

PARSHAT VA'ETCHANAN

9 - 15 Av 5785
3 - 9 August 2025

Torah: Duet. 3:23-7:11
Haftorah: Isaiah 40:1-26

BLACK LEATHER BOXES

The mitzvah of tefillin is an enigma among human rituals: Tefillin are black leather boxes containing parchment scrolls inscribed in meticulous accordance with the criteria of an ageless scribal art. Not to be read, but to be worn.

Yet from Sinai to Jerusalem, Babylon to Masada, Auschwitz to Manhattan, through fire, sword, forced labor and affluence - we carried tefillin to this day, guarding the chain of transmission with our very lives.

Wrapping tefillin very much feels like you are tying yourself to every other Jew and to the G-d of Israel in a tight bond. It's also one of those mitzvahs that's meant to remind us of our liberation from Egypt, when we became untied from bondage to human beings by becoming tightly bonded to the Master of the Universe.

Tefillin is said to have a real effect on the people that wrap in the every morning. Their mind and heart are connected together in a perfect bond with the infinite light of the Creator. Here is one explanation of how that works:

Hi-Tech Connectivity

This was back in the early sixties, when the first mainframe computers were being introduced into business. Professor Abraham Polichenco, a pioneer of computer technology, visited the Lubavitcher Rebbe and posed to him a question:

"I know that everything that exists in the world, even something that we discover later in history, has its source somewhere in the Torah. So, where are computers in the Torah?" Without hesitation, the Rebbe answered, "Tefillin." The professor was perplexed.

"What's new about a computer?" the Rebbe continued.

"You walk into a room and you see many familiar machines: a typewriter, a large tape recorder, a television set, a hole puncher, a calculator. What is new?"

"But under the floor, cables connect all these machines so they work as one."

The professor nodded enthusiastically. He hadn't realized it before, but yes, this is all that a computer is: a synthesis of media and processing devices.

"Now look at your own self. You have a brain. It is in one world. Your heart

is in another. And your hands often end up involved in something completely foreign to both of them. Three diverse machines.

"So you put on tefillin. First thing in the day, you connect your head, your heart and your hand with these leather cables—all to work as one, with one intent. And then, when you go out to meet the world, all your actions find harmony in a single coordinated purpose."

What's in the Tefillin?

There are many laws and requirements regarding the making of Tefillin, and it takes many years of training to qualify the scribes and craftsmen who make them. What follows is a basic description.

A set includes two Tefillin - one for the head and one for the arm. Each consists of three main components: the scrolls, the box and the strap.

The scrolls are strips of parchment upon which are inscribed four passages from the Torah: Kadesh (Exodus 13:1-10), VeHayah Ki Yeviacha (Exodus 13:11-16), Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) and VeHayah Im Shamo'a (Deuteronomy 11:13-21). In the arm-tefillin, the four passages are written on a single scroll; in the head-tefillin, they're on four separate scrolls.

The scrolls are inserted into boxes made of leather that has been painstakingly pressed into the tefillin's perfectly smooth planes and precise geometrical shape and painted black. The upper part of the tefillin box is a perfect cube; the lower part is a flatter box that is wider than the upper part. On one side, the lower part extends further than the other sides, and has a slit through which the tefillin strap is threaded. The head-tefillin has four compartments, for the four scrolls, and has a raised Hebrew letter shin on each side.

The straps are made of leather painted black on one side. They are threaded through the lower part of the boxes and knotted. The head-strap's knot is in the shape of the Hebrew letter daled; the hand-tefillin is knotted in the shape of the Hebrew letter yud. (Together, Shin, Daled, Yud spell Shadai—one of the names of G-d.)

The Kabbalah of Tefillin

Kabbalah is an esoteric wisdom that explains the secrets of the cosmos and the things Jewish people do. Like Tefillin.

According to Kabbalah, the world is projected into being by an infinite

light focused through ten harmonious Sefirot. But at the time of creation, only seven of the Sefirot descended within seven days and generated our world. The first three, those of Mind, stayed up there, sort of out of the picture.

That's why, to this day, people's bodies are generally not in sync with their minds. Neither are their hearts or their actions. Actually, nothing's much in sync with anything. It all goes back to that first Big Bang of light.

Tefillin is all about healing that rift. You do your part, connecting your mind and heart with these leather straps and black boxes with scrolls inside - and the effect reverberates throughout the cosmos. Heaven connects to earth, spiritual to physical, Creator to creation. Everything starts getting into harmony with its essence and inner purpose.

Tefillin Reborn

In June 5727 (1967), the Jewish nation was once again in dire danger. The neighboring Arab states, led by Egypt and with Soviet support, were tightening the noose, threatening to utterly annihilate the fledgling state of Israel. Pundits predicted they would have an easy victory. The Israeli government feared another holocaust on the horizon.

One Jewish leader stood up with confidence and strength. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, spoke publicly and ensured that his message would be transmitted to Israel: G-d would make great miracles for His people and protect them. In the merit of Tefillin, the enemy would turn in fear and flee.

Tefillin observance at the time was at an all-time low. Rituals had fallen out of fashion with the climate of conformity that pervaded the Cold War era. But now began an urgent campaign for Jews everywhere to wrap Tefillin. Businessmen rolled up their sleeves on the street, as did students on campus, and, of course, soldiers in the Israeli army.

The rest is history: The enemy quickly scattered in retreat and surrendered to a ceasefire after only six days of battle. Jewish pride took off like a rocket, and a renaissance of Torah Judaism ensued in Israel, in the West and even in Russia.

Today, Jews of all walks of life can be found wrapping Tefillin every

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalm 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

Negative Mitzvah 145

Consuming Offerings outside their Prescribed Boundary

It is forbidden - even for a priest - to consume of the flesh of a Sin or Guilt Offering outside the Temple Courtyard. Similarly, it is forbidden for anyone to consume of the flesh of other sacrifices outside the walls of Jerusalem.

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morning - some for an entire hour of prayers, some for only the five minutes it takes to put them on, say the Shema and take them off again. After all, that five minutes may be just what it takes to make a whole new world.

By Rabbi Tzvi Freeman

VA'ETCHANAN IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Va'etchanan," means "I entreated," and it is found in Deuteronomy 3:23.

Moses tells the people of Israel how he implored G-d to allow him to enter the Land of Israel, but G-d refused, instructing him instead

to ascend a mountain and see the Promised Land.

Continuing his "review of the Torah," Moses describes Exodus from Egypt and the Giving of the Torah, declaring them unprecedented events in human history. "Has there ever occurred this great thing, or has the likes of it ever been heard? Did ever a people hear the voice of G-d speaking out of the midst of the fire . . . and live? . . . You were shown, to know, that the L-rd is G-d . . . there is none else beside Him."

Moses predicts that in future generations the people will turn away from G-d, worship idols, and be exiled from their land and scattered amongst the nations; but from there they will

seek G-d and return to obey His commandments.

Our Parshah also includes a repetition of the Ten Commandments, and the verses of the Shema, which declare the fundamentals of the Jewish faith: the unity of G-d ("Hear O Israel: the L-rd our G-d, the L-rd is one"); the mitzvot to love G-d, to study His Torah, and to bind "these words" as tefillin on our arms and heads, and inscribe them in the mezuzot affixed on the doorposts of our homes.

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 9 Av 5785 - 3 August 2025

Exodus Generation Condemned to Die in Desert (1312 BCE)

On the Ninth of Av 2449 (1312 BCE), the generation of Jews who came out of Egypt under Moses' leadership 16 months earlier were condemned to die in the desert and the entry into the Land of Israel was delayed for 40 years.

As related in Numbers 14, when the Spies that Moses sent to the Land of Canaan returned with their disheartening report, the people wept all night - the night of the 9th of Av - proclaiming that they'd rather return to Egypt than attempt to conquer and settle it; G-d decreed that the entire generation would wander in the desert for 40 years until the last of them died out, and that their children, under the leadership of Joshua, will enter the land He promised as Israel's heritage.

Holy Temples Destroyed (423 BCE and 70 CE)

Both the first and second Holy Temples which stood in Jerusalem were destroyed on 9 Av: the First Temple by the Babylonians in the year 3338 (423 BCE), and the second by the Romans in 3830 (70 CE).

The Temples' destruction represents the greatest tragedy in Jewish history, for it marks our descent into Galut - the state of physical exile and spiritual displacement in which we still find ourselves today. Thus, the Destruction is mourned as a tragedy that affects our lives today, 2,000 years later, no less than the very generation that experienced it first-hand.

Fall of Betar (133 CE)

Betar, the last stronghold in the heroic Bar Kochba rebellion, fell to the Romans on the 9th of Av of the year 3893 (133 CE) after a three-year siege. 580,000 Jews died by starvation or the sword, including Bar Kochba, the leader of the rebellion.

Expulsion From England (1290)

On this date in 5050 (1290), King Edward I of England issued an Edict of Expulsion, ordering the expulsion of all Jews from his territory. Jews would be allowed to live in England for nearly four centuries.

Spanish Expulsion (1492)

The Jews of Spain were expelled by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella on the 9th of Av of 5252 (1492), terminating many centuries of flourishing Jewish life in that country.

Passing of Rabbi Yaakov Y. Horowitz (1815)

Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Horowitz (5505-5575, or 1745-1815), known as the "Seer of Lublin," was the successor to Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk (5477-5527, or 1717-1787), and a major personality in the spread of the Chassidic movement throughout Poland. Many of the great Chassidic masters of the time were his disciples. Many of his insights were

published posthumously in Divrei Emmet, Zichron Zot, and Zot Zichron.

Monday, 10 Av 5785 - 4 August 2025

Birth of Issachar (1565 BCE)

Issachar, the son of Jacob and Leah, ninth of the Twelve Tribes, was born on 10 Menachem Av in Haran 2196 (1565 BCE). He lived to the age of 122. The tribe of Issachar was well-known for their Torah scholarship, producing many members of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court.

Holy Temple Burns (69)

The Romans set the Temple aflame on the afternoon of 9 Av, and it continued to burn through Av 10. For this reason, some of the mourning practices of the "Nine Days" are observed through the morning hours of 10 Av.

AMIA Bombing (1994)

Arab terrorists affiliated with Hezbollah and Iran exploded a bomb in the Jewish community center (AMIA) in Buenos Aires, Argentina, killing 86 and wounding more than 300, in the most lethal attack against any diaspora Jewish community since the Holocaust.

Expulsion from Gaza (2005)

More than 8,500 Jewish residents were forcefully expelled from their homes in 25 towns and settlements in the Gaza Strip (including 16 settlements in the flourishing "Gush Katif" belt) and Northern Samaria in the summer of 5765 (2005), as part of the Israeli government's ill-fated "Disengagement Plan."

10 Av was the deadline set by the governments for all Jews to leave their homes in these areas. Two days later, tens of thousands of soldiers and police officers began the forceful removal of the thousands who refused to leave willingly. The removal of all Jewish residents from Gush Katif and the Gaza Strip was completed by 17 Av, and from Northern Samaria a day later. The army completed its withdrawal from these areas on the 8th of Elul, after bulldozing all the hundreds of homes and civic buildings in the settlements. The Jewish dead were disinterred and removed from the cemeteries. Only the synagogues were left standing.

The government's hopes that the "disengagement" would open "new opportunities" in relations with the Palestinian Arabs were bitterly disappointed. No sooner had the last Israeli soldiers departed from the Gaza Strip that Arab mobs began looting, desecrating and torching the synagogues. The vacated settlements became the staging grounds for terrorist attacks against Israel, including the unremitting rocket fire on the nearby Israeli town of Sderot and the cities and settlements of the Western Negev.

Wednesday, 12 Av 5785 - 6 August 2025

Nachmanides' Disputation (1263)

By order of King James I of Aragon (Spain), Nachmanides (Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, 4954-5030, or 1194-1270) was compelled to participate in a public debate, held in the king's presence, against the Jewish convert to Christianity, Pablo Christiani. His brilliant defense of Judaism and refutations of Christianity's claims served as the basis of many such future disputations through the generations.

Because his victory was an insult to the king's religion, Nachmanides was forced to flee Spain. He came to Jerusalem, where he found just a handful of Jewish families living in abject poverty, and revived the Jewish community there. The synagogue he built in the Old City is in use today, and is perhaps the oldest standing synagogue in the world.

Shabbat, 15 Av 5785 - 9 August 2025

Ban on Inter-Tribal Marriage Lifted (13th century BCE)

In order to ensure the orderly division of the Holy Land between the twelve tribes of Israel, restrictions had been placed on marriages between members of two different tribes. A woman who had inherited tribal lands from her father was forbidden to marry out of her tribe, lest her children - members of their father's tribe - cause the transfer of land from one tribe to another by inheriting her estate (Number 36). This ordinance was binding only on the generation that conquered and settled the Holy Land during the 14-year period 2488-2503 (1273-1258 BCE); when the restriction was lifted, on the 15th of Av, the event was considered a cause for celebration and festivity.

Jeroboam's Roadblocks Removed (574 BCE)

Upon the division of the Holy Land into two kingdoms following the death of King Solomon in the year 2964 (797 BCE), Jeroboam ben Nebat, ruler of the breakaway Northern Kingdom of Israel, set up roadblocks to prevent his citizens from making the thrice-yearly pilgrimage to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, capital of the Southern Kingdom of Judea. These were finally removed more than 200 years later by Hosea ben Eilah, the last king of the Northern Kingdom, on 15 Av, 3187 (574 BCE).

Betar Dead Buried (148 CE)

The fortress of Betar was the last holdout of the Bar Kochba rebellion. When Betar fell on the 9th of Av, 3893 (133 CE), Bar Kochba and many thousands of Jews were killed; the Romans massacred the survivors of the battle with great cruelty and would not even allow the Jews to bury their dead. For 15 years their remains were left scattered on the battlefield. When the dead of Betar were finally brought to burial on Av 15 of the year 3908 from creation (148 CE), an additional blessing (HaTov VehaMeitiv) was added to the "Grace After Meals" in commemoration.