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Posted July 2, 2010, by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

BH

AMBIVALENCE ABOUT WOMEN WEARING TEFILLIN IN THE YERUSHALMI

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According to our sages, women, all the way back to biblical times, have been observing Jewish rituals which, today, are reserved for men:

Women and slaves are exempt from reciting the Shema and donning tefillin. From whence do we know that women are exempt? "And you shall teach them to your sons/children (Deuteronomy 11:19)" but not to your daughters (Sifre D., #46). One who is obligated to study Torah is obligated to don tefillin. Women, who are not obligated to study Torah, are not obligated to wear tefillin.

This ruling was challenged: Michael was the daughter of a Kushite (i.e., King Saul) and she wore tefillin. And Jonah's wife used to go up to the Temple on the pilgrimage festivals and the sages did not protest this.

Rabbi Chizkiya said in the name of Rabbi Abbahu: Jonah's wife was turned back from the Temple when she tried to go there on the festival. And Michal, the daughter of a Kushite, the sages protested against her. (Y. Berachot 2:2)

There were no sages back then to make an objection!!!

Discussion Questions:

1. This is a characteristic Yerushalmi passage in that it expresses different opinions but doesn't force the learner to come to any one conclusion. In other words, you can follow Michal's practice of wearing tefillin and/or Jonah's wife's practice of going to the Temple for festivals. Or you can buy into Rabbi Abbahu's teaching that these women were prevented from performing these practices. There is a historical problem with Rabbi Chizkiya's teaching. Can you identify it?
2. Women and slaves are exempt from the obligation of reciting the Shema and wearing tefillin....but they are not prohibited from doing so. Is there any logical formula by which we could make women obligated to recite the Shema and wear tefillin?