

The Florence Melton Adult Mini-School
Section: Rhythms of Jewish Living
<http://mcohen02.tripod.com/rhythms.html>
Instructor: Marsha B. Cohen
E-mail: marbcohen@gmail.com

Topic: Jewish Reminders and Symbols

Key Idea: Although there are many symbols and ritual objects associated with Jewish traditions and practices, *tefillin*, *mezuzah* and *tzitzit* are considered the most important Jewish symbols insofar as they are 1) biblically mandated and 2) used year-round, rather than in association with a particular festival. (Traditionally, 2 of the 3 have been used exclusively by Jewish males.) All are explained by the Rabbis as reminders to observe the *mitzvot*, but they have also been popularly regarded as amulets or objects with anti-demonic protective properties.

The word *Tefillin* comes from the same Hebrew root as the words for “attachment,” and “to look after” or “care for.” It is etymologically associated by many with the word *tefilla* (prayer), but which is spelled differently in Hebrew. *Tefillin* is often translated as “phylacteries,” from the Greek *phylakterion*—to protect or guard. They are black leather boxes worn on the head and upper arm (traditionally by post-bar mitzvah males) during weekday prayer, but are not worn on Shabbat, festivals or, according to the custom of many observant Jews, on *chol hamoed*, the intermediate days of festivals. *Tefillin* each contain four parchment scrolls pertaining to the *mitzva* of putting them on.

Mezuzah means “doorpost.” A hand-written parchment scroll with the text of Deut. 6:4-9 and 11:13-21 is placed inside a case (often erroneously referred to as the *mezuzah*) on the upper third of the right doorposts of Jewish homes. Many observant Jews attach *mezuzot* to the entrances of all the rooms of their home (except the bathrooms and kitchen).

The Torah commands that *tzitzit* (fringes) be attached to the corners every (male) garment. When clothing styles changed, the *tzitzit* were attached to the *tallit*, worn during morning prayers and Kol Nidre, and to a four-cornered garment called *tallit katan* or *arbah kanfot*, which is worn all the time (by males).

The *kippah* is another symbol traditionally for males. While women are required to cover their hair in traditional Judaism, men cover their heads. The rationales for men’s and women’s headcoverings are different. For the male, the *kippah* serves as a sign of reverence for God (the Aramaic phrase *yirah malka* became *yarmulka* in Yiddish). Women’s hair is regarded in Judaism (as well as in Islam) as sexually arousing, and since late antiquity, perhaps even earlier, women by tradition have been required to keep their hair covered, not just during prayer, but at all times. The adoption of the *kippah* by women represents not only a different style of hair covering, but a different, more egalitarian rationale for it.

Our discussion of the texts:

Text 1: Deuteronomy (Devarim) 6:4-9. The *Shema* speaks of the *tefillin* and *mezuzah* as reminders of our responsibility to love and obey God, teaching our children His ways.

Text 2: Ramban (Nachmanides) Commentary on Exodus 13:16- *Tefillin* are a reminder of the Exodus, emblematic of God’s acting in the world.

Text 3: Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zara 11a. The *mezuzah* as a symbol of God’s protection.

Text 4: Numbers (Bamidbar) 15:37-41. The commandment to attach fringes with a thread of blue to all four cornered garments.

Text 5: Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 43b. *Tefillin, tzitzit* and *mezuzah* are symbols of God's love and favor. They help the user to avoid sin.

Text 6: Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Tallit. Spiritual aspects of wearing the *tallit*.

SupplementaryText: "Women, Tallit and Tefillin: A Surprising Voice From Within Sephardic Tradition," by Sarina Roffé (based on a lecture by Dr. Zvi Zohar).

Rambam [Maimonides] tells us that women may put on *tallit* and *tefillin* but may not say the *berakha* for doing so. But another 12-13th Century Talmudic sage, Rabbi Ya'akov Tam, the grandson of Rashi, ruled that women who perform the *mitzvot* of putting on *tefillin* and *tallit* are permitted to say the *berakha*. Over time, it has become generally understood that Ashkenazic Jews permit the women to say the *berakha* over time-bound *mitzvot*, and Sephardic Jews do not.

Rabbi Yisrael Yaakov AlGhazi and his son Yomtov AlGhazi were each (in turn) holders of the office of "Rishon LeZiyon", Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, and were in the first rank of Sephardic rabbis in the world. They characterize the figure of the "Woman of Valor" [the ideal Jewish woman, "*Eshet Hayyil*"] as one who not only performs *mitzvot*, such as putting on *tefillin* and *tallit*, but also recites the appropriate blessings. Moreover, these two rabbis explain that the ideal woman is one who is learned in *Halakha*, and therefore is able to decide when it is a good idea to consult with rabbinic sages and when it is best to act without such consultation. Knowing that contemporary rabbis might advise her to refrain from *tallit* and *tefillin*, the ideal, wise woman acts in her own best religious interest, and acts without seeking rabbinic approval. Such a woman will receive a great heavenly reward.

Moreover, the two rabbis AlGhazi go on to say, such a woman shall receive a heavenly reward no less than men, who are fully obligated to fulfill these *mitzvot*. Why so? Because a woman who performs the *mitzvot* of putting on *tefillin* and *tallit*, is observed by those around her, especially her family. Her example will encourage men in her family and community to be even more conscientious in fulfilling *mitzvot*. She will therefore receive special additional Heavenly merit not only for her own increased spirituality but also for her influence on the "spiritual ecology" of her surroundings.

Text 7: Babylonian Talmud, Kiddushin 31a. *Kippah (yarmulka)* as reverence for God.

Text 8: Rabbi David haLevy Segal, Turei Zahav (17th c.) *Kippah* as a separation from the customs of non-Jews.

Text 9: Mark Washofsky, The Worship Service. The evolving reinterpretations of Jewish symbols in the Reform movement.