

דורש טוב לעמו

AN ANTHOLOGY OF

DRASHOT CELEBRATING THE SMACHOT IN LIFE

L'ilui Nishmat
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Hanahat Tefillin and Bar Mitzvah: In Search of the Tefillin Strap Mark's Meaning

I arrived at the shul as a Hebrew School student in 1980 with the aim of preparing for bar mitzvah (more bar than mitzvah, as the rabbi would joke, but still needing to know enough to fake my way through a *Haftarah*). Among the many recollections of our interactions and conversations in those days on that ridiculously large and overstuffed leather couch in Rabbi Dworken's dark, wood-paneled synagogue office the first time I wore tefillin stands out. A hand-me-down set of bar mitzvah "*dakot*" tefillin (which would later turn out to have been *pasul lehathila* and which he would help me replace with a proper pair worn still), was what was used for my "*hanahat*" tefillin, a private event with just the two of us.

I often think of that day, especially when teaching S.Y. Agnon's charming Hebrew short story, "*Shnei Zugot*," written in 1926 by the future Nobel Laureate. (The story appears in his volume *Elu ve-Elu*; in English as "Two Pairs" in *A Book That Was Lost*). The semi-autobiographical story depicts a young boy coming to the age of mitzvot and receiving his own pair of tefillin, including the adult narrator's memories of that day as well as the fate of that pair of tefillin consumed by fire years later. It is also one of the most explicit depictions of Agnon distancing himself from observance, followed by his mid-life road back. Agnon is hardly the only Jewish author to use tefillin as a symbol for being bound to, or untethered from, the tradition, but he does so with his distinct tone of nostalgia tinged with irony and artistry.

The narrator recalls his youthful enthusiasm for his new tefillin:

Mornings I would run to the synagogue. Sometimes I would arrive before the appointed hour for prayer and I would stare out the window at the sky to spot the sunlight when it would first appear so that I could then put on my tefillin. When prayer time arrived I would take out my tefillin, and a fragrance of prayer would emanate from them. As I lay the tefillah on my arm I could feel my heart pounding alongside them and I would then wind the warm straps around my arm until they pressed into my skin. And then I would circle my head with the other tefillah. When the cantor recites the prayer that thanks God for "girding Israel with strength and crowning Israel with splendor," I stand astonished that I myself am "girding" and "crowning" like a man of Israel and I am overjoyed. [...] Sometimes my praying would be soulful and plaintive, sometimes melodious and joyful. In either event, I would continually touch my tefillin—something like a shepherd making music out in the field who periodically remembers his charges and looks around to see if any of them

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have wandered off—until I completed my praying, removed my tefillin, and saw pressed in my arm's flesh the remaining evidence of the straps.

A couple of years ago I read the story with my own son in advance of his *hanahat* tefillin. What aroused his curiosity was a particular line that I must confess had been lost on me, despite the very many times I had read and taught this story. The narrator continues: "I wouldn't eat or drink until the indentations on my arm had completely disappeared." With the fresh tefillin marks still on his own arm from his initial wrapping, and with thoughts of breakfast in mind, he asked if this was the actual halakhah. No, I replied, it is certainly not normative practice, nor is it a custom I had ever encountered or heard of (outside this story).

Perusal of the usual halakhic codes and guides to *minhagim* resulted in a dead end. Was this just an idea the author invented to add some color to his story? That would be possible, but highly unlikely. Although a writer of fiction, Agnon very carefully documented religious practice as depicted in his works, particularly nineteenth-century Galicia and early-twentieth-century life in *Eretz Yisrael*. His use of halakhic sources and portrayal of the lived *minhagim* has itself been analyzed by some as a type of "literary-halakhic" literature. I could not believe that his recording of this unfamiliar practice was not authentic, although I failed to find a source.

Turning to the brain trust of friends and teachers, I became aware of two other mentions of this obscure practice. The hive mind pointed me to the memoirs of Dr. Avraham Yaakov Brawer, *Zikhronot Av u-Veno (Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1966)*. Brawer (1884-1975) was born in Stryj, near Lvov. He was a rabbi and academic with specialties in history and geography, and had a distinguished career as an educator in Jerusalem after his arrival in 1911. (From middle age onward, he and Agnon maintained a warm friendship.) In a chapter of his memoir recalling his youth in *kheyder*, he writes: "I was careful to be 'crowned' with tefillin for

at least an hour a day. Some of the boys would not eat as long as the impression of the tefillin strap was still visible on their arms. It is possible this custom is recorded somewhere in some book; I have not found it in writing.”

On the one hand, I was comforted to be in the company of such a noteworthy scholar—if Brawer knew of no source, then my own inability to find one might be forgiven. At the same time, here was a second anecdote, which, as everyone knows, is often itself considered data.

Rabbi J. David Bleich, despite his encyclopedic knowledge of, well, just about everything, similarly knew of no halakhic source, but drew my attention to a novel by Soma Morgenstern (1890-1976). Morgenstern, a novelist, critic, journalist, and close friend of the more famous writer Joseph Roth, was born in Budaniv, in the Ternopol district (today part of western Ukraine). In his novel, *The Son of the Lost Son* (JPS, 1946; translated from German), we encounter the protagonist, Velvel, standing at morning prayer. Morgenstern compares the leather straps to a horse's reins. This is no sacrilege; Velvel, girded in his tefillin, is described as “God's steed, harnessed for prayer.” Upon completing his prayers, he enters the farmhouse kitchen.

On the table stood jugs and little jugs, cups and saucers, coffee, milk, cream, butter, eggs, rye bread, rolls of rye flour with buttermilk and poppyseed, and rolls of white flour with whipped white of egg. There was honey cake and a big bottle of brandy. Velvel sat motionless for a while. He was still far away from the mundane world, no longer a worshipper, but not yet an eater. The awe of the prayers had given him an appetite, but he still held back. For though the law does not prohibit it, the really pious man shrinks from taking food as long as the marks of the phylactery straps are still visible on his left arm. Then he took a little brandy, sipping it slowly, poured coffee and milk and cream into a cup, added sugar, stirred it, and hardly noticed how his thoughts, unguarded by his will, moved aimlessly [...]. Velvel sighed a deep sigh of forced

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relief and turned back to the breakfast table. There were no longer any marks of the phylactery straps on his left arm. He could now take his breakfast. He helped himself, with the calm, slow, heavy movements of a peasant, yet generously, like a rich landowner.

So here we have three records of our mysterious *minhag*. Morgenstern makes clear what we may have understood intuitively from Agnon and Brawer: this is not a strict law but a mark of piety. Two of the records, Agnon and Brawer, depict the practice among young boys around the age of bar mitzvah and initiation into the practice of wearing tefillin. Morgenstern's protagonist is an adult, and the story is set in 1924, but the fictional Velvel would have become a bar mitzvah at around the same time as those in the other sources. Only Agnon mentions neither drinking nor eating; the others seem to limit the practice only to food, and, in fact, Velvel takes a little brandy and coffee while he awaits the fading of the strap marks which will enable him to eat.

What is significant is that all three authors were near contemporaries and hailed from the same general region of eastern Galicia, that former area of southern Poland, which since the 1772 partition of Poland had been the easternmost province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. All three were young men of Hasidic stock raised in religious homes. Was this a little-practiced, regional *minhag* even then, preserved not in halakhic codes but in works of memoir and autobiographical fiction? It is very likely. If so, these three texts are testament to how the world of *minhag* is often preserved more in actual lived religious experience, fleeting as that may be for researchers and historians, than in the codices of the Beit Midrash.

In all cases, my son's question led to a delightful scavenger hunt for sources, brought about by my his entering the yoke of mitzvot and the straps of tefillin. As I recall my own very meaningful initiation into that mitzvah, it is hoped that Rabbi Dworken's satisfaction in *Gan Eden* is increased by knowing that, four-plus decades on, Agnon's description of his own bar mitzvah remains

true for an Anshe Chesed Hebrew School student as well: "Tefillin ... have been dear to me every single day from the very first time that I wore them."

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During their many years at Cong. Anshe Chesed in Linden, NJ, many lives were touched by Rabbi Steven ל"ז and Mrs. Susan תבלחט"א Dworken and their family. While it's pointless (and arrogant) to compete for the title of the one most affected by their teaching and message, warmth and hospitality, it is impossible for me to imagine the course my life has taken without being mindful of exactly how important and impactful Rabbi Dworken was, through his example and guidance, in shaping my personal, spiritual, and professional path. His example and encouragement, and the palpable pride which he displayed in my accomplishments, both girds and guides me to this day.