

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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Posted February 3, 2011, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

WEAR YOUR TEFILLIN ALL DAY LONG: RABBAN YOHANAN BEN ZAKKAI AND RABBI ELIEZER DID!

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These days, tefillin are worn only during morning services but the Yerushalmi informs us that some of our greatest sages wore tefillin all day long, taking them off only to prevent the tefillin's holiness from coming into contact with any form of nakedness. One of these occasions was the Roman-style baths. There, a "tefillin check man" named Jacob the Thermasarius (i.e., the Thermometer man), would take charge of them until the men would finish bathing.

When Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai would come up to Jacob to get his tefillin back, he'd say to Jacob: Two arks went along with the Israelites in the desert-the ark of the covenant and the ark of Joseph's bones. The nations of the world said: What is the nature of these arks?" Israel said to them: This is Joseph's coffin and this is the ark of the Eternal. And the nations of the world ridiculed Israel and said: Is it possible that a coffin goes alongside the ark of the Eternal? And Israel said: It is because Joseph kept the commandments of the Torah that God wrote, i.e., the contents of the other box.

And why did Rabban Yochanan tell this story to the bath attendant?

Said Rabbi Haninah: Did he have no other teaching of Torah to tell him? Rather, he wanted to chastise him saying: Joseph merited being the father of the tribe from which kings descended only because he kept God's commandments. And we merit all of our honors only because we keep God's commandments. And you wish to disrupt us from keeping his commandments. So hurry up and give us back our tefillin! (Y. Berachot 2:2)

Discussion Questions:

1. There is so much to learn from this story! First of all, we have the idea that, in the earliest centuries of rabbinic Judaism, our sages (and possibly many others) wore tefillin all day long. The \$64,000 question is, obviously, when and why did this practice stop? Would you be open to wearing tefillin all day long? Have you ever seen someone wearing tefillin outside of services?
2. Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai's story helps us understand the spiritual import of tefillin: they protect us and are miniatures of the two "arks" that traveled with us from Egypt and protected us throughout our wandering in the wilderness. Does this understanding help the mitzvah of tefillin better? If so, how?
3. If you wanted to keep the Shema with you all day long, how would you do it? Would you have it as a

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screensaver, a ring tone, jewelry, etc.? Let your creativity run free. I look forward to your answers!