YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Contemporary Halakha**

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**Shiur #04: *Hanachat Tefillin* (2)**

Last week we began our study of the manner in which one dons *tefillin* (*hanachat* *tefillin*). We noted that the *Rishonim* discuss whether one should first put on one’s *tallit*, which is worn more frequently (*tadir*), or one’s *tefillin*, which has a higher level of sanctity (*mekudash*). In addition, assuming that the *tallit* is worn first, as is our practice, the *Acharonim* question whether one who touched his *tefillin* first should put them on first, in order not to violate the principle “*ein ma’avirin al ha-mitzvot*,” or whether it is still preferable to put the *tallit* and *tefillin* on in their proper order.

This week we will discuss the blessings recited over the *tefillin*, as well as the manner in which the *tefillin* are placed onto the arm and head.

**The *Birkot Ha-Tefillin***

The *Rishonim* debate whether one should say one or two blessings upon donning the tefillin. This debate hinges on different understandings of the following passage (*Menachot* 36a):

R. Chisda says: If one spoke between donning the phylacteries of the arm and the phylacteries of the head, he must recite the blessing again when donning the phylacteries of the head. The Gemara notes: One can infer that if he spoke, yes, he must recite a blessing when donning the phylacteries of the head, but if he did not speak, he does not recite a blessing. The Gemara challenges this: But Rav Chiyya, son of Rav Huna, sent a ruling in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: On the phylacteries of the arm, one says the blessing: Blessed are You … Who has sanctified us through His *mitzvot* and commanded us to don phylacteries (*lehaniach tefillin*). On the phylacteries of the head, one says the blessing: Blessed are You ... Who has sanctified us through His *mitzvot* and commanded us concerning the mitzva of phylacteries (*al mitzvat tefillin*). [This indicates that one always recites a blessing when donning the phylacteries of the head.] Abaye and Rava both say, to resolve this apparent contradiction: Rabbi Yochanan meant that if one did not speak, he recites one blessing; if he spoke, he recites two blessings, when donning the phylacteries of the head as well as when donning the phylacteries of the arm.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The *Rishonim* disagree regarding the position of Abaye and Rava. Rashi (36a, *s.v. lo* *sach*) rules that only one blessing is recited when putting on the *tefillin*, unless one interrupts in between the *tefillin shel yad* and the *tefillin shel rosh*. This appears to be the view of the Rambam (*Hilkhot Tefillin* 4:4). and Rashba (*Teshuvot* 1:156) as well. *Tosafot* (36a, *s.v. lo sach*) cite Rabbeinu Tam, who disagrees and argues that one is always meant to say two blessings upon donning the *tefillin*: *lehaniach* before tying the *tefillin* to the arm, and *al mitzvat tefillin* when placing the *tefillin* on the head.

Some *Rishonim* relate this debate to a broader question regarding the relationship between the *tefillin shel rosh* and the *tefillin shel yad*. In a previous *shiur*, we discussed whether wearing both phylacteries, i.e., the *tefillin shel rosh* and the *tefillin shel yad*, constitute one mitzva (*Yereim* 399, *Semak* 153) or two (Rambam, *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, Positive Commandments 12-13, *Semag* 21-22 and *Chinukh* 421-422).

Some explain that those who require one blessing must maintain that the two phylacteries are two parts of one mitzva. The Rambam (*Pe’er Ha-Dor* 8:1), however, explains:

Even though they count as two *mitzvot*, and not performing one does not invalidate the other (*einan me’akvot zu et zu*), since these two *mitzvot* are “*inyan echad*” (one idea), he recites only one blessing on them, as both of them serve as a remembrance, as the verse says, “in order that the teaching of the Lord may be in your mouth.”

The Rashba (*Menachot* 36a, *s.v. sach*) says that according to Rabbeinu Tam, two blessings are recited because the *tefillin shel yad*, and *tefillin shel rosh* are two separate *mitzvot*.

The *Shulchan Arukh* (OC 25:5) rules:

He should put on the *tefillin shel yad* first and say the blessing "... to place the *tefillin*" and afterwards put on the head *tefillin* without a second blessing, for only one blessing [is made] for both of them.

The Rema, however, adds:

Some say to make [the following] blessing on the head *tefillin* "...on the mitzva of *tefillin*" even if one did not make an interruption between them (i.e., the *tefillin shel yad* and *tefillin shel rosh*). [*And this is the widespread Ashkenazic custom, to make 2 blessings.*]

The Rema appears to rule in accordance with Rabbeinu Tam.

However, the Rema adds, citing the Maharii Chabib (38): “And it is a good idea to always say after the second blessing, ‘Blessed is the Name of His glorious Kingdom forever and ever’ (*barukh* *shem kevod malkhuto le-olam va’ed*).” What is the reason for this addition after the *berakha* said over the *tefillin shel rosh*?

Some assume that this must be due to a principle found elsewhere (see Rambam, *Hilkhot Shavuot* 12:11), according to which one who said God’s name in vain may “fix” the situation by praising Him. The *Beit Yosef*, however, notes that this is only done after one accidentally says a *berakha levatala*, but never when it was said intentionally. The *Mishna Berura* (OC 25 *s.k.* 21) explains that since in this situation there is a very small cause for uncertainty regarding the proper practice, one says “*barukh shem*” after the blessing over the *tefillin shel rosh*, *“le-ravcha de-milta*” (as an extra precaution).

The *Arukh Ha-shulchan* (OC 25:12-13) offers a more profound explanation for the addition of “*barukh shem*…”:

And in my humble opinion, it seems that the saying of "May the Honored Name of [God's] Kingdom be blessed forever and ever" is not for the reason of uncertainty regarding a blessing, rather because of a different reason. And even though the halakhic authorities wrote that it is for this reason, in any case it seems to me that the custom arises from a different reason. For behold, we already questioned: How can one make two blessings on one thing? Also, there have been those who have challenged the core of the opinion of Rabbeinu Tam, since we learned in a Tosefta in *Berakhot* chapter 6, and so wrote the Rambam in the first chapter of *Ma'asrot*, that if one separates *teruma* and *terumat ma'aser* and *ma'aser* *sheni* [together] as one — he makes one blessing upon all of them. And if so, how can they establish two blessings upon the two *tefillin* [when they are being performed together as one mitzva]?

Therefore, it seems to me that the blessing of *al mitzvat tefillin* is a *birkat* *ha*-*shevach* (blessing of praise), in accordance with what I wrote earlier, in that this mitzva is the great knot (*kesher*) which ties the Jewish people to their Father in heaven. For this, we recite a *birkat hoda’ah*, to thank God for this great goodness. And since the essence of this connection is expressed by the *Shema Yisrael* verse, and we therefore say “*barukh* *shem kevod malkhuto le-olam va’ed*” …

In other words, the *Arukh Ha-shulchan* suggests that just as we respond to the *Shema* *Yisrael* verse by saying “*barukh shem kevod*…,” so too we respond to tying the *tefillin* to the head, which also symbolizes the bond between God and the Jewish people, by saying “*barukh shem*.”

R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (cited in *Eretz Ha-Tzvi* 3:16) offers a different explanation. He suggests that, at times, we say a blessing not just over the “*maaseh* *mitzvah*” (i.e., the act of a mitzva), but over the “*chalot ha-mitzva*” (i.e., over the impact of the mitzva). For example, after a child is circumcised, we recite the blessing of “*le-hakhniso be’vrito shel Avraham Avinu,*” which praises God for bringing the child into the covenant. Similarly, Rabbeinu Tam maintains that the *birkat ha-eirusin* is recited after a betrothal, as at that point the couple is already betrothed.

Regarding the blessing over the *tefillin shel rosh*, R. Soloveitchik explains that in addition to the *birkat ha-mitzva*, which is recited before putting on the *tefillin shel yad* (and, if one interrupts, before putting on his *tefillin shel rosh*), Rabbeinu Tam requires a second blessing to praise God for the unique sanctity imbued in a person who has donned *tefillin*.

**When Are the Blessings Recited?**

The Talmud (*Menachot* 35b) teaches that the blessing should be recited after the *tefillin* are placed upon the arm (and head):

Rav Shmuel bar Bideri says that Rav says, and some say Rabbi Aḥa Arikha, i.e., Rabbi Aḥa the Tall, says that Rav Huna says, and some say that Rav Menashya says that Shmuel says: With regard to phylacteries, from when does one recite a blessing over them? From the time when one dons them on the arm and onward. Is that so? But doesn’t Rav Yehuda say that Shmuel says: With regard to all the mitzvot, one recites a blessing over them prior to their performance (*over le-asiyatan*)? How, then, can one recite a blessing over phylacteries after donning them? Abaye and Rava both say: One recites the blessing from the time of donning the phylacteries until the time of binding them, as the binding constitutes the performance of the mitzva.

The *Shulchan Arukh* (25:8) rules accordingly. The *Mishna Berura* (ibid. *s.k.* 26) writes that if one forgot to say the blessings when donning the *tefillin*, they may be recited as long as he is wearing the *tefillin*, as the mitzva continues throughout the day and this is also considered to be “prior to their performance.” See also *Talmidei Rabbeinu Yona* (*Berakhot* 20a, *s.v. mi-sha’ah*).

**On Which Arm Are the *Tefillin* Worn?**

The Talmud (*Menachot* 36b – 37a) teaches that the *tefillin* should be worn on the left arm and debates the source for this requirement.

Rabbi Natan says: This proof is not necessary, as it says: “And you shall bind them for a sign upon your arm” (*Devarim* 6:8), and then it states: “And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house” (*Devarim* 6:9). This teaches that just as writing is with the right hand, as most people write with their right hands, so too, the binding of phylacteries must be performed with the right hand. And since binding is with the right hand, this means that donning is on the left arm, as one cannot bind the phylacteries with the same hand upon which he is donning them… Rav Ashi said: The requirement that phylacteries be donned on the left arm is derived from the verse: “It shall be for a sign upon your arm [*yadkha*]” (*Shemot* 13:16), which is written with a letter *heh* at the end. This is expounded as though it stated: Your weak [*keha*] arm.

The Gemara explains that the *tefillin* are placed on the left arm either because one normally ties the *tefillin* with his right arm or because the left is usually the weaker arm.

What about one who generally uses his left arm (a “lefty”)? The Talmud (37a) says:

The Sages taught in a *baraita*: A left-handed person dons phylacteries on his right arm, which is equivalent to his left arm, i.e., his weaker arm. The Gemara raises a difficulty: But isn’t it taught in a *baraita* that a left-handed person dons phylacteries on his left arm, which is the left arm of every other person? Abaye said: When that *baraita* is taught, it is referring to one who has equal control with both his hands, i.e., an ambidextrous person. Since such an individual also uses his right hand, he dons phylacteries on his left arm.

The Gemara concludes that while an ambidextrous person dons *tefillin* on his left arm, a “lefty” wears them on his right arm.

The *Rishonim* debate how one determines which arm is the stronger, or more dominant arm. According to one opinion, the arm with which one does the most work is considered to be the dominant arm. According to others, the arm with which one writes is the dominant arm, and *tefillin* are worn on the other. The *Shulchan Arukh* (27:6) cites both views; the Rema rules that writing determines which arm is the strong arm, while the Gra rules in accordance with the first view. Interestingly, the *Bach* (27 *s.v.*, *ve-iter*) insists that only if one writes and does most tasks with the left arm does one don his tefillin on the right arm.

**Where Should the *Tefillin* Be Placed?**

Regarding the *tefillin shel yad*, the Talmud (*Menachot* 37a) teaches:

The Master says: “On your arm”; this is the bicep. The Gemara asks: From where do we derive this? As the Sages taught: “On your arm [*yadkha*]”; this is the upper part of the arm. Do you say that this is the upper part of the arm, or is it only literally on your actual hand, i.e., on the palm of the hand? The Torah says: Don phylacteries on the *yad* and don phylacteries on the head; just as there, with regard to the head, it means on the upper part of the head, as will be explained, so too here, it means on the upper part of the arm.

The *Shulchan Arukh* (27:7) and Rema (27:1) rule that the *tefillin* should be placed on the lower half of the bicep. The Gra disagrees and maintains that the entire bicep is considered to be the proper place for the *tefillin shel yad*. The *tefillin* should preferably be placed on the lower bicep, but not too close to the elbow.

Regarding the *tefillin shel rosh*, the Talmud (*Menachot* 37b) teaches:

The school of Menashe taught with regard to the verse: “And you shall bind them for a sign on your arm, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes” (*Devarim* 6:8): “On your arm”; this is the bicep. “Between your eyes”; this is the crown of the head. The Gemara asks: Where exactly on the crown of the head are the phylacteries placed? The school of Rabbi Yannai say: Phylacteries are placed on the place where the bone above the baby’s brain is soft after birth.

The Talmud teaches that the *tefillin shel rosh* are placed on the top of the head. The Gemara further teaches that they must be placed above the hair line. Unfortunately, it is very common for men to wear the *tefillin shel rosh* below their hair line.

Furthermore, the *Shulchan Arukh* (27:10) rules that the *tefillin* should be placed “between the eyes.” The *Acharonim* debate whether the *tefillin* must always remain in the exact center of the head (see *Mishna Berura* 27:36), or whether they may be a bit to the side (see *Divrei Chaim* 2:6 and *Tzitz Eliezer* 12:6). Although some are accustomed to check their *tefillin* with a mirror, others assume it is sufficient to feel the *tefillin* in order to check that they are in the middle of the head.

**Touching the *Tefillin* - *Mishmush***

The Rabbis (*Menachot* 36b) also teach that one should touch the *tefillin* while wearing them.

Rabba bar Rav Huna says: A person is obligated to touch his phylacteries regularly for the entire time [that he is wearing them]. This is derived from an *a fortiori* inference from the *tzitz* (frontplate) of the High Priest, as follows: And if with regard to the *tzitz*, which has only one mention of God’s name, the Torah states: “And it should be always upon his forehead” (*Shemot* 28:38), that he should not be distracted from it, then with regard to phylacteries, which have numerous mentions of God’s name, all the more so [one must always be aware of them].

The Gemara explains that in order not to be distracted from the *tefillin*, one should touch them regularly (*mishmush*). The *Shulchan Arukh* (28:1) rules that one should touch one’s *tefillin* constantly. The *Bach* (28) says it is sufficient to touch one’s *tefillin* in order to ascertain that they have not moved out of their proper place. The *Kitzur Shulchan Arukh* (10:17) notes that some kiss their *tefillin* whenever they “feel” (*mishmush*) them.

1. Explanatory translations of Talmudic passages in this *shiur* are from the William Davidson edition at sefaria.org, with minor edits. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)