

# From *Totafot* to *Tefillin*: A Short History of Meaning

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## Introduction

One of the main elements of classical Judaic prayer is the *tefillin* which consists of two cube-shaped leather boxes with leather straps fixed to them for attaching them to the head and the arm. Within these boxes parchment is placed on which Biblical verses are written. There is a lot of flexibility allowed in styles and sizes, as long as the shape remains that of a cube, the colour black, and the straps of leather. Also the *tefillin* worn of the head has to have four separate compartments within the cube, while the arm *tefillin* has none. Within these two cubes small parchments are placed which contain verses of the chapters Exodus and Deuteronomy of the Torah that are interpreted as prescribing the practice of *tefillin* itself.<sup>1</sup>



*Tefillin* (Joods Historisch Museum, photo by the author, 2014)

The *tefillin* are put on for the morning and evening prayers during the weekdays, but not on the Sabbath or festive days as these are considered symbols by themselves.<sup>2</sup> This aspect of being a symbol is viewed as central to the *tefillin*, based on the Biblical verses involved<sup>3</sup>:

**Ex.13:9/16 “And it shall be for you like a sign (*oth*) on your hand (*yad*) and a reminder between your eyes that the law of the LORD is to be on your lips. For the LORD brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand. [...] And it will be like a sign on your hand and frontlets (*totafot*) between your eyes that the LORD brought us out of Egypt with his mighty hand.”**

<sup>1</sup>Louis Jacobs, *A Concise Companion to the Jewish Religion* (Oxford University Press, Published online 2003), accessed on 14-11-2014.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Idelsohn, *Jewish Liturgy and Its Development* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1995), 79 – 80.

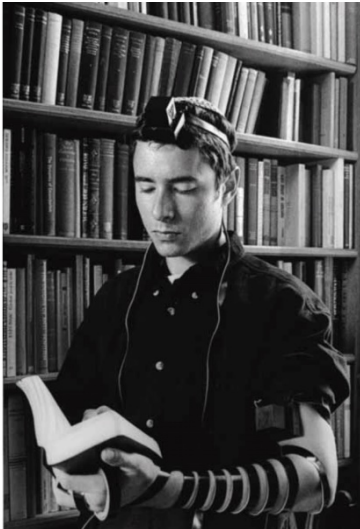
<sup>3</sup> All the Bible verses that are written on the parchments for the *tefillin* are: Ex.13:1-10, Deut.6:4-9, and Deut. 11:13-21

Deut.6:8 “**Tie them as sign on your hands and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.**”

Deut.11:18-19 “**Therefore you shall lay up these my words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes. And ye shall teach them your children, speaking of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.**”

The binding of the arm (the Rabbinic interpretation of hand, *yad*, is extended to mean the whole arm) and head as part of the daily prayers (as the binding is linked to the end of Dt. 11:19 ) so that they may be a sign, *oth*, and as frontlets, *totafot*. The term *oth* is a term widely used in the Hebrew Bible, referring to a sign, a mark, which is used for subjects as signifying Divine creation (the stars in Gen.1:14) and miracles (Gen.9:12, Ex.4:8), but also for circumcision as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham (Gen.17:11). This widely used term thus gives a clear definition of the weight that could be given to the binding. But

this intertextual exegesis isn't applicable to the term *totafot*. For *totafot* to have evolved to become *tefillin* took centuries of scriptural and ritual evolution.



*Young man with Tefillin* <sup>4</sup>

6. *Tefillin* [phylacteries] are worn during morning prayers on weekdays. There are two leather cases, placed on the forehead and upper arm respectively, and they contain tiny parchment scrolls on which four passages from the Torah are written by hand. These four passages (Exodus 13:1–10 and 11–16; Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and 11:13–21) all ordain that the words of the Lord should be bound for a sign on the arm and for a symbol or reminder on the forehead. Photograph by Emmanuel de Lange.

## History of meaning

For the scriptural *totafot* to become the ritual *tefillin* we can deduce three main developments:

<sup>4</sup> Photo taken from: Nicholas de Lange, *An Introduction to Judaism (Introduction to Religion)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 173.

1. Hebrew Bible: *Totafot*, which according to Cohn can be best understood as referring to Assyrian headstraps used for charms.<sup>5</sup>
2. Greek Bible: *Phylactyros*, as a Septuagint translation of *totafot* and which means amulets.
3. Post-Biblical Rabbinic: *Tefillin*, which means aid to prayer.<sup>6</sup>

The Rabbinic basis for the *tefillin* are the previous mentioned Biblical verses which they understand as covers the *Shema*, the declaration of faith in the one God, the binding of the *tefillin*, the *mezuzah*, the placing of scriptural parchment at the front door, and Torah study. Together with the *tzitzit*, the prayer mantel, based on Num.15:38, the texts are approached as providing a detailed ritual.<sup>7</sup> The ‘words’ that must be binded are understood to be these verses themselves, making it a self-referential text in the eyes of the Rabbi’s.<sup>8</sup> But this wasn’t always so. Only in the late second temple period are these texts viewed as providing a literal ritual, but even then not all were combined into a single interlinked practice. We know from the works of Philo (d. 50 CE) but also from earlier works as that of the ‘Letters of Aristeas’ (around 170 BCE) that the terms in the verses were understood in allegorical fashion<sup>9</sup>: “He also strictly commands that the sign shall be worn on our hands, clearly indicating that it is our duty to fulfill every activity with justice, having in mind our own condition, and above all the fear of God.”<sup>10</sup> For Aristeas, the ‘words’ mentioned in the Biblical verses stand for justice and not for the verses themselves. Alexander emphasizes that in Aristeas’ time, Jews were probably more focused on ‘embodied rituals’ than on liturgical

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<sup>5</sup> Yehudah Cohn, *Tangled up in Text: Tefillin and the Ancient World*, 1st ed. (Richmond: Brown University Press, 1951), 37-38.

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Rand, ‘The Etymology of Totafot’, by American Jewish Congress, *Judaism* 42 (1993).

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, ‘Women’s Exemption from Shema and Tefillin and How These Rituals Came to Be Viewed as Torah Study’, by Brill, *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 42 (2011), 552-553.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander, *ibid*, 533.

<sup>9</sup> For Philo, see: Alexander, *ibid*, 558-561.

<sup>10</sup> As cited by Alexander, *ibid*, 554.

texts.<sup>11</sup> Parchment and *tefillin* fragments found at Qumran and Egypt show that first century Jews (at the end of the second temple period) did combine in their time both the binding with scriptural verses, but had more diversity in which verses they placed on parchments.<sup>12</sup> The wearing of the *tefillin* is also mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew 23:5, where the Pharisees are mentioned as wearing them to show off their piety. Although the showing off is clearly a view of Matthew on the Pharisees, it does show to Alexander that these ritual wear gained interest because they are rituals that “express and perform Jewish commitment in and on the body”.<sup>13</sup> But can we know anything from before the late second temple period? According to Cohn we must look for the origins of the *tefillin* in pagan amulet practice, whereby Jewish scripture was sifted and applied that focused on prosperity and divine protection (as in Deut. 11:14-21 which promises rain, good harvest and cattle, and a long life for the person and his children).<sup>14</sup> From these early origins to the end of the second temple period to the Rabbinic era, we see the *tefillin* going from a ritual being textualized to a text being ritualized. The ritual was viewed from a amulet towards a symbol of justice and remembrance of God towards symbolizing remembrance of God and Torah study.<sup>15</sup> For Alexander this also explains why women were exempted from wearing the *tefillin*, as it was equated by the Rabbi’s to Torah study which they only saw obligated to males.<sup>16</sup>

We can now formulate a timeline in how different meanings of the verses developed over the centuries:

1. Pre-second temple period: Formation of scripture, whereby terms as *totafot* were understood in their Egyptian-Assyrian religious context.
2. Early second temple period: Part of scripture and probably read metaphorically.

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<sup>11</sup> Alexander, *ibid*, 556.

<sup>12</sup> Alexander, *ibid*, 549-551.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander, *ibid*, 558.

<sup>14</sup> Cohn, *ibid*, 55-102.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander, *ibid*, 576.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander, *ibid*, 577.

3. Late second temple period: Beginning of literal reading and formation of ritual as a protective amulet and symbol of Jewishness, which explains the Septuagint translation of phylacteries (amulets).
4. Post-second temple period: Common acceptance of ritual wherein the centre place of the Torah is emphasized. Only groups as the Karaites and modern reformist Jews uphold a metaphorical reading and reject it as a ritual.

### Experiencing the ritual

In the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam, they show recorded interviews wherein Jews of different backgrounds and religiousness discuss their experience of certain rituals or festivities. One of these is with Daniel van Praag<sup>17</sup>, a practicing orthodox Jew, who tells about his experience of putting on the *tefillin*. In his experience, the first time he put it on, he “spaced out”. Coming from a non-practicing family, his experience at first, was a deep religious experience, but which faded over time. Doing it daily now for several years the experience has become normalized, and so he now approaches it as a way of symbolizing him controlling his urges to “pleasures”. He explains it as literally binding him as if he was a horse and the daily prayer with prayer shawl and *tefillin* as the yoke and reins. It are good powers, but they must be directed properly. His approach to the world is thus seeing it as filled with bad temptations, and human nature as weak and wild. Religion is thus seen as a controlling mechanism. He views the religious life as a puzzle which he learns piece by piece to understand, while at the same time believing that man can never understand all of it. His approach to the rules is thus that one can rationalize a portion of them, but never its totality.

### Conclusion

In this interview we see the Rabbinic interpretation where the ritual is linked to the Torah rules in total. The first experiences had a magical effect on him, creating an overwhelming religious experience, but which faded after repeated application. None of the earlier concepts

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<sup>17</sup> Directed by Kiki Amsberg, produced by Interakt, 2004.

of *tefillin* (amulet, justice, Jewish identity) are discussed, even though the magical experience of an embodied ritual is clearly told, it cannot be equated with it being experienced as an amulet since an amulet is worn, not for experience, but for protection and blessings. In Daniel's experience, the ritual clearly symbolizes the text, to which he dedicates his life to study. Binding the *tefillin* for contemporary orthodox Jews thus expresses everything where Rabbinic Judaism stands for, binding yourself to the text, so it is the only thing that stays on your lips. In the end, the centuries old practice still retains a common theme, but which has underwent an important transition. In the earliest uses as an amulet, it was the text itself, the paper and the words in ink, that hopefully caused prosperity. Today, it is still the text which can cause this, but only when oneself becomes the text in act and spirit. One must not just wear the text, one must know and live it. The evolution of the ritual thus shows the evolution on how we approach the world, from a supernatural and uncontrollable world, to a more natural and controllable one.



*Screenshots from the interview with Daniel van Praag (Interakt media, 2004)*

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