

## All Gender LGBTQ Tefillin Workshop

### Submitted by JP Payne

#### Short Summary of Event:

The act of laying tefillin is an act of intimacy between a Jewish person and God. In this workshop, we encourage people of all genders to partake in this ancient ritual. We also encourage participants to engage in a text study which examines the often gendered language of the tefillin ritual, as well as the marital and sexual imagery used in the tefillin blessing. The text study investigates both the spiritual significance of tefillin as well as their connection with masculine privilege.

#### Materials Needed:

- At least one set of tefillin for every two participants (contact your local synagogues, rabbis, and community members)
- Copies of this text study (one for every two participants)
- Copies of the blessings (one for each participant)
- A rabbi or lay leader knowledgeable about laying tefillin
- Prayer book of your choice (optional)

**Number of Participants:** 10 – 20 participants

**Time needed:** 2-3 hours

#### Goals for the Event:

- 1.) Create a welcoming atmosphere for people of all gender identities to engage with tefillin.
- 2.) Host a discussion on the relationship between tefillin and masculine privilege.
- 3.) Discuss the imagery of sexuality and marriage which appears in the tefillin blessings. Consider what this tells us about the relationship between God and human.

**Time needed:** 2-3 hours

#### Outline of Event:

##### 1. Personal Introductions

Allow people to share their names, preferred pronouns, and an article they are wearing which has significance for them.

##### 2. Introduction to tefillin

The lay leader or rabbi should give a brief introduction to the subject of tefillin, answering the questions: What are they? What is inside of them? When do we wear them? Why do we wear them? Where does this commandment come from? What are some of the laws (halakha)

associated with them? Do other cultures have any similar article that is worn (look at Greek cultures and the origin of the English word "phylacteries")?

### 3. Text study

Download the text study on gender, marriage, and sexuality as they relate to tefillin. Select sources most appropriate for your group to read and discuss in hevruta (pairs). Depending on time available, this section can easily last 30 min or 2 hours.

### 4. Laying tefillin

The rabbi or lay leader guides the group in hands-on laying of tefillin. Download the blessing cards to guide the group in saying the blessings out loud. If a rabbi or person experienced in laying tefillin is not available, there are numerous how-to videos online. Select the one most appropriate for your group for viewing. One example can be found at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y8r3QIF07Ac>'.

### 5. Prayer service (optional)

Once the group is wearing tefillin, it may be meaningful to have a morning or afternoon prayer service, either following a siddur that works well for the group, or simply allowing members to meditate and reflect while wearing tefillin.

6.) Remove the tefillin and guide participants in re-wrapping them for storage. Allow participants to share any closing thoughts.

### **\*\*Considerations:**

Different styles of tefillin exist: Ashkenazi, Sephardi, right-handed, and left-handed, to name a few. The most common set of tefillin will be Ashkenazi-style right-handed tefillin. Use what is available, but be aware that some participants may be familiar with different styles.

Laying tefillin requires the use of both hands and some range of motion for both arms. For group members for whom this would be difficult, please consult a rabbi on a method of laying tefillin that will work for them.

Plan the workshop to occur during daylight hours, as tefillin are worn in daylight.

Tefillin are not worn on Jewish holidays. Please check with a reliable Jewish calendar or a rabbi if you are unsure which days are considered holidays.

Adjustments can be made to the tefillin shel rosh (head tefillin) to fit a participant with the consent of the owner. If you cannot adjust the tefillin, anticipate that some people may have poorly fitting tefillin. This is acceptable for the purposes of a learning workshop.

## GENDER AND TEFILLIN THROUGH THE AGES

### THE TORAH SAYS...

#### 1.) Exodus (13:8-10)

And you shall tell your son in that day, saying, “This is done because of what God did to me when I came forth out of Egypt. *And it shall be for a sign to you upon your hand, and for a memorial between your eyes, that the Lord’s Torah may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand has God brought you out of Egypt.*

[Note: Hebrew word “ben” means son. It is used in both gender-neutral and gender-specific ways in the Torah.]

#### 2.) Deuteronomy (6:4-9)

Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord; And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words, which I command you this day, shall be in your heart; And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up. *And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.* And you shall write them upon the posts of your house, and on your gates.

*These two passages are interpreted as commandments to lay tefillin. What are tefillin reminders of according to Exodus? What are they reminders of according to Deuteronomy? How do you see the tension between liberation and bondage in these texts?*

*Two significant community events in the Torah are the Israelites’ exodus from slavery in Egypt and God’s revelation at Sinai. Who participated in these events?*

### THE RABBIS SAY...

#### 3.) Babylonian Talmud (Kiddushin 29a)

Regarding all positive commandments which are time-bound, men are obligated to fulfill them and women are exempt.

#### 4.) Babylonian Talmud (Eruvin 96a)

It was taught: Michal the daughter of the Kushite wore tefillin and the Sages did not attempt to prevent her.

*Why might women be exempt from time-bound commandments in the times of the Talmud?*

*Why might women remain obligated for time-independent commandments?*

*Why would women not be exempt from commandments which are time-independent?*

*How do you interpret the word “exempt” in light of the second passage?*

## MODERN VOICES: OBLIGATORY VS. VOLUNTARY

### 5.) Babylonian Talmud (Kiddushin 31a)

Rabbi Hanina: "Greater is one who is commanded and performs than one who is not commanded and performs."

### 6.) Joel Roth, 1983 (former chair of Committee on Jewish Law and Standards)

I am opposed to the issuance of a *takkanah* [new or revised law] obligating all women to observe all mitzvot from which they are exempt because the imposition of legal obligation by *takkanah* would make noncompliance with the dictates of that *takkanah* sinful. That would result in the creation of a large class of sinners where none now exists.

[from the responsum "On the Ordination of Women as Rabbis" which was adopted by Jewish Theological Seminary]

### 7.) Jen Taylor Friedman, 2009 (Creator of Tefillin Barbie)

The present practice of having egalitarian prayer but only expecting men to wear tefillin is shameful. The message is either that tefillin do not matter, which in a professedly halakhic community is resoundingly inappropriate, or that egalitarianism has different requirements for men and for women, which devalues egalitarianism. By tacitly exempting women from wearing tefillin, these communities admit that the women do not *really* have the same communal status as men.

[from the essay, "Should All Barbies Wear Tefillin?"]

*What might the reasoning be behind the Talmud's statement that a deed is greater if it is obligatory rather than voluntary? Has this proven true in your own experiences? Has this proven untrue in your own experiences?*

*Why does Roth oppose creating a new law (takkanah) which would obligate women to lay tefillin?*

*Why does Friedman find not obligating women to lay tefillin problematic?*

*The tension here is between egalitarianism and tradition. Do you feel this tension in your own life? Do you experience other tensions between tradition/ritual and values/ethics?*

## OUTSIDE THE BINARY

### 8.) Shulchan Aruch (1563)

Women\* and slaves are not obligated in tefillin, because it is a positive mitzvah that is time-bound. If women wish to be strict with themselves [and put on tefillin], we prevent them\*\*.

### 9.) Mishneh Berura (1884; Commentary on Shulchan Aruch)

\**Women* - People of indeterminate gender, and those with androgynous features, are obligated because of doubt, as with all mitzvot.

\*\**We prevent them* - Because they [tefillin] require bodily cleanliness, and women are not as zealous to be careful. [Translators note: A further commentary explains that they are not as vigilant because they are not actually obligated in the mitzvah, but act of their own volition.]

*The Mishneh Berura draws on a discussion started in the Talmud: in a legal system that is strictly binary, where do other genders fit? The rabbis discussed at length issues of androgynous, genderqueer, and intersexed people. What do you make of the Mishneh Berura's solution here to the question of whether someone who is neither man nor woman should lay tefillin? What is the reason behind their conclusion?*

## TEFILLIN AND MASCULINE PRIVILEGE

### 10.) Targum of Yonatan (a contemporary of the Mishnaic sages)

“No male garments shall be placed on a woman or female garments upon a man.” (Deut. 22:5) Tzitzit and tefillin, which are male garments, should not be placed on a woman.

### 11.) Ari Lev Fornari, 2009

Patriarchy isolates people who do not benefit from Jewish gender privilege—namely, women, trans people, and gender-variant folks who do not have access to teachers who can transmit the how-tos of halakhic observance. In addition, most histories of how gender-variant people have maneuvered and moved through the world have been erased. ... In the Jewish world tallit and tefillin are still privileged as markers of masculinity and Jewish authenticity. In light of this fact, it is necessary to appropriate symbols of Jewish masculinity so that women and gender-variant people can feel whole and seen in Jewish tradition. ... Although the words of the Shema and V'ahavta are commonly used to describe the practice of laying tefillin, for me they resonate with the practice of wearing a chest binder. (“Bind These Words” in *Torah Queeries*)

## MARRIAGE AND BONDAGE: SEXUAL IMAGERY AND TEFILLIN

1.) Hosea 2:21-22 (ca. 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE)

ה. את וידעת באמונה לי וארשתיך, וברחמים ובחסד ובמשפט בצדק לי וארשתיך, לעולם לי וארשתיך.

"And I will betroth you to Myself for ever; I will betroth you to Myself in righteousness, and in justice, and in lovingkindness, and in compassion. And I will betroth you to Myself in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD."

[Notes: This verse is recited while wrapping the tefillin around the middle finger. The words "you" here are in the singular. The Hebrew word for "know" can have sexual overtones.]

*What does this language say about God's relationship to God's people?*

*What power dynamics come into play?*

*How does consent appear in this passage?*

*How does consent appear in the practice of laying tefillin?*

2.) Talmud (Berachot 6a)

R. Abin says: How do you know that the Holy One, blessed be He, puts on tefillin? For it is said: The Lord hath sworn by His right hand, and by the arm of His strength. 'By His right hand': this is the Torah; ... 'And by the arm of his strength': this is the tefillin ...

R. Nahman said to R. Hiyya: What is written in the tefillin of the Lord of the Universe? — He replied to him: "And who is like Thy people Israel, a nation one in the earth" Does, then, the Holy One, blessed be He, sing the praises of Israel? — Yes.

*What are God's tefillin a reminder of? What does it mean for God to participate in the marriage/bondage imagery of tefillin?*

*How does the concept of a tefillin-laying God affect the power dynamics between God and people?*

3. from Timtum: a trans Jew zine

Alterations of the flesh engage the spirit. Fasting, cleansing/immersion (as in a mikvah) and binding (as with t'fillen) are more familiar Jewish physical vehicles for intense psychological shifts, into a mental state that could be designated sacred. Cutting or piercing, in a sexual or S/M context, have a similar effect, and therefore require (for me) a certain level of trust and connection.

--Micah Bazant, 1999

*How do physical rituals (or “alterations of flesh”) produce spiritual or psychological transformations?*

*What kind of trust is needed for sex? What kind of trust is needed to lay tefillin? How does one develop this trust?*

#### 4. Helen Roth Rosner, excerpt from “Ties that Bind” (2005)

After 5000 years of persecution, you’d think we’d be sick of it: name-calling, whips and chains, submitting to dominance. We Jews ought to be pretty over that whole scene by now. And we are—until it comes to the bedroom door. ...

Madame Alexia, a professional dominatrix ... takes a green light from the fact that that nearly half her clients are Jewish as well, and is pleased to note that they range from wholly unobservant to “full-on guys with beards and black hats” ... [she] believes that BDSM is not only A-OK in the Jewish tradition—it’s consistent with it. This confirmation comes virtually in absence of an official ruling. There’s nothing in Jewish religious texts that either condemns or condones sadomasochistic behavior. But Alexia points out the bondage-like imagery of laying t’fillin and the self-flagellation that accompanies the Yom Kippur service—both of which, to her, contain echoes of sadomasochistic behavior. ... Alexia notes that, “In the Torah, no one tries to pretend that they’re not terrified of God. There’s this constant threat of punishment and wrath, but the Israelites don’t mind—it’s like that’s what they love about God.”

According to Dr. Ken Stone, Associate Professor of the Hebrew Bible at the Chicago Theological Seminary, Alexia and her clients are in some pretty good company. In a recent paper, Dr. Stone argues that there’s quite a bit of sadomasochism in the Holy Books—particularly in Jeremiah, where the prophet describes his relationship to God in terms that resemble a dominant/submissive sexual dynamic: “O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed.” Dr. Stone argues that the worshipful attitude Jeremiah takes towards God is in line with a voluntary sexual submissive—someone who derived sexual or spiritual pleasure from the domination imposed on him by God.

*Do you agree with the author that the threat of punishment and wrath is what the Israelites of the Torah loved about God? What about modern people?*

*What “spiritual pleasure” is derived by the interplay of submission/domination?*

#### 5. “Meditation for Tefillin”, 2008

by Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah, published in *The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary*

I cannot  
bind myself  
to You  
I can only  
unbind myself  
continually and  
free  
Your spirit  
within me

blood rushing  
heart pounding  
life-force surging  
pushing  
panting  
straining  
struggling to  
break through  
to You

So why  
this tender-cruel  
parody of  
bondage  
black  
leather  
straps  
skin  
gut and  
sacred litany of  
power and  
submission  
which bind us  
Your slave-people  
still?

My own answer is  
wound around  
with every  
taut  
binding and  
unbinding



*How are tefillin a “tender-cruel” parody of bondage*

*The poet calls us God’s “slave-people still.” What is the first slavery she is referring to? What slavery are we in now? What is the significance of the question mark at the end of this line?*

*What is the poet’s “own answer” alluded to in the last stanza? What actions does she describe as part of her own answer?*

### First Blessing

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַנִּיחַ תְּפִלִּין.

Baruch ata Adonai elohanyanu melech  
ha'olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav  
vetzivanu lehani'ach tefillin.

Praised are you, Adonai our G-d, Sovereign  
of the Universe, who has made us holy with  
the mitzvot and instructed us to wear tefillin.

### Second Blessing

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ עַל מִצְוֹת תְּפִלִּין.

Baruch ata Adonai elohanyanu melech  
ha'olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav  
vetzivanu al mitzvat tefillin.

Praised are you, Adonai our G-d, Sovereign  
of the Universe, who has made us holy with  
the commandments and instructed us about  
the mitzvah of tefillin.

וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי לְעוֹלָם, וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי בְצַדִּיק  
וּבְמִשְׁפָּט וּבְחֶסֶד וּבְרַחֲמִים. וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי  
בְּאֱמוּנָה, וְיָדַעַת אֶת-יְיָ.

Ve'ayrastich lee l'olam  
ve'ayrastich lee betzedek u'mishpat  
u'vchesed u'vrachamin  
ve'ayrastich lee be'emunah  
veyada'at et Adonai.

I will betroth you to Me forever. I will betroth  
you to Me with righteousness, with justice,  
with kindness, and with compassion. I will  
betroth you to Me with faithfulness, and you  
shall know G-d.

### First Blessing

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוָּנוּ לְהַנִּיחַ תְּפִלִּין.

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ha'olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav  
vetzivanu lehani'ach tefillin.

Praised are you, Adonai our G-d, Sovereign  
of the Universe, who has made us holy with  
the mitzvot and instructed us to wear tefillin.

### Second Blessing

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,  
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Baruch ata Adonai elohanyanu melech  
ha'olam asher kidshanu b'mitzvotav  
vetzivanu al mitzvat tefillin.

Praised are you, Adonai our G-d, Sovereign  
of the Universe, who has made us holy with  
the commandments and instructed us about  
the mitzvah of tefillin.

וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי לְעוֹלָם, וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי בְצַדִּיק  
וּבְמִשְׁפָּט וּבְחֶסֶד וּבְרַחֲמִים. וְאֶרְשָׁתִּיךָ לִי  
בְּאֱמוּנָה, וְיָדַעַת אֶת-יְיָ.

Ve'ayrastich lee l'olam  
ve'ayrastich lee betzedek u'mishpat  
u'vchesed u'vrachamin  
ve'ayrastich lee be'emunah  
veyada'at et Adonai.

I will betroth you to Me forever. I will betroth  
you to Me with righteousness, with justice,  
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betroth you to Me with faithfulness, and you  
shall know G-d.