



The Intimacy of Wearing God's Name

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In the moment of prayer, how are we meant to feel close to God, beyond reciting the words of the Siddur? How might we feel a connection to God through our tactile experiences?

In Parashat Tetzaveh, we learn about the special clothing of the High Priest. One of these articles is a plate that wraps around the head, called the *tzitz*:

Exodus 28:36,38

You shall make a plate (*tzitz*)¹ of pure gold, and engrave upon it with seal engravings: “Holy to YHVH.” ...it shall be on [Aharon’s] forehead perpetually for their acceptance for YHVH.

שמות כח:לז, לח

וַעֲשִׂיתָ צִיץ זָהָב טָהוֹר וּפְתַחְתָּ עָלָיו
פְּתוּחֵי חֹתֶם קֹדֶשׁ לִיקוּקָ: ... וְהָיָה
עַל-מִצְחוֹ תָמִיד לְרָצוֹן לָהֶם לִפְנֵי יְקֹוֹק:

Aharon is meant to wear a special plate of gold, which has the name of God engraved on it.

The function of this head wrapping is to expiate any “inadvertent impurity or imperfection in the offerings to the sanctuary”² (see the first half of Exodus 28:38). It served to reassure

¹ For this translation, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), p. 512 and Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible* (New York: Norton, 2019), p. 328.

² Milgrom, p. 512. See Tosefta Pesahim 6:5 and Sifrei Bemidbar #109, ed. Kahane, p. 286, for the Rabbinic expansion of the *tzitz*’s power of expiation. See further Shmuel Safrai and Ze’ev Safrai, *Mishnat Eretz Yisrael: Pesahim* (Jerusalem: Lifschitz, 2009), p. 284, n. 36.



priests, and those laypeople bringing the sacrifice, that even if the priest made an error in making a sacrifice, the sin would be forgiven.³

What does the word “*tzitz*” mean? It can refer to a blossom, or perhaps a plate. But a midrashic tradition⁴ connects its meaning to a verse from the Song of Songs:

Song of Songs 2:9⁵

שיר השירים ב:ט

Behold, my lover stands behind our wall, looking through
the window, peering (*meitzitz*) through the cracks.

הִנֵּה-זֶה עֹמֵד אַחֲרֵי כְּתֻלָּנוּ מִשְׁגָּחַ
מִן-הַחֲלֹנוֹת מִצִּיץ מִן-הַחֲרָכִים

In this moment in the Song of Songs, the lover approaches his beloved. Just before entering her house and inviting her to run away with him, he pauses, and peers through the cracks in the wall that separates them. It is a moment of anticipation and heightened connection. They are not yet united, but they are about to be.

The *midrash* sees this as the derivation of the word “*tzitz*” worn by the High Priest: to peer through the crack. The *tzitz* is the connection point between God and the High Priest. It is not simply a band with God’s name on it, but it is the reminder that God **sees** Aharon by “peering through the cracks.” In this understanding, the *tzitz* functions as a bridge and connection point between God and Aharon. As R. Behaye comments (on Exodus 28:26): “the Shekhinah is right above [Aharon’s] head.” This plate, wrapped around Aharon’s head, allows Aharon to feel God’s presence intimately.

In the rabbinic understanding, God’s peering at Israel, God’s beloved, continued beyond the stage in history in which the High Priest served as a holy mediator. Indeed, according to

³ See *Mishnat Eretz Yisrael: Pesahim*, p. 285.

⁴ This position is expressed by later commentators such as Rashbam and Rabbeinu Behaye.

⁵ For the *midrash*, see *Torah Sheleimah*, vol. 20, p. 183, #106.



another *midrash*, in the era of the synagogue, when the priests recite the special blessing for Israel (see Numbers 6:24-26), God peers through the fingers of the priests:

Pesikta Rabbati 15:9, ed. Friedmann, p. 72a⁶

“Behold, my lover stands behind our wall”—behind the walls of the synagogues and study houses...
“Peering through the cracks”—between the fingers of the priests.

פסיקתא רבתי (איש שלום) פסקא טו

הנה זה עומד אחר כתלינו אחר כתלי בתי
כנסיות ובתי מדרשות...
מציץ מן החרכים מבין אצבעותיהם של
כהנים.

God is not only looking at Israel through the *tzitz* of the High Priest. Rather, God is peering through the fingers of the priests as they hold their hands up in special formation (imitating a wall with cracks) and recite their special blessing in the synagogue. This is the reason one may not look at the priests when they recite this blessing: God’s presence is so close, so palpable, that we must avert our gaze.⁷

But the image of God peering through the crack, like a lover poised to appear, is not limited to the domain of the priests. Indeed, the *tzitz*, the catalyst by which God sees us, is connected to one of the most basic prayer accessories today: *tefillin*. Rabbah bar Rav Huna draws a connection between the *tzitz* and the *tefillin*:⁸

⁶ Indeed, Rashi notes that the Shekhinah is resting between the fingers of the priests when they recite this blessing. See Rashi on Bavli *Hagigah* 16a, s.v. ומברכין.

⁷ The Rosh to Megillah 3, #21, writes about the priests offering the blessing: “ששכינה למעלה מראשיהן ומציץ מבין” / the Shekhinah is above their heads and is peering between the spaces in their fingers.” See also Zohar 3:147a, ed. Pritzker, vol. 8, p. 477. See further Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1998), vol. 6, pp. 23ff.

⁸ Although in Rabbinic understanding, the High Priest wore both the *tzitz* **and** *tefillin*, so they were not 100% equivalent. See Bavli *Zevahim* 19a.



Talmud Bavli Shabbat 12a

Rabbah bar Rav Huna said: A person must touch his *tefillin* regularly (in order to be aware of wearing them). This is derived from the *tzitz*: If concerning the *tzitz*, which only has God's name written on it once, the Torah said "it must be perpetually on his forehead" so that his concentration does not fade from it (when it is on his head),⁹ then *tefillin*, which has many mentions of God's name (in the texts within), how much the more so!

תלמוד בבלי שבת יב.

דאמר רבה בר רב הונא: חייב אדם למשמש בתפילין כל שעה ושעה, קל וחמר מציץ: מה ציץ שאין בו אלא אזכרה אחת - אמרה תורה והיה על מצחו תמיד - שלא יסיח דעתו ממנו, תפילין שיש בהן אזכרות הרבה - על אחת כמה וכמה!

Rabbah bar Rav Huna notes that the priest always had to maintain focus on the fact that he was wearing the name of God (קודש לה) on his head.¹⁰ *Tefillin* have texts that mention God many times over, and therefore one who wears *tefillin* must focus on this fact, and be aware of the presence of God's name on their head. *Tzitz* and *tefillin*—both means of binding God's name to one's forehead—are physical objects whose function is to directly connect its wearer to God's presence. Indeed, the very intimate action of binding God's name to one's head draws one closer to God.

If the *tzitz* and *tefillin* are related, one could have imagined that *tefillin*—like the *tzitz*—would be reserved for a limited elite. But that is not the opinion of the Talmud:

Talmud Bavli Arakhin 3b

Everyone is required to wear *tefillin*: priests, Levites, and Israelites.

תלמוד בבלי ערכין ג:

הכל חייבין בתפילין, כהנים לויים וישראלים.

⁹ See Bavli Yoma 7b.

¹⁰ This matches R. Yehuda's understanding of the word "תמיד - always" in Exodus 28:38. See Bavli Yoma 7b.



The fact that Jews of all statuses, not just priests, were required to wear *tefillin*, is shocking.¹¹ Regular people, not just Aharon and his family, were commanded to wrap their heads with texts containing the name of God.¹² God looks at all of us, not just priests.¹³

Indeed, when I put *tefillin* on my head (and my arm), I feel a physical closeness to God. It is an intense form of intimacy to wear a head wrapping with God's name, and then pray by speaking God's name.¹⁴ It is sometimes hard to imagine God's presence close to me, but it is easier when I wear *tefillin*. Sometimes I imagine that God is looking upon me, in that intimate moment before appearing, described in the Song of Songs. When prayer is cast as a moment of anticipation, of waiting for the lover to fully appear, it is no longer a series of words, but an expression of yearning. And wearing a garment with the name of our Lover increases the intensity of that moment.

¹¹ For the sources on women wearing *tefillin*, see R. David Golinkin, *Ma'amad Ha-Isha Ba-Halakhah* (Jerusalem: Machon Schechter, 2001), pp. 23-45. See also R. Ethan Tucker's framing of this issue in terms of citizenship in his essay "Gender and *Tefillin*: Possibilities and Consequences," available to read here.

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/gender-and-tefillin>.

¹² *Tzitzit* is another example of a garment that one might expect only priests to wear but actually applies to all Jews. See R. Shai Held's essay on Parashat Korah, "Every Jew a High Priest?: The Meaning of *Tzitzit* and the Sin of Korah," published in *The Heart of Torah* vol. 2 and available here:

<https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/every-jew-high-priest>.

¹³ R. Yoḥanan uses the word *tzitz* in his personal prayer following the Amidah in Bavli Berakhot 16b: "רבי יוחנן בתר: דמסיים צלותיה אמר הכי: יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלקינו שתציץ בבשתנו 'May it be Your will, YHVH our God, that You peer on our embarrassment...'"

¹⁴ The biblical word for *tefillin* (טופת) appears in Mishnah Shabbat 6:1 as a form of adornment that women wore. When we wear *tefillin*, we are adorning ourselves for God. (Compare Mishnah Shabbat 6:2, which mentions *tefillin* explicitly).

