

Torah Weekly

THE MOST MYSTERIOUS WORD IN THE TORAH

The famous passage of Shema found in Parshat Va'etchanan includes the following verse:

And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for totafot between your eyes.

While it is well known that this verse refers to the tefillin bound on the arm and forehead, the question remains: Why are they described in such cryptic terms, and what, in fact, does the word totafot actually mean?

1. "Two Plus Two" in Foreign Languages

Rashi quotes the Talmud where Rabbi Akiva explains that the word totafot (טֹטָפוֹת) denotes the four compartments found in the head tefillin. Tat (טַט) in Coptic means "two." Similarly, path (פַּת) in Afriki also means "two." Thus, taken together, we have four, which teaches us that there are four compartments to the head tefillin.

According to this interpretation, the Torah specifically used this word to highlight the number four. Unlike the word "ot" (אוֹת, "sign"), which the verse used for the arm-tefillin and which is singular, totafot is grammatically plural. Rabbi Akiva's etymology explains why totafot implies not just two (as a plural might minimally indicate) but four compartments in total.

2. Just Do The Math (and Ignore the Meaning)

The same section of the Talmud cites Rabbi Yishmael's opinion. He understands—a little cryptically—that we can infer its meaning from the other places⁴ the word is mentioned in the Bible. He notes that in two places the word is written without a vav (טֹטָפֹת) and once with a vav (טֹטָפוֹת), hinting at pluralization. Tallying up these appearances, he concludes that totafot alludes to the number four (two singular mentions and one plural mention 1+1+2=4), hinting at the fact that the head-tefillin must contain four separate compartments. He does not, however, explain what the word actually means.

3. A Forehead Ornament or Crown

Another explanation is based on the usage of a similar term in Rabbinic literature to mean an ornamental headband. The Mishnah mentions a "totefet" that women would wear on the forehead (extending ear to ear) as a piece of jewelry. Nachmanides embraces this approach in his commentary. He notes that totafot has "no known affinity" in Hebrew, and after rejecting a different

etymology (see below regarding speech), he writes: "Our Rabbis, however, have called an object which lies upon the head totafot, just as they said: 'A woman may not go out [on Shabbat] with a totafot ... Rabbi Abahu said: What is totafet? It is a forehead band from ear to ear.' Now it is the rabbis ...who spoke the language and knew it, and from them we should accept the explanation of totafot."

4. "Totafot" Connoting Speech

An alternative explanation connects totafot to a root meaning speech or utterance. This view was recorded by the 10th-century philologist Menachem ibn Saruk and is brought by Rashi in his commentary on Exodus 13:16. He associates totafot with the Biblical Hebrew verb "הטף" (hatif), meaning "to drip words," figuratively speaking. For example, the prophet Ezekiel is told "vehateif el darom" – "speak (prophecy) to the south," and Micah says, "al tatifu" – "do not preach." These uses of טִיף/הטִיף refer to speech pouring forth.

On this basis, totafot would imply conversation starters. Rashi explains that they are named totafot because "whoever sees them tied between the eyes will remember the miracle [of the Exodus] and speak about it."

5. A Numerical Hint

The Ba'al HaTurim points out that the phrase "uletotafot bein einecha" ("for totafot between your eyes") has the same numeric value as the phrase "eleh arbaa batim" ("these are four compartments [of the head tefillin]").

6. Reclaiming "Totafot" as Holy Tongue

According to Rabbi Akiva's explanation, we must understand why the Torah uses foreign words (Coptic, Phrygian) to form "totafot." Could the Torah not use a native Hebrew term for this mitzvah? The Tzemach Tzedek, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch, cites Shelah, who cautions against interpreting this to mean that the Torah uses words originating in non-Hebrew languages. Rather, he explains, all languages ultimately stem from Lashon Hakodesh, the Holy Tongue.

"When G-d created the world," he writes, "there was only the Holy Tongue," as Rashi attests in multiple places. It was only later, at the Tower of Babel, that G-d confounded human speech and introduced linguistic diversity. At that point, G-d interwove fragments of the Holy Tongue into the newly formed languages of the nations. Thus, even the Greek, Caspian, and African terms cited by Rabbi Akiva contain original Hebrew words that became embedded in other tongues.

From this perspective, tat and path—though identified with other languages—are in fact remnants of the Holy Tongue, repatriated into the Torah. Far from borrowing from the nations, the Torah is reclaiming its own dispersed language. By including such words, the Torah signals that even the languages of the nations contain holy sparks.

Yet, perhaps the use of words that were preserved in foreign languages was intentional, as the head-tefillin is a signal to the nations of the world—as Rabbi Eliezer the Great interprets the verse, "Then all the peoples of the earth will see that the name of the L-rd is called upon you," as a reference to the head tefillin, which broadcasts to all that the name of G-d is literally worn on our bodies.

By Mordechai Rubin

SPIRITUAL ATOMIC FISSION

Moses told the Jewish people,] "For you are the least of all peoples." Deuteronomy 7:7

The Jewish people have almost always been a small minority. This may prompt us to wonder how we can be expected to fulfill our Divine mission. Even if we can survive, how can a tiny minority

PARSHAT VA'ETCHANAN

19-25 July
5-11 Av

Va'etchanan: Deuteronomy 3:23 -
7:11
Isaiah 40:1-26

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzoh for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

Sacred material please do not desecrate

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No One Alone,
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IN JEWISH HISTORY

influence the majority? Moreover, assimilation and war have continued to erode our population, and the demands of modern life leave the rest of us progressively less time for spiritual pursuits and less sensitive to spirituality.

But now that scientists have learned to unleash the power of the atom, the world has learned that size is not always an indication of power. Once we learn how to access its latent energy, even the smallest particle of matter can release incredible force.

The basic process used to release atomic power is nuclear fission, in which the atom is broken down into smaller components. As Jews, this teaches us that the key to releasing our latent, infinite potential is by breaking our egos, thereby allowing our inner, Divine essence to shine through. The better we master this "spiritual technology," the less we need be intimidated by being an apparently insignificant minority or by having only limited time and energy to devote to holy endeavors. Within us lies the power to change the entire world for the good!

Tuesday, July 21, 2026

7 Av, 5786

First Temple Invaded (423 BCE) 7 Av

After nearly a month of fierce fighting inside Jerusalem (see "Today in Jewish History" for Tammuz 9), the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia broke through into the Temple compound, where they feasted and vandalized until the afternoon of Av 9, when they set the Holy Temple aflame.

Wednesday, July 22, 2026

8 Av, 5786

Spies Return (1312 BCE) 8 Av

The Spies dispatched 40 days earlier by Moses to tour the Promised Land return to Israel's encampment in the desert, bearing a huge cluster of grapes and other lush fruits. But even as they praise the land's fertility, they terrify the people with tales of mighty giant warriors dwelling there and assert that the land is unconquerable.

Wednesday, July 22, 2026

8 Av, 5786

Civil War in Jerusalem (67 CE) 8 Av

Fighting breaks out inside the besieged city of Jerusalem between Jewish factions divided on the question of whether or not to fight the Roman armies encircling the city from without. One group sets fire to the city's considerable food stores, consigning its population to starvation until the fall of Jerusalem three years later.

Thursday, July 23, 2026

9 Av, 5786

Exodus Generation Condemned to Die in Desert (1312 BCE) 9 Av

On the Ninth of Av of the year 2449 from creation (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 (see "Today in Jewish History" for yesterday, Av 8), the people wept all night -- the night of Av 9th -- 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.

This is the first of five national tragedies that occurred on Av 9 listed by the Talmud (Ta'anit 4:6), due to which the day was designated as a fast day. The other four (see below) are: the destruction of the two Temples, the fall of Betar, and the plowing over of Jerusalem.

Thursday, July 23, 2026

9 Av, 5786

Holy Temples Destroyed (423 BCE and 69 CE) 9 Av

Both the first and second Holy Temples which stood in Jerusalem were destroyed on Av 9: the First Temple by the Babylonians in the year 3338 from creation (423 BCE), and the second by the Romans in 3829 (69 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.

Yet the Ninth of Av is also a day of hope. The Talmud relates that Moshiach ("anointed one"--the Messiah), was born at the very moment that the Temple was set aflame and the Galut began. [This is in keeping with the teachings of our sages that, "In every generation is born a descendent of Judah who is worthy to become Israel's Moshiach" (Bartinoro on Ruth); "When the time will come, G-d will reveal Himself to him and send him, and then the spirit of Moshiach, which is hidden and secreted on high, will be manifested in him" (Chattam Sofer).]