

RITUAL AND MEANING: Putting on Tefillin

Rituals are not merely behaviors. A ritual enables us to speak in the language of symbols. *Object symbols* embody basic concepts and values in a visible, tangible form. *Action symbols*—symbolic acts we perform—assert our commitment to concepts and values far more powerfully than words alone.

The 1st paragraph of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4–9) illustrates the connection between the concepts and the object symbols and action symbols:

1. Love Adonay your God (6:5).
2. Express your love by always keeping Adonay's teachings in your heart and in your mind (6:6–7).

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3. Demonstrate your love by binding (action symbol) sections of Adonay's Torah (object symbol) to your arm and your head, near your heart and your mind (6:8).

Tefillin are leather boxes containing sections of the Torah written by a *sofer* (scribe) on parchment with a quill in the manner of a Torah scroll. Using leather straps, we bind these symbolic Torah scrolls to our bodies as an *ot* (sign) and a *zikkaron* (reminder) of Adonay's teachings (6:8, Exodus 13:9).

In preparation for putting on *tefillin*, concentrate on fulfilling the *mitsvah* without distraction. Insert the left arm (if left-handed, then right arm using *tefillin* for a left-hander) through the strap loop of the *tefillah shel yad* (hand), with the free end of the box toward your hand. Rest the box upon the biceps muscle. Position the box so that when your arm drops to your side, the box points toward your heart. Recite the first *berakhah* (w_3f_4) and immediately perform the *mitsvah* by pulling the strap tight and wrapping it around your upper arm. Wrap the strap around your forearm a number of times (usually 7) to ensure the box stays in its proper place.

Without interruption, place the *tefillah shel rosh* (head) loosely on your head. Ashenazic Jews now recite a second *berakhah* (w_3f_4). Immediately position the *tefillah shel rosh* properly: (1) The free end of the box should align with your hairline (or where it used to be), *not* on your forehead. (2) The knot should lie at the base of your skull, above your neck. Spread the straps around the top of your head, in direct contact with your head. Strap ends fall in front, one on each side. Recite *barukh shem kevod malkhuto* . . . (w_3f_4).

Wrap the *tefillah shel yad* strap around the middle finger 3 times while reciting (w_3f_6) God's promise to bind Godself forever to the People Israel (Hosea 2:21–22). Conclude by wrapping 3 times around the hand to form the 3-branched letter Ψ . In doing so, you also have “inscribed” on your body the letters Ψ (on your hand), Υ (in the knot at your head), and $\daleth$ (in the knot on your arm)—the word *Shadday*, one of the names of God.

For both *tefillin*, be sure the black side of each strap shows.

Binding the Torah to your body can be an intimate experience of personal contact with the Torah. Regular engagement with symbols reminds us daily of what those symbols *represent*. This is a signature pedagogy of the Torah, which the Rabbis expanded into a complex framework of ideas, values, and principles conveyed through a rich and varied collection of object symbols and action symbols.