

Good Shabbos Everyone. In this week's Torah portion Bo, Hashem commands us regarding the mitzvah of tefillin. As the Torah tells us, the tefillin "shall be for you a sign on your arm and a reminder between your eyes - so that Hashem's Torah may be in your mouth - for with a strong hand Hashem removed you from Egypt." (Exodus - Shemos 13:9) The Sages teach us that "Man always needs a sign of his bond with G-d. Shabbos itself is such a sign, but on weekdays, the sign is tefillin." (Eruvin 96a)

The mitzvah of tefillin is one of the most powerful spiritual expressions that a Jew can do. By putting on tefillin, a Jew declares his membership in the Jewish nation and his belief in Hashem. Rav Aryeh Kaplan described tefillin as a sign of the bond of love between G-d and the Jewish people. (Tefillin, p.237 Rav Aryeh Kaplan) Rav Kaplan tells us that the greatest possible love is the love between G-d and man. As Hashem tells us through the Prophet Jeremiah "I have loved you with an infinite world of love." (Ibid., citing Jeremiah 31:3) tefillin are a symbol of the love that binds us to our Father in Heaven. The following amazing true story illustrates the power of tefillin to awaken in Jew the love between him and his Creator.

As the Eretz Yisroel-bound El Al plane lifted off the tarmac of New York's JFK International Airport, Shalom realized suddenly that he had left his tefillin in the trunk of his car. In his mind's eye, Shalom could see the tefillin in the trunk of his Chevrolet.

Shalom thought back to his bar mitzvah fourteen years earlier and remembered the pride emanating from his father when he had presented the tefillin to Shalom. His father, Yehuda, had always been very careful to fulfill the mitzvah of tefillin properly and made an extraordinary efforts to obtain the best possible pair for his son.

The parshiyos of Shalom's tefillin were written by a G-d fearing soifer who was an expert in all the laws pertaining to tefillin. The batim containing the parchments were also formed by a G-d-fearing expert, one who used all the finest materials. His grandmother had embroidered a beautiful velvet bag lovingly to protect them. And now Shalom had inadvertently left them in the trunk of his car for the next ten days while he vacationed in Eretz Yisroel. This, too, is for the best, he thought to himself. The ten days in Eretz Yisroel flew by, and Shalom had to return to the United States. When he went to retrieve his car from the long-term parking lot at JFK International Airport, Shalom discovered that his car had suffered a break-in. He checked the trunk quickly. His tefillin were gone. Stolen. Shalom went to the police station and filed a report of the theft, giving the desk sergeant the details of how to contact him should his tefillin ever show up. Then he got into his car and drove himself home to Philadelphia. Shalom went to his mother's house for his first Shabbos back from Eretz Yisroel. When he told her about his tefillin, she offered him the use of his father's (who had passed away.) "I'm lending these to you until your nephew Yehuda will be a bar mitzvah in twelve years. It's important to me that, since he is named after Daddy, of blessed memory, he should wear these tefillin. "Guard them with your life," she told him. Twelve years would be plenty of time for Shalom to get himself a new pair of tefillin.

Six years passed. Shalom came home from work one day and heard a message on his answering machine from the New York City police department. They left a phone number and a request that he contact them as soon as possible. When he reached them later that evening, the sergeant told Shalom that a religious object of his had been turned in. "Please come as soon as possible to reclaim your stolen goods."

The next morning Shalom hopped into his car, and drove up to New York. After presenting his identification to the police officer at the front desk, Shalom was ushered into an office. The officer introduced himself as Howard and proceeded to tell the following story. "Three days ago, an elderly Russian gentleman presented himself at the precinct, placed your tefillin bag on the table and told the following story. "I own a pawn shop a few blocks away," he began. "About an hour ago a man came into my shop and wanted to pawn these." He pointed to the tefillin lying on the table. "I'm not religious myself, but I recognized immediately that these were phylacteries. Jews call them tefillin and wear them during the morning prayers. I told the man to forget pawning the tefillin, as I was willing to buy them from him. I paid him cash and took the tefillin. My hands began to tremble and shake. I don't know what came over me. Since these tefillin had obviously been stolen, I locked up my shop and came here, to the police station, to see if I could perhaps help return them to their owner. The embroidery says Shalom son of Yehuda Goldberg. Is there any record of this theft?" Asked the Russian pawn shop owner.

"I picked up the tefillin," continued the police officer Howard, "to see what they were. The strangest thing happened when I held them in my hands. I felt a hot flash and began sweating profusely. My hands were trembling and shaking. Why would a Jewish object cause such a reaction in me, a Gentile? I locked up the tefillin in my desk, planning to investigate their background the next day. That night I couldn't shake the memory of my hands trembling and shaking. I wondered again why a Jewish object should make such an impression on a non-Jew. Disturbed, I told my mom the story, asking her what she thought of the matter. She didn't seem surprised at all. "Howard, when I was a teenager I rebelled and left home to marry your Dad," she told me. "I never told you that my parents were Jewish, did I? Well, by Jewish law, since I am Jewish, so are my children, Howard, maybe the tefillin had such an impact on you because you yourself are Jewish!" Shalom, the owner of the tefillin, was sitting on the edge of his chair by now. "I've often felt like something was missing in my life," the police officer Howard continued. "Apparently, my Jewish soul was hungering for some spiritual nourishment. I am going to start investigating my heritage. Can we keep in touch?" Shalom agreed.

The story doesn't end there. When he arrived back in Philadelphia, Shalom brought the tefillin to Rabbi Shreiber, his soifer, to have them checked. Who knows where the tefillin had been during the past six years and whether or not the letters on the parchments were still intact? Shalom told Rabbi Shreiber the entire story as Rabbi Shreiber opened up the outer boxes.

Rabbi Shreiber checked the parchment and began to cry. "Why are you crying?" Shalom asked. "These tefillin are as kosher as the day they were made," Rabbi Shreiber declared emotionally. "I would like to buy them from you, if I may." "I'm sorry," said Shalom, "but these tefillin are even more precious to me now. They are my own personal reminder of how Hashem runs the world." (From "Hamodia Magazine Section" 29 Teves, 5764)

Every mitzvah serves to draw us closer to Hashem and to strengthen this bond of love. (Orech Chaim 30:2, Mishna Berurah 37:6) In fact, the word Mitzvah comes from a root meaning "to bind." In the case of tefillin, this bond is physical as well as spiritual. (ibid.) We literally bind G-d's love symbol to our bodies. (ibid.) The tefillin of the arm represents the harnessing of our physical power and the mastering of our hearts' desires to follow G-d; while the tefillin of the head represents the harnessing of our wisdom to carry out the commandments.

Tefillin are the original "black box." It is well known that jet airplanes have "black boxes" which record the actions of the flight of the plane. The black box of a plane is indestructible. The same is true with tefillin. The Jews have gone through thousands of years of persecution and yet the black box remains, and in it are the secrets of our success as a people. In fact, excavations at Masada, which was destroyed almost 2000 years ago in the Land of Israel, turned up tefillin that were configured exactly the way we wear them today!

Tefillin are such an important mitzvah, that the Sages tell us that tefillin encompass all other mitzvahs. (Kidushin 35a) Tefillin are not merely a sign, they actually have tremendous spiritual power to them. The Kabbalah tells us "Happy is the man who wears tefillin and fathoms their mystery." (Zohar 1:129a) We will conclude this week with excerpts from the prayer that many say before putting on tefillin: "May the spiritual influence of the Mitzvah of tefillin be extended upon me so that I have a long life, a flow of holiness, and holy thoughts, without an inkling of sin or iniquity." **Good Shabbos Everyone.**