



Wrapped IN A mitzvah

How did Moshe Rabbeinu make his tefillin in the Midbar?

REB NOACH GREENBERG of Tzfas came up with one answer, and is using his method to teach bar mitzvah boys worldwide



THE SETTING FOR THIS SESSION of Reb Noach Greenberg's hands-on Keshar Tefillin workshop is appropriate for this well-known artist and educator who has been creating Judaica from wood for the past 35 years.

We're sitting in the Old City of Tzfas, under the shade of vines, surrounded by olive, lemon, and esrog trees, in the courtyard of this ancient stone home, built centuries ago as a way station for traveling merchants. The rooms now housing Reb Noach's operation were once used to stable horses.

Reb Noach's Keshar Tefillin course, in which boys actually make their own tefillin, is renowned for its inspirational power. But this particular class, being held for Reb Noach's own first three grandsons approaching bar mitzvah, along with their fathers, has special significance.



A Holy TASK

EACH BOY IS SEATED at a table beside his father, with a sheet of goatskin in front of them.

Teaching the craft of tefillin making to preteen boys required Reb Noach to develop his own unique method. For the *batim*, he decided to use thin goatskin parchment instead of thick cowhide leather. That enabled him to fashion a single piece that could be formed into a *bayis* using origami-like folding techniques. (Many older sifrei Torah, particularly those in the older shuls of Tzfas, were written on goatskin parchment.)

To engage the boys, he kicks off the introductory session with some questions: What is kedushah? What are tefillin? What's leather? How is it made? Especially powerful is the quote from the *Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 37:1, Mishnah Berurah)* that details the huge reward for the mitzvah of tefillin, as described by the Chofetz Chaim — long life, a guaranteed place in the World to Come, invulnerability to the fires of Gehinnom, and forgiveness for our sins — and all this for wearing little black boxes.

Before any work is done, the boys wash *netilas yadayim*. This is a sacred task, Reb Noach tells them, and, just like the Kohanim would wash their hands before their service in the Beis Hamikdash, and as a *sofer stam* does today before he begins to write, so we do before making tefillin.

The boys then see and handle the components of tefillin — *klaf*, *batim*, *parshiyos*, the hair of a calf's tail used to tie up the *parshiyos*, and the *gid*, or sinew thread that stitches the *batim* closed. All the while, Reb Noach continues with his probing, incisive questions. Why do we use the hair of a calf tail? (For all the answers, you'll have to attend one of Reb Noach's workshops....)

And then, before the boys begin the real job, they declare importantly in a loud voice, as halachah requires "*L'sheim kedushas tefillin!*" Reb Noach emphasizes that these words, repeated at every stage of the process, center the person's thoughts and signify his intention that all these practical tasks are for the sake of a holy mitzvah.

no mix-ups

SUDDENLY, EACH BOY is holding a pair of perfect *batim*. In the following sessions, Reb Noach brings kosher *parshiyos*, which the boys tie up with calf hair and insert into the *batim*. The tefillin are then sewn with cows' sinew, and the boys learn to tie the special knots in the *retzuos* (straps).

All ten critical steps, from the initial cutting to tying the straps, have been carried out by the boys themselves. When they become obligated in the mitzvah, they will be performing it with tefillin they made themselves.

Making tefillin is an arduous task, but Reb Noach is an expert hand at sweeping the boys along with his enthusiasm so it feels not like a job, but a privilege. He's also an expert at mixing information and interest into his presentation — too much dry data and the boys will lose interest, too many stories and the essential info will get lost. He throws in fascinating gems, such as the *gematria* of the two shins on the tefillin along with their

"*regalim*" adding up to 613.

Some stages are harder than others. Folding the *batim* of the *tefillin shel rosh*, for example, takes a great deal of time and effort, and triggers numerous cries for help. From a halachic standpoint, Reb Noach explains that inserting the *parshiyos* is the most stressful part, as it must be done just right.

Imagine, he says, 30 students in a classroom, each with four *parshiyos* all rolled up. The moment these are unrolled, amid commotion and excitement, they are at risk of falling on the floor and getting mixed up. And if the wrong *parshiyos* go into the wrong *batim*, those tefillin are *passul* — and no one will know.

"You can't imagine how much sleep I've lost worrying about this," he admits.

His concern caused him to seek rabbinical advice, as he does regarding every step of the process, and that particular problem was largely solved by the simple step of numbering the *parshiyos*.

ABOVE the Fold

THE BOYS GET DOWN TO WORK. The first stage is cutting out the pattern of the *bayis* from the sheet of parchment. The shape is marked with tiny holes, but has to be punched out by hammering very hard with a wooden mallet. (The boys enjoyed this part.)

Next, because halachah requires that the Hebrew letter shin be embossed on the sides of the *tefillin shel rosh*, the boys do this using something rather like a very large hole punch. Then the oddly shaped pieces of parchment are taken to a different table and sprayed liberally with black paint. (Reb Noach explains that this, like the other ten steps of this process, are *halachah l'Moshe miSinai*.)

Reb Noach is incredibly organized and efficient, and at the same time, very cool, calm, relaxed, and friendly — and patient with the boys. The whole presentation runs like a well-oiled machine, with a set time and

place for everything.

Next comes the origami-like folding stage. Reb Noach explains that there are over 100 folds to make, and, using a "*makel hakadosh*" — a "holy stick" (actually a popsicle stick) — the boys work hard (with help from their fathers) making creases in the appropriate places and directions, and the boys see the tefillin gradually begin to take on their familiar form.

As they progress, they become more and more involved and excited. When Reb Noach sensibly suggests a short break — everyone's been working for two hours solid, outside, in a record heat wave — the boys insist on continuing. A class has to be that absorbing for a bunch of 12-year-olds to be ready and willing to dedicate so much time and effort to it. (And these workshops continue for roughly four hours, three times.)

Internal BEAUTY

Some readers might reasonably wonder if such unusual tefillin, made of thin goatskin parchment rather than thick leather, are actually kosher. Before launching the project, Reb Noach took his prototype tefillin to Rav Nissim Karelitz *ztz"l* in Bnei Brak for approval.

Says Reb Noach, “Rav Karelitz and his entire beis din opened them up, checked them, and asked lots of questions as to how they were made. He finally pronounced, ‘These are tefillin!’”

The Keshet Tefillin method and educational program have the support and approval of numerous prominent rabbis, among them Rav Yisroel Belsky and the Novominsker Rebbe, *zichronam livrachah*; and Rav Sarel Rosenberg, Jerusalem’s Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Aryeh Stern, and Tzfas’s Chief Rabbi Shmuel Eliyahu.

Still, the halachah is that only Jewish males over the age of 13 are permitted to make tefillin, so how can Reb Noach allow pre-bar mitzvah boys to make them? Reb Noach received the *psak* that if an appropriate adult supervises the boy and physically helps him with the critical stages, the tefillin are kosher.

As to whether anyone would want a pair of tefillin somewhat different from the norm, Reb Noach points out, “These tefillin may actually be closer to the traditional *mesorah*. The tefillin



used today, which are a good deal heavier, are a relatively recent innovation — no more than perhaps 80 to 100 years.”

Although the tefillin are kosher, in order to keep the project affordable, Reb Noach generally uses the simplest kosher materials (*parshiyos, retzuos*) as approved by the project’s rabbanim, while offering more *mehudar* options. The standard *parshiyos* are perhaps less *mehudar* than more expensive ones. But beauty extends beyond the external.

As one father wrote to Reb Noach, “My son has made the most beautiful tefillin I have ever seen. I know he put his heart and soul into it and I just wish you could have been there to see his face when he gave them to me. I believe it means more to him than we’ll ever know... and that is what makes these tefillin so beautiful.”

Tracing the Pattern

How did Reb Noach dream up this whole concept?

“I was learning the halachos of tefillin with my son for his bar mitzvah, back in about 2005,” he relates. “I started thinking about how today’s tefillin are made with such heavy leather, needing hydraulic presses and all kinds of sophisticated machinery. Moshe Rabbeinu also wore tefillin — I don’t think he had that equipment in the Midbar. How did he make his tefillin?”

Reb Noach, a California native with a degree in horticulture from UC-Berkeley and a Tzfas resident since 1978, began to ponder the question in light of his experience

as an artist. Having executed multiple projects using paper-engineering techniques, including an origami-style fold-up cardboard tzedakah box, he made the connection.

“Well, we have paper, we have tefillin — how do we get from there to here?”

It took a lot of stubbornness and tenaciousness, but the path he singlehandedly carved out led to a project that has now reached close to 8,000 people: adults, college students, bar mitzvah-aged children and parents. Reb Noach has presented in schools, summer camps, synagogues, community facilities, and privately.

Ties That Bind

What is the point of such a workshop? Why would a preteen want to spend 15 hours making his own tefillin, when he could simply order a pair ready-made?

It's all about connection, says Reb Noach.

He points out that the mitzvah of tefillin covers an astonishing spectrum of Jewish concepts — kedushah, responsibility, devotion, dedication, continuity, connectedness, identity. So his workshop gives some boys a chance to connect to their Jewish heritage.

“At first, when I began, I thought it was a project about tefillin,” Reb Noach says. “But it has gradually become clearer that it’s not just about that — it’s a project about Yiddishkeit. Tefillin is just the handle that opens the door.”

The majority of the schools Reb Noach works with are Orthodox. Still, although the staff may be fully mitzvah-observant, often many in the student body are not. In one school he visits regularly, for example, only about 15 percent are *shomrei Shabbos*. And often these are the boys whom Reb Noach lights up with his workshops. He deliberately creates a lively, happy atmosphere.

“I’m trying to make Judaism fun, and to that end, I make the workshops as ‘un-school-like’ as possible.”

That fun, relaxed, warm atmosphere allows the boys to feel connection. Reb Noach’s enthusiasm for the subject enables him to transmit to his students a sensitivity to the kedushah of tefillin and an emotional connection to themselves as Jews, to this mitzvah, and to mitzvos in general.

Owning the Mitzvah

When Reb Noach holds a regular workshop in a school, the final session is turned into a festive celebration — he calls it the “Siyum.” The room is set up, siddurim are distributed, and all the *mechanchim*, parents, and local dignitaries are invited. Then the boys get to lay their very own tefillin for the first time with a brachah and recite Krias Shema. This, for the boys, is the highlight of the workshop, and an extremely emotional moment.

“These boys work hard, investing 15 hours into making their tefillin, and when they finish, they truly own this mitzvah,” Reb Noach explains. “Putting on the tefillin for the first time and saying Krias Shema — I watch the most difficult children simply melt. The moment is electric.”

Reb Noach has many stories to tell of the powerful effect the experience has on the boys, but one is especially moving. He relates that at a summer camp, he met an older teen who had attended the tefillin workshop some years previously.

“The boy came up to me and told me, ‘I still wear my tefillin.’

“I told him, ‘Thanks for telling me — you made my day.’

“He responded, ‘Rabbi Greenberg, you made my life!’”



Big Plans

Young Jewish boys across the globe, from Sydney to Chicago, from Jerusalem to New Jersey, have participated in the workshops. But Reb Noach has big plans. His fervent belief in Keshet Tefillin is pushing him to take this unique program out to as many young Jews as he can reach.

To that end, in an attempt to reach out to the people least likely to hear about Keshet Tefillin through word of mouth, Reb Noach has launched a concerted social-media advertising campaign. And, he says, it’s working — in the last month it has generated a multitude of inquiries. He also hopes to open an educational center on the subject of tefillin, with the active encouragement of Rabbi Mordechai Dov Kaplan, rabbi of the Old City of Tzfas, for the benefit of tourists visiting the city, so that, as he says, “They will have something more interesting and inspiring to do than just wander around the alleyways.”

Reb Noach has plans to open a tefillin factory in Tzfas, guided and encouraged by Rabbi Aryeh Stern, the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Jerusalem. Today in Israel, the market for low-cost tefillin is dominated by items of questionable kashrus, yet Reb Noach’s tefillin will be made under Rabbi Stern’s supervision and receive his *hechsher*. Reb Noach admits that when Rabbi Stern first suggested the idea, he was not overly excited. But he soon changed his mind.

“Rabbi Stern explained that his agenda is to enable regular Jews to buy strictly kosher tefillin at a reasonable price — ‘a revolution in the world of tefillin,’ he called it. It’s exciting to be part of that.”





Corona KESHER

Although Reb Noach's international Keshet Tefillin workshops have evaporated under the onslaught of coronavirus, it's not all negative. As Reb Noach points out, "Coronavirus has given me an incredible opportunity to finally focus on Israel."

He is forging alliances with municipalities and educational networks of all religious affiliations to introduce Keshet Tefillin into the school curriculum in Israel as he has abroad. He has found support from Tzfas mayor Shuki Ohana and he hopes soon to be going into schools in his hometown — the communal health situation permitting.

For bar mitzvah boys whose schools have been closed by COVID lockdowns, Reb Noach has been offering private workshops that allow fathers and grandfathers to participate, helping make their bar-mitzvah tefillin. Today's class shows what a beautiful opportunity it is for father and son to spend productive time together performing a holy mitzvah and bonding — a truly unique, unforgettable experience.

Reb Noach typically spends about half the year on the road, giving workshops across the globe. What motivates Reb Noach to keep giving the same workshop over and over, and still search out more Jews to participate? "People often ask me if I get bored giving over the same material time after time. I tell them, 'Look at these boys' faces when they lay their very own tefillin for the first time! You can't get bored looking at their faces. We are literally changing their lives. It's totally addictive, and the most gratifying thing I've ever done.'"

And with that kind of inspiration and energy driving Reb Noach, chances are that he will go on changing Jewish lives, one pair of tefillin at a time.