

The Three Tefillin of the Kabbalah

An Outline of Kabbalistic Halakhic Practices

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As is known in all Orthodox Jewish circles, there are a number of different types of Tefillin. The two most well known forms are named after the medieval Rabbis who held one to be the correct practice over the other. These two great Sages (and the Tefillin named after them) are Rashi and Rabbeynu Tam.

The only difference between these two orders of Tefillin is simply the order of the Biblical passages written inside them. According to Rashi, the order of the scripture passages within the Tefillin follows the order of how they appear in the Bible. According to Rabbeynu Tam, the third passage, which is the Shema Yisrael, should be placed last, reversing the order of the third and fourth passages. This difference of opinion as to the proper order of Tefillin did not start with these Sages, nor end with them.

Jewish law dictates that the Tefillin of Rashi are the standard. It is thus Rashi Tefillin that everyone wears today. However, Rabbeynu Tam Tefillin most certainly did not go away. These other Tefillin are worn by a large number of Torah observant men to this day, especially since the Kabbalah has revealed what Rabbeynu Tam Tefillin truly are.

Prior to the days of the Ari'zal and the revelation of the Kabbalistic meaning of the Rabbeynu Tam Tefillin, pious Jewish men would be cautious to fulfill both opinions regarding Tefillin. After all, one would be correct and the other would be as non-existent. But which one? Prior to the Kabbalistic revelation, no one knew the answer to this question. So the custom arose that pious Jewish men would wear two sets of Tefillin.

There were two practices as to how this was performed. The most common way was for one to wear Rashi Tefillin during Shaharit (morning prayer service) until the conclusion of the main body of the service, the Amidah and the following supplications. After these prayers were recited one would take off the Rashi Tefillin and put on the Rabbeynu Tam Tefillin, wearing these until the completion of the service.

The second practice was that both sets of Tefillin were made extremely small and were both worn at the same time throughout the entire morning prayer service. This tradition is even recorded in the Code of Jewish Law, (Shulkhan Arukh, Orah Haim 34:2-3) as being the correct practice. Yet, Rabbi Yosef Karo insisted that this practice is to be performed only by those who are well known for their pious behavior.

This tradition of wearing two sets of Tefillin simultaneously was not an innovation of Rabbi Karo's. He was only quoting a precedent established by Sages in previous generations. According to those Sages, one set of Tefillin was the right one and the other set was to be considered no more than superfluous straps. Therefore, the wearing of two sets simultaneously was not anything controversial. Besides the Talmud clearly states (Menahot 34) that there is room on the head for two sets of Tefillin. Maybe the Sages of the holy Talmud were hinting at something, but then again maybe not.

Only a few years after Rabbi Karo wrote these directives in his Shulkhan Arukh, his young contemporary, the Ari'zal revealed the true Kabbalistic meaning behind the Rabbeynu Tam Tefillin. The Ari'zal had received revelation from Elijah the prophet himself that both orders of Tefillin were indeed correct and both sets needed to be worn in accordance to a special procedure.

The Ari'zal explained further that the Tefillin worn upon the head assist in activating certain parts of the brain and mind, stimulating them to be sensitive to the reception of aspects of the spiritual light. The Rashi Tefillin, the Ari'zal says in Sha'ar HaKavanot, correspond to the sefirat Binah and assist the wearer in receiving enlightenment from the "Mohin of Imma" which emanated from Binah. The Rabbeynu Tam Tefillin have even a higher source. They correspond to the sefirat Hokhma and assist the wearer in receiving enlightenment from the "Mohin of Abba" which emanated from Hokhma.

The two Mohin (brains), be they in the world of the sefirot or in the head of man, are meant to function together. Therefore, the Ari'zal revealed that the two sets of Tefillin which assist in brain and spiritual activity also must be worn together. The two sets are of equal importance. One is not as nothing. Nor should the sets be worn one after the other. Both must be worn together.

This practice, the Ari'zal says, is not simply for those who are known for their piousness. Every Jewish man, regardless of his education or piety should wear two sets of Tefillin, together. This is the truth according to the Kabbalah. This is the right way to wear Tefillin according to Heaven, as revealed by Elijah to the Ari'zal. The Sages of the Talmud knew this over a thousand years before the Ari'zal was given the permission to publicly reveal this. Indeed, they did hint to this in Tractate Menahot.

Since the days of the Ari'zal many in the Sephardic communities who have adopted the Kabbalah as Jewish law follow this practice. Although the two small sets of Tefillin are harder to get and much more expensive, they are, nonetheless, the right way to wear Tefillin. Any true G-d fearing man should do all in his power to acquire these kosher Kabbalistic Tefillin.

For the afternoon service (Minha) the Ari'zal instituted another Kabbalistic tradition. At Minha he would wear a set of large Rashi Tefillin called Shimusha Rabbah. These Tefillin are to measure 4.5 cm, no more and no less. 4.4 cm is not acceptable. The requirements of the exact size are important for the small Tefillin of Rashi and Rabbeynu Tam are to measure 2.3cm and 2.2 cm respectively. The Shimusha Rabbah has to be the exact size of the two of them together, for the Shimusha Rabbah Tefillin correspond to the sefirat Keter, the source of Hokhma and Binah.

These measurements were told to me personally by Rabbi Yitzhak Kaduri when I was a student at the Kabbalistic Yeshiva Beit El in Jerusalem. The size of 4.5cm is unusually larger than what is normally made and when we, the students of Beit El, arranged to get our Shimusha Rabbah Tefillin a special mold had to be formed to make them. It is important that anyone seeking Shimusha Rabbah Tefillin make certain that they are the correct 4.5cm size and not 4.4cm. Yes, the meticulousness of 1cm makes a big difference. With regards to the small Rashi and Rabbeynu Tam Tefillin, these can be purchased, by special order, through most Jewish bookstores. Shimusha Rabbah Tefillin might not be available outside of Jerusalem.

Again, I wish to advise you of the importance of wearing Tefillin in the correct Kabbalistic fashion. Although these Tefillin are a great expense, they are truly worth whatever it takes to acquire them. Just remember, not all Rabbis are aware of the Kabbalistic traditions. In our many sins, there are even some Rabbis who do not accept Kabbalistic authority as the final word on Jewish law. May G-d forgive their souls.

Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef, the great Sephardi legal authority of our generation is one of the modern Sages who does not accept Kabbalistic practice as legally binding. He has gone on record calling for the wearing of Tefillin according to the pre-Kabbalistic tradition. While in all areas governing Jewish law, Rav Ovadiah's words should be adhered to, regarding those areas where the Kabbalah has spoken, it is the correct and wise thing to pay heed to the Kabbalah and not to Rav Ovadiah or any other Jewish legal authority who would contradict it. For Rabbi Yosef Karo, the author of the Shulkhan Arukh has clearly stated (Beit Yosef, Orah Haim 141) that any law not specifically outlined in the Talmud is to be observed in accordance to the directives of the Kabbalah, even if all the Rabbis disagree with what the Kabbalah says.

With regards to Jewish law, observance in accordance to the Kabbalah is paramount. This has been agreed to by all Sephardic Sages since the days of the Ari'zal. Rav Ovadiah's intention, I am sure are excellent and above reproach. Nonetheless, one who aspires to achieve holiness, Divine inspiration, and enlightenment must observe Jewish law according to its most correct form, i.e., according to the Kabbalah. I am sure Heaven understands Rav Ovadiah's good intention, and forgives him for anything that he has said or done that disagrees with the great Sephardic, Kabbalistic Sages who came before him.

The Tefillin are referred to in the Torah as a "sign" between Israel and G-d. Therefore, the proper observance of this commandment is extremely important. They should be scrupulously observed as best as possible in accordance to Kabbalistic tradition.