

And I will Betroth You unto Me

On Fading Tefillin Strap Marks

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דברים פרשת עקב פרק יא פסוק יג - יד

(יג) וְהָיָה אִם שָׁמַע תִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶל מְצוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת יְקוֹק אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וּלְעֲבֹדוֹ בְּכָל לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁכֶם :

This well-known verse is found in this week's parsha. We read it (and the whole paragraph), of course, at least twice a day in the krias Shema and it is found in our tefillin. And this brings me to very interesting, very strange and perhaps even mystical minhag brought by the famous author Shai Agnon in a story entitled, "Two Pairs" (שני זוגות). In it, he tells of his youth. Permit me to quote a short passage:

Mornings I would run to the synagogue. Sometimes I would arrive before the appointed hour for prayer and I would stare out the window at the sky to spot the sunlight when it would first appear so that I could then put on my tefillin. When prayer time arrived I would take out my tefillin, and a fragrance of prayer would emanate from them. As I lay the tefillah on my arm I could feel my heart pounding alongside them and I would then wind the straps around my warm arm until they pressed into my skin. And then I would circle my head with the other tefillah. When the cantor recites the prayer that thanks God for "girding Israel with strength and crowning Israel with splendor," I stand astonished that I myself am "girding" and "crowning" like a man of Israel and I am overjoyed... [When] I completed my praying, removed my tefillin, and saw pressed in my arm's flesh the remaining evidence of the straps. I wouldn't eat or drink until the indentations on my arm had completely disappeared. ... How I loved them. Maimonides, of blessed memory, had surely done the right thing when he included the regulations pertaining to tefillin in his Book of Love.

בבוקר הייתי רץ לבית הכנסת. פעמים שבאתי עד שלא הגיע זמן תפילה והצצתי מן החלון וכיוונתי עיני לשמים אימתי תנץ החמה ואניח תפילין. הגיע זמן תפילה אני מוציא את תפילי, מיד ריח של תפילות נודף מהי. ואני מניח תפילה של יד ולבי דופק כנגדה ואני כורך את זרועי החמה ברצועות עד שהן שוקעות בבשרי ומעטר את ראשי בתפילין של ראש. וכיון שהחזן מברך "אזור ישראל בגבורה," "עוטר ישראל בתפארה," אני עומד משתומם שאף אני אזור ועטור כאדם מישראל ואני שמח שמחה גדולה. ... [כש]סיימתי תפילתי וחלצתי את תפילי ורואה כריכה אחר כריכה מתרת אבל סימניהן שקועים בבשרי, ולא הייתי אוכל ושוחה עד שנתעלמו לגמרי. ... מה אהבתי את תפילי. יפה עשה אדונינו הרמב"ם ז"ל שקבע הלכות תפילין בספר אהבה.

So where does this custom of waiting for your tefillin strap marks to fade before you eat? This story was brought to my attention in an [article by R. Jefferey Sacks](#) (Zayit, Efrat) who investigated the minhag and found that, while not mentioned in any sifrei halacha or sifrei minhag, it is found in a number of stories with Hassidic roots in Galicia (an area

that bridges modern day Poland and the Ukraine) each dating from around the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century:

Dr. Avraham Yaakov Brawer, *Zikbronot Av u-Veno* (*Mossad ha-Rav Kook*, 1966). Brawer (1884-1975) was born in Stryj, near Lvov. He was a rav and academic with specialties in history and geography, and had a distinguished career as an educator in Jerusalem after his arrival in 1911. (From middle age onward, he and Agnon maintained a warm friendship.) In a chapter of his memoir recalling his youth in *keheyder*, he writes: I was careful to be “crowned” with tefillin for at least an hour a day. Some of the boys **would not eat as long as the impression of the tefillin strap was still visible on their arms.** It is possible this custom is recorded somewhere in some book; I have not found it in writing (241).

...

Soma Morgenstern (1890-1976). ... In his novel, *The Son of the Lost Son* (JPS, 1946; trans. from German by J. Leftwich and P. Gross), we encounter the protagonist, Velvel, standing at morning prayer. ... Upon completing his prayers, he enters the farmhouse kitchen. On the table stood jugs and little jugs, cups and saucers, coffee, milk, cream, butter, eggs, rye bread, rolls of rye flour with buttermilk and poppyseed, and rolls of white flour with whipped white of egg. There was honey cake and a big bottle of brandy. Velvel sat motionless for a while. He was still far away from the mundane world, no longer a worshipper, but not yet an eater. The awe of the prayers had given him an appetite, but he still held back. For **though the law does not prohibit it, the really pious man shrinks from taking food as long as the marks of the phylactery straps are still visible on his left arm.** Then he took a little brandy, sipping it slowly, poured coffee and milk and cream into a cup, added sugar, stirred it, and hardly noticed how his thoughts, unguarded by his will, moved aimlessly [...](11).

When I read of the minhag, I liked it and thought that perhaps I could adopt it – as the Ramban famously exhorts in his letter to his son:

וּכְבֹּאֵשֶׁר תִּקְוִים מִן הַסֶּפֶר – תִּחַפֵּשׂ בְּאֵשֶׁר לְמַדְתָּ אִם יֵשׁ בּוֹ דָּבָר אֲשֶׁר תּוּכַל לְקַיְמוֹ.

So the next morning, when I took off my tefillin, I turned on the stopwatch on my phone and waited. After 30minutes there was still no sign of fading and I began to realize that this was no simple minhag. After one hour I went to eat breakfast, but still kept the stop watch running. One hour turned to two and two to three – the fact is that I could still see faint traces after 3.5 hours! So, I am sad to report that, as much as I identify with the minhag, alas, fasting half a day everyday will not be possible for me.

That said, the minhag is really powerful and so I asked myself: What really is the point of it? What is its message?

After thinking about it for no small amount of time I came to the conclusion that: Love is the answer.

To start with, that is how Agnon concluded his relating of the minhag: “How I loved my Tefillin. Maimonides, of blessed memory, had surely done the right thing when he included the regulations pertaining to tefillin in his Book of **Love**.”

מה אהבתי את תפילי. יפה עשה אדונינו הרמב"ם ז"ל שקבע הלכות תפילין בספר **אהבה**.

And indeed, Love is no small matter, as we find that just in this week's parsha alone, we are asked no less than four times to Love God.

(1) דברים פרשת עקב פרק י (יב) ועתה ישאל מה יקוּק אלהיך שאל מעמך כי אם ליראה את יקוּק אלהיך ללכת בכל דרכיו ולהבה אתו ולעבד את יקוּק אלהיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך:

(2) דברים פרשת עקב פרק יא (א) ואהבת את יקוּק אלהיך ושמרת משמרתו וחקתיו ומשפטיו ומצותיו כל הימים:

(3) דברים פרשת עקב פרק יא (יג) והיה אם שמע תשמעו אל מצותי אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם היום לאהבה את יקוּק אלהיכם ולעבדו בכל לבבכם ובכל נפשכם:

(4) דברים פרשת עקב פרק יא (כב) כי אם שמר תשמרון את כל המצוה הזאת אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם לעשתה לאהבה את יקוּק אלהיכם ללכת בכל דרכיו ולדבקה בו:

For the record we find the command to love God ten times in the Torah (all in the Book of Devarim – with the most occurrences being in this week's parsha of Ekev).

Interestingly, one of the ways this love is made manifest is when we put on our tefillin – as we recite the following verses from Hosea (2:21-22):

And I will betroth you unto Me forever;
and I will betroth you unto Me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in loving-kindness, and in compassion.
And I will betroth you unto Me in faithfulness and you shall know The L-rd.

הושע פרק ב

**(כא) וארשתיך לי לעולם
וארשתיך לי בצדק ובמשפט ובחסד וברחמים:
(כב) וארשתיך לי באמונה וידעת את יקוּק: ט**

So if putting on the tefillin is like getting engaged to God, then perhaps we could say that taking off the tefillin is like taking leave from your betrothed. Accordingly, waiting for the imprint to fade is like longingly (b'kemihah) watching one's betrothed (arusa) leave on a trip. One wants not to take leave, one savors every moment, even to the last glimpse as she disappears over the horizon (כשהיא נעלמת מעל האופק).

It is a love affair.

And it is this love that is all important. It is important in our relationships with people. It is important in our relationship with God. Heschel explains the problem with religion “today”:

Religion declined not because it was refuted [which is to say, people did not decide not to be religious because there is proof that God does not exist or that the mitzvot make no sense], but because it [i.e., religious observance] became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, **love by habit**; ... its message become meaningless.

הדת לא דָּחְתָּהּ בגלל שהיא הופרכה, [זאת אומרת, אנשים לא החליטו לא להיות דתיים בגלל שיש הוכחות שאין אלוקים או שהמצוות לא עומדות במבחן התבונה – מ.נבון] אלא משום ש[קיום הדת] הפך ללא רלוונטית, משעממת, מעיקה, תפל. כאשר האמונה מוחלפת לחלוטין בעקרי אמונה [דוגמות], כאשר סגידה מוחלפת בְּמִשְׁמַעַת, כאשר אהבה מוחלפת בהרגל; ... [אז] המסר של הדת הופך לחסר משמעות.

We must not let the love turn to habit. (Note that he is not saying that there is no place for dogma, no place for discipline. On the contrary, there is even a place for habit! However if that is all there is, if the power of love has been lost in the everyday habit – then all is lost.

Love is the power that brings life, that brings meaning to the relationship. Without it, there is no relationship. This is why God asks for love. This is why one waits for the strap marks to fade. It is a demonstration of love. It is an act of love.

Shabbat Shalom.