



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

YOM KIPPUR 5775 • 2014

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 4, 2014
Yom Kippur - Yizkor

Does God Wear Tefillin?



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart 5775 Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

Yizkor is to remember. *Yizkor* is to bear witness.

Today, we are witnesses. Today, we remember.

But, truly, we bear witness every second of every day of every year – our every breath is testimony in itself – so why is today different? What makes *Yizkor* unique?

The answer is found in one of the most painful liturgy of Judaism – the story of the Ten Martyrs.

The High Priest, Rabbi Yishmael, was the second martyr. He was an exceedingly beautiful man and to preserve his beauty, the Roman tyrant flayed off his face. *When they reached the place of the tefillin, Rabbi Yishmael cried out with a bitter voice to the Creator of his soul.*

How could the High Priest not scream out in anguish for this desecration? The *tefillin*, containing the *Shema*, bear witness to the oneness of God.

The Talmud says that God also dons *tefillin* every day, and that God's *tefillin* bear witness to the oneness of the Nation Israel.

The Berditchver Rebbe equates God's *tefillin* with the Jewish people, and he asks: How could God not pick up, caress, and cherish His *tefillin* when they fall down? Even the most ignorant person knows that you pick up and kiss *tefillin* that fall to the ground, so God must do the same!

Yom Kippur is the day we bear witness to the oneness of God, and it is the day that God will surely bear witness to our oneness, the unity of the Children of Israel.

DOES GOD WEAR TEFILLIN?

1. Wit-nesses (Optional Humor)

(A)

Lawyer to Witness: "What is your date of birth?"

Witness: "October 4th."

Lawyer: "What year?"

Witness: "Every year."

(B)

Lawyer to Witness: "This myasthenia gravis - does it affect your memory at all?"

Witness: "Yes."

Lawyer: "And in what ways does it affect your memory?"

Witness: "I forget."

Lawyer: "You forget. Can you give us an example of something that you've forgotten?"

2. To Remember

Yizkor is to remember. *Yizkor* is to bear witness.

Today, we are witnesses. Today, we remember.

But, truly, we bear witness every second of every day of every year - our every breath is testimony in itself - so why is today different? What makes *Yizkor* unique?

Today, on Yom Kippur, we remember that we are meant to bear witnesses and we articulate our testimony.

This is Yom Kippur and this is *Yizkor*.

To what are we bearing witness? What are we remembering? What is our testimony?

3. Our Relationship with God

We bear witness to our relationship with God, which we sometimes take for granted.

It happens when two people are married for a long time, say forty years, that their marriage has become their natural state – it is like breathing, it is like living. And like breathing or living it isn't spoken about, articulated, analyzed, or dissected. It just is.

But then, every once in a while – perhaps on a wedding anniversary, or at the Bar Mitzvah of a grandchild, or at a family Seder – the two people look at each other and smile. In that smile they articulate and bear witness to the beautiful and eternal relationship that is their life together, and the delicious fruit it has produced.

If this is the case with two people that have been married for forty years, how much more so with a couple that has been married for *three thousand and forty years*. When you are married for forty years you know each other so well that the relationship is so normal, so natural, that it is hardly spoken of. Imagine how natural a relationship must be after *three thousand and forty years* of marriage!

We Jews have been in a relationship with God for *three thousand and four hundred years*, ever since Sinai.

Our relationship is so natural, that we don't even think about it. I mean, how many of us actually think about God, or articulate our relationship? It's like breathing, or living, or speaking – we don't have to think about it or discuss it or analyze it; it is natural to us.

But then comes Yom Kippur – a day that is like an anniversary, like a Bar Mitzvah of a grandchild – when we look at God, so to speak, and God looks at us and we smile at each other. On Yom Kippur we remember what we have, we remember our relationship, we bear witness to our beautiful life together.

Today, as we remind ourselves of our essential relationship with God, and God's essential relationship with us, we are also reminded of a very painful event about which we read every year in the Yom Kippur liturgy – it is the story of the Ten Martyrs, which begins: *These we remember...*

NOTE: The word “martyr” has been hijacked and kidnapped by terrorists lately. But there is a major difference between the Torah’s definition of a “martyr” and the current evil connotation. Islamists misuse the term “martyr” to describe someone who is willing to *murder others* (supposedly) for God. But the Torah uses the word “martyr” to describe someone that has been murdered *by others* because he/she believes in God and the sanctity of life with which God gifts to us.

4. The Ten Martyrs

The Ten Martyrs – ten of Israel’s greatest sages – died at the hands of a cruel and evil Roman emperor who reveled in the most horrible means of torture imaginable. Today, and every Yom Kippur, close to the conclusion of the Musaf prayer, we read the description of their martyrdom for the sake of God.

The recitation relates the sages’ reaction to the terrible decree that they must die. Headed by the High Priest, Rabbi Yishmael, they seek to know if this decree comes only from the Roman emperor or if it was issued on high, in heaven.

Rabbi Yishmael ... ascended to the heavenly heights and inquired of the angel clothed in white. He answered: “Take it upon yourselves, righteous, beloved sages, for I have heard from behind the curtain that this decree has been imposed upon you [by God].”

[Rabbi Yishmael] then descended and informed his colleagues ...

Rabbi Yishmael, the High Priest who performed God’s holy service, who on the holiest day of the year, Yom Kippur, walked into the Holy of Holies, the nucleus of all existence, ascended on high – into the spiritual heights – to check if this decree came from heaven. He found that indeed it did.

And so, the ten sages presented themselves to the emperor, who selected Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel as the first to be slaughtered. It was a terrible scene:

Rabbi Shimon pleaded and implored that he be executed first so that he would not witness the death of [Rabbi Yishmael] who ministers to the exalted God. [In response, the cruel emperor] ... ordered them to cast lots, and the lot fell on Rabbi Shimon. The emperor hurried to spill his blood as if it were that of a bullock. When his head was cut off, Rabbi Yishmael took it and bitterly cried out ... "How the tongue that so eloquently taught the words of Torah, now licks the dust!"

Then it was Rabbi Yishmael's turn to die:

While he wept in anguish, the daughter of the wicked tyrant stood by listening to his lamentation, and lusted in her heart for his beauty. She requested from her father that he spare Rabbi Yishmael's life, but this the wicked man refused to do. Then she asked that the skin of his face be flayed off; this he did not hesitate to grant. When they reached the place of the tefillin, Rabbi Yishmael cried out with a bitter voice to the Creator of his soul.

Rabbi Yishmael was renowned for his physical beauty. The tyrant's daughter asked her father to flay off his face so that she might preserve it.

There is no explanation for such cruelty. But we read this story on Yom Kippur for a reason. And maybe the chief reason is hidden in just these words: *When they reached the place of the tefillin, Rabbi Yishmael cried out with a bitter voice to the Creator of his soul.*

5. The Tefillin

Every day of the year (excluding Shabbat and holidays) there is a mitzvah for every Jewish male to don *tefillin* – one leather box on the arm and another on the head. The *tefillin* contain small handwritten parchments upon which is written the Shema – the quintessential statement of monotheism – *Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad*, "Hear O Israel, the Lord is Our God, the Lord is One."

As the story of the Ten Martyrs later describes, Rabbi Akiva returned his soul with these words, testifying with his last breath to the oneness of God.

[We will say these immortal words at different point in the Yom Kippur service, and again at the conclusion of *Neilah*.]

But the *tefillin* that the Children of Israel put on is but half of the story. The Talmud¹ states that God also puts on *tefillin*. [Of course, this has to be understood in non-anthropomorphist terms but rather as a metaphor since Torah speaks in the “language of man”].

Asks the Talmud: *And what is written upon God's tefillin?* It answers quoting the words of King David: *And who is like Your people Israel, one nation on earth.*²

Wow. When we put on *tefillin*, we profess and bear witness to the oneness of God, and when God puts on *tefillin* God professes and bears witness to the oneness of Israel.³

This in itself is a life-changing message. But it is so much deeper.

6. The Berditchver's Argument

Based on this profound Talmudic revelation, the holy Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev goes further. He equates God's *tefillin* with the people of Israel, and he takes God to task for not treating them with respect:⁴

“Master of the Universe! Go out and see the behavior of the simple Jew, who only with great difficulty can recognize the forms of the Hebrew letters, if he sees his *tefillin* falling to the ground, or (God forbid) rolling on the ground, would he not instantly bend down, pick them up and kiss them, and return them to their place of honor?

¹ Berachot 6a. See Issa b' Midrash Tillim, recited by the Rebbe Rashab on his Bar Mitzvah, the 20th of Cheshvan 5634.

² II Samuel 7:23; II Chronicles 17:21.

³ Incidentally, the mystics explain that this is why women are not obligated to don tefillin and why men do not don tefillin on Shabbat or holidays, such as today: For tefillin are witnesses, testaments to the unity of God – and the unity of Israel – women, Shabbat, and holidays are themselves witnesses to the Oneness, are themselves like tefillin; and a witness, obviously, does not require witnesses, a pair of tefillin does not require to don tefillin.

⁴ This selection from the “Kedushat Levi” on Parshat Bo gives us a glimpse into the unique, essential and natural relationship between God and the Nation of Israel.

Why then do You not act in a similar manner, when You see Your People, Israel – who are Your *tefillin*, as it is written concerning them, “And who is like Your People, Israel, a Unique Nation in the World” – rolling on the ground, in disgrace and shame, time after time. How could you not pick them up, kiss them, and return them to their place of honor?!

“Master of the Universe, You must forgive Israel for their sins. If You do this, good. But if not, I’ll tell the world that the *tefillin* You wear are *passul*, invalid. Why? The words of King David enclosed within Your *tefillin* state, ‘Who is like your people Israel, one nation on earth?’ If You, God, do not forgive Israel, then this verse in your *tefillin* is untrue, and Your *tefillin* are invalid!”

7. Blessing of Rabbi Yishmael

Now, all of this comes together in the Talmud, which elsewhere quotes our holy martyr, Rabbi Yishmael, the High Priest, as saying:

“I once entered into the innermost sanctum [the Holy of Holies] to offer the incense offering. There I saw the Holy One,⁵ the Lord of Hosts, seated upon a high and exalted throne. He said to me: ‘Yishmael, My son, bless Me!’ I replied: ‘May it be Your will that Your compassion overcomes Your anger and Your compassion prevails over Your other attributes, and may You interact with Your children according to the attribute of compassion, and may you embrace them beyond the latter of the law!’ And He nodded to me [and replied, ‘Amen!’]”⁶

Dear God: Your children, have suffered long enough. Your *tefillin* have been desecrated long enough. The beauty of your singular nation has been flayed for long enough by too many tyrants.

Just a few weeks ago, one of your children, one of the sacred letters in your sacred *tefillin*, had been defiled by the sword of evil. After his murder, the story came out that Steven Sotloff risked his life to observe Your holiest day, Yom Kippur, while in the dark clutches of hell itself.

⁵ Lit. ‘Akatriel Kah.’

⁶ Berachot 7a.

These are Your testaments, these are Your witnesses, these are Your *tefillin* – how could you not deal with them compassionately?!

Every Jew on earth, from the most religious to the most secular, from the most learned to the most ignorant, knows that they should cherish and sanctify and protect a pair of *tefillin*, even a pair that's not their own. So how could You, God, not do the same for Your *tefillin*, the People of Israel? How could You not cherish, protect, sanctify Your *tefillin*, and deal compassionately with us?

And now we understand why *when they reached the place of the Tefillin, Rabbi Yishmael cried out with a bitter voice to the Creator of his soul.*

When it was being flayed, Rabbi Yishmael ben Elisha, the High Priest of Israel, cried out for the place on his forehead that proclaimed the Oneness of God. R' Yishmael ben Elisha, the High Priest of Israel, is witness to the Unity and Oneness of God. When this witness felt the evil darkness of the world scraping away at this Oneness, he cried out in pain and bitterness – not for his own pain, but for the pain of the desecration of God's One Name!

8. Purified Tattoos (Inspirational Story)

I would like to share with you a story I recently heard from a prestigious scholar and lecturer, who experienced the following firsthand. This story is told in his own words:

Around 15 years ago I was invited to serve as the guest speaker at a weekend Shabbaton in a small city in the United States (I won't name names and omit some details in order to "protect the innocent").

As is the custom on such weekends, the local rabbi hosted a Friday night dinner and Saturday afternoon lunch. During the meals various volunteers helped set up and serve. Among them I noticed one well-built man who was being particularly helpful. With a congenial smile and no airs about him, he was doing everything possible to make all the guests comfortable.

When I spoke, I observed that this gentleman (I'll call him David) was extremely attentive, absorbing every word. And when discussions ensued after the talks, his engaged curiosity was

extraordinary. At every possible opportunity, David would approach me with more questions. His insatiable thirst for knowledge, his sincerity and innocence of heart touched me deeply.

Someone very pure was clearly in our midst. To satisfy my curiosity, I quietly asked the host rabbi about David, and this is what I learned:

David had served in Vietnam. After being discharged from the US Navy, he began a search for his Jewish roots. He visited different synagogues, attended various classes, and finally ended up in this particular place. David had grown up in a completely secular home, with absolutely no Jewish education. Now he embraced his heritage with an unquenchable thirst for study, doing everything possible to compensate for his years of no Jewish education.

Then came the punch line. Nonchalantly the rabbi whispered to me, "You should know that David is a *tzaddik nistar*." I was floored – a *tzaddik nistar* is an expression used to describe the thirty-six hidden *tzaddikim* that exist in the world.

"You see," the rabbi continued, "when David was in the navy he had his body tattooed, as many sailors and marines do. From head to toe, his body was covered with tattoos. When David became Torah observant, he tried to remove as many of his tattoos as possible. Besides the fact that David now knew about the Torah's prohibition against mutilating or scarring the body, including the etching of tattoos, he also felt that his tattoos were not in the spirit of who he wanted to be.

"But some tattoos were simply impossible to get rid of. One tattoo in particular irked David. It was a tattoo that was etched on his left bicep, where a right-handed individual places his *tefillin*. This particular tattoo was – how shall I put it? – not exactly the Star of David. It therefore deeply disturbed David that this tattoo stared him in the face every morning as he donned his *tefillin*.

"He asked an authority in Jewish law what he should do. This authority told David that since he did not know better when he had himself tattooed and being that the tattoo was irreversible, he shouldn't worry about it and just put on *tefillin* and ignore the tattoo.

“Since becoming observant five years ago, David immerses himself in a *mikveh* every morning. And because he doesn’t want anyone to see his remaining tattoos, David wakes up each morning at 5 AM and goes to the *mikveh* before anyone else arrives...”

What do you think God is feeling when He sees the holy *mikveh* waters covering the tattooed body of this Vietnam veteran each morning? What do you think God is feeling when this holy soul covers his tattoo with the sanctity and unity of the *tefillin*? What do you think God is feeling when this righteous human being bears witness to God Almighty?

I’ll tell you exactly what God is feeling. God is feeling great pride and He is thinking: *“Who is like Your nation Israel, one nation on earth!”*

9. Standing Here as Witnesses

Today, on Yom Kippur, as we are about to recite the *Yizkor* prayer, we are standing here as witnesses – and none of our tattoos, taboos, or blemishes could ever get in the way of our testimony.

“There is One God!” we exclaim.

And the One God responds: “There is One Israel!”

Today, on Yom Kippur, when our true relationship with God is revealed and remembered, may God fulfill Rabbi Yishmael’s blessing: May our Father in Heaven deal with us compassionately, beyond the letter of the law. As we bear witness to God’s oneness and holiness, may God bear witness to our oneness and holiness.

Sometimes, in the nitty-gritty, hustle-bustle of the year, we may forget to remember our very names. Sometimes we may wake up in the morning and think our names are something like, Depressed, or Insignificant, or Inconsequential. But on Yom Kippur we remember that our name is Israel, our name is Jew With A Purpose, our name is inscribed in God’s *tefillin* – *Who Is Like Your Nation Israel, One People On Earth!*

Shabbat Shalom and Gut Yom Tov!

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