

something may seem to run counter to the concepts of freedom and creativity. But perhaps, being obliged to God—to the Torah—makes our priorities clear, and ultimately, gives us a real freedom, enabling us to work towards those spiritual goals that all of us, on some level, crave. □

🌸 Endthoughts 🌸

My grandfather's tefillin

Edward M. Friedman

Over 30 years ago, I received a very special bar mitzvah gift from my uncle and aunt: my grandfather's *tefillin*. Grandpa had died seven months earlier and did not live to see me reach that day.

A Place For Discarded Treasures

In Russia, he had excelled in talmudic studies and had considered going into the rabbinate. However, the political uncertainties of the turn of the century convinced him to come to the United States with his wife and two surviving children (three had died of croup in Russia and five more would be born in this country including my father.) Here Grandpa became a tailor and, later, a grocer. He continued to pray and to study Talmud with his cronies at the High Street Shul in Bridgeport, but his dreams of becoming a rabbi were never fulfilled. He had, however, encouraged my early success in Hebrew school and planted within me the idea of following his unfulfilled dream. Thus there was no question in the family that I should receive grandpa's *tefillin* and his Hebrew and Yiddish books after he died. No one fought me for them.

Noting their worn condition, I asked the *shamash* of the *shul* to fix them up by polishing the boxes and the straps for me. After that, I wore them intermittently for the next five years as I struggled to make this mitzvah a daily habit. I didn't succeed until I began college in Philadelphia. Only there, at Penn, did I start wearing grandpa's *tefillin* every day. My junior year I spent at Hebrew University in Jerusalem and while there I had the *tefillin* inspected for the first time, by a *sofer* in Meah Shearim. He reported that one of the parchment slips in the *tefillin* of the head was not kosher because two letters

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❖ ❖ ❖ Ta sh'ma ❖ ❖ ❖

We invite you to send us your favorite text and comment. Submissions should not exceed 200 words. Be sure to include proper citation of sources. Hebrew will appear in transliteration.

Michael Zola Plotnick

Hear me house of Ya'akov
All the remnant of the house of Yisrael;
Those I've carried in My belly,
Upheld in My womb.
Until you grow old, I will be the same;
When you turn grey, it is I who will carry (you);
I made, I will uphold, I will carry and rescue (you).

ISAIAH 46:3-4

When my wife Paola and I learned we were pregnant, we clearly felt the presence of our child in our midst. By the middle of the pregnancy, the "little one" could clearly hear what we were doing, and could identify my voice. We wanted to include this developing one in our Shabbat rituals. We didn't feel that using the blessing formula for boys or girls was appropriate for one in the womb. (Besides, we refused any sonograms and were unaware of the baby's gender until its birth.) From the text of Isaiah quoted in Kiddush Levanah (the blessings for the moon) came the inspiration, "Those carried in the womb..." "Beit Ya'akov" (according to the midrash, these are the women) and "Beit Yisrael" (according to the midrash, these are the men) hint to both sexes. The verse following it brought a sense of the whole journey we all are on.

Raphaela Davida Sephira was born two days before Shavu'ot and lives with her parents in Corvallis, OR where Michael is the Rabbi of Beit Am.

were touching and he replaced it with a kosher parchment. I kept the invalid parchment and on the day of my rabbinic ordination I put it in my pocket over my heart as a remembrance of my grandfather and his influence in bringing me to that significant day.

Still My Grandfather's Tefillin

A few years later, I again visited Israel and this time had decided to upgrade my *tefillin* boxes from the standard (*peshutot*, boxes made from parchment origami) to the

next level (*dakkot*, made from the skin of sheep or goats). The parchments and straps from grandpa's *tefillin* continued to be used, but now I had much nicer boxes to carry them in. They were still grandpa's *tefillin* in a new package.

The years went by quickly and by 1988, I had my own family. My son Aaron was 12 and preparing for his own bar mitzvah. That summer we all went to Israel and we bought *tefillin* for Aaron in the Old City. We found a scribe appropriately named Ezra and Aaron got to watch as Ezra checked over the parchments, and sewed them into the boxes, and cut straps to size. While there I discussed changing my own boxes to the highest grade (*gassot*, made from rawhide) but Ezra told me the parchments I had, though kosher, were not of the proper quality for such fine boxes. I decided not to make the change at that time, out of deference to my grandfather's memory. However, it was necessary then to replace the frayed straps that were on my *tefillin* with new straps. Even though the parchments were all that remained of the original *tefillin*, I still considered them my grandpa's *tefillin*.

The Making Of Grandfather's Tefillin

A couple of years ago, I finally decided to buy a pair of the highest grade *tefillin* and put aside my grandfather's pair. This new pair felt very special and there was a sense of holiness in performing the mitzvah in this special and distinctive way. The leather boxes are supposed to maintain their shape for a lifetime and these *tefillin*, the scribe assured me, will be a wonderful heirloom for those after me.

I mentioned recently in a discussion with colleagues that these new *tefillin* somehow do not fit as well as my grandpa's *tefillin*. They tend to slip on my forehead, the strap on my fingers is a little too long. They are just not quite the same. One of my colleagues suggested that they would only begin to feel right once I had a grandchild of my own to teach the mitzvah of *tefillin*. He may be right.

I have begun to realize that I am now creating a new pair of grandpa *tefillin* to hand down to the next generation once I become a grandpa. Though this pair no longer contains any of the physical elements that were part of my grandfather's *tefillin*, they do contain the same commitment to the mitzvah that my grandfather transmitted to me and that I pray I might transmit to those who come after me. □

But others say about...

Suffering

To restate what Rabbi Ira Stone and others said very well in *Sh'ma* 26/499, suffering is simply a given. It is a part of the reality we live in. We often have no control over it, we often can't understand its origins, we often can't find meaning in it. Religion can only give us tools to cope with suffering. There are no miraculous rituals that can magically alleviate suffering. What religion can do is teach that compassion on the part of others is the obligatory humane response to suffering that we do have control over.

I have a question. How did the Rabbis explain God's silence every Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur when Job asked God to alleviate his suffering?

Barry Leonard Werner
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Book Reviews

Toward a Meaningful Life Menachem Mendel Schneerson. Morrow. \$20

Simon Jacobson's reverent adaptation of universalistic excerpts from the Rebbe's many talks and publications seeks to make his wisdom more broadly available. The resulting book of uplift would, without the Rebbe's name on it, be another vapid effort that some would nonetheless find inspiring.

God Was Not in the Fire Daniel Gordis. Scribner. \$22

This entry in the guide to a spiritual Judaism commends itself by its sensible tone and steady stream of engaging *midrash*. Its content is an involving, sophisticated restatement of Mordecai Kaplan's religious humanism. If you start with a sense of human limits and seek God as an independent reality you must go elsewhere.

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