



In Parashat Bo the Torah introduces us for the first time to the *mitzva* of *tefillin*: "It shall be for you as a sign upon your arm and as a remembrance in between your eyes, in order that the Torah of the Lord shall be in your mouth" (13:9; see also 13:16). The purpose of wearing *tefillin* as described in this verse is so that "the Torah of the Lord shall be in your mouth." How exactly might we understand this objective, and how is it served through the donning of *tefillin*?

The answer perhaps emerges from the following comments of Maimonides towards the end of his exposition of the laws of *tefillin*:

The sanctity of *tefillin* is exceedingly great, for the entire time that the *tefillin* is upon one's head and arm he is humble and God-fearing, and is not drawn after levity and idle talk, and does not think evil thoughts; he rather turns his mind to words of truth and righteousness. Therefore, a person must endeavor to have them upon him the entire day, for this is the *mitzva*. (Hilkhos Tefillin 4:25)

When one wears *tefillin*, he binds the Torah to his arm and head, an experience that brings him to think seriously and focus his attention on "words of truth and righteousness" – meaning, the obligations of the Torah. Human nature is such that people are naturally "drawn after levity and idle talk" and "think evil thoughts." Left uncontrolled, people's minds and mouths become occupied by vanity or, even worse, sin and depravity. The experience of wearing *tefillin* is intended to bring the person's mind and heart back to the Torah, away from the vanities of life, and remind him that he is to devote his time on earth to Torah and *mitzvot*, rather than to "levity and idle talk." Maimonides therefore emphasizes the value in wearing *tefillin* throughout the entire day, as this minimizes or even eliminates the time available for a person's mind to wander into frivolity and vanity.

Presumably, this is how Maimonides interpreted the clause, "in order that the Torah of the Lord shall be in your mouth." The purpose of *tefillin* is to help ensure that a person grants priority to the study and practice of Torah, that his faculties are devoted primarily to the pursuit of spiritual excellence, rather than to merriment or excessive physical indulgence.

For this reason, perhaps, God commanded Moshe to include *tefillin* among the first *mitzvot* issued to *Benei Yisrael* after the Exodus. He wanted to impress upon the newly-emancipated slaves that they were freed from Egyptian bondage for the purpose of serving the Almighty, and not to serve themselves, that they were simply transferred from the service of Pharaoh to the service of God. Whereas Pharaoh used torture and torment to keep the slaves' minds focused upon their obligations to him, God summoned a different means – *tefillin* – to ensure the loyalty and devotion of His subjects. The words

of Torah worn upon our arms and heads replace the taskmasters' whip as a constant reminder that we live in God's service and must therefore devote our lives to Him.

Even though the general practice today is to wear *tefillin* only during the morning prayer service, the theme and message of *tefillin* most certainly apply as much today as they did generations ago, when *tefillin* was worn throughout the day. Today, too, we are bidden to remind ourselves on a daily basis of our status as *avdei Hashem*, loyal servants of God, and the need to arrange our priority scale and daily routines in the manner that allows us to most effectively fulfill that goal.