

# Tefillin: Do You Know What Is In Your Batim?

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## Introduction

**FOR ABOUT 15** years now, I've been learning with Michael, my telephone chavrusa, through the Partners In Torah program. We are currently studying Kitzur Shulhan Arukh and have just finished the laws of tefillin in section 10.<sup>1</sup> I thought since Michael did not have a religious background, he would find it interesting knowing what to look for in tefillin. Having grown up from myself, and having gone to Yeshiva, I thought I knew everything about tefillin, but when you have to teach it, you realize how little you really know.

I did a fair bit of research using the internet. There is an amazing array of tefillin and tefillin-related items on the internet, including tefillin that are sold on Amazon<sup>2</sup> and tefillin straps that are sold on eBay.<sup>3</sup> Regarding tefillin, there are also numerous choices available that comply with various minhagim, along with pricing ranging from a few hundred dollars<sup>2</sup> to over two thousand dollars.<sup>4,5</sup> Tefillin can also be purchased in the usual way, which is directly through a sofer.

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1. Kitzur Shulhan Arukh: [www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/4297855/jewish/Chapter-10-Laws-of-Tefillin.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4297855/jewish/Chapter-10-Laws-of-Tefillin.htm).
  2. Tefillin on Amazon.com: [www.amazon.com/s?k=tefillin&crid=HG82008INR7E&prefix=tefillin%2Caps%2C203&ref=nb\\_sb\\_ss\\_ts-doa-p\\_1\\_8](http://www.amazon.com/s?k=tefillin&crid=HG82008INR7E&prefix=tefillin%2Caps%2C203&ref=nb_sb_ss_ts-doa-p_1_8).
  3. Straps on eBay: [www.ebay.com/itm/Kosher-Tefillin-Straps-High-Quality-Made-in-Israel-Retzuot-Tefilin-Phylacteries-/292557599486?\\_ul=IN](http://www.ebay.com/itm/Kosher-Tefillin-Straps-High-Quality-Made-in-Israel-Retzuot-Tefilin-Phylacteries-/292557599486?_ul=IN).
  4. Expensive Tefillin: [www.en.tefillin.co.il/our-tefillin-levels](http://www.en.tefillin.co.il/our-tefillin-levels).
  5. Expensive Tefillin: [www.hasofer.com/page.pl?p=gassot](http://www.hasofer.com/page.pl?p=gassot).

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## **Types of Tefillin**

Tefillin are generally categorized by soferim into three minhagim, Ashkenazi, Chassidic or Sephardi.<sup>6</sup> There are also Chabad customs which I will not be discussing. Ashkenazi tefillin are generally used by people from Germany, England, Russia and Lithuania who daven Nusach Ashkenaz. People from Poland, Galicia, Hungary, Romania and Slovakia, who daven Nusach Sephard, generally use Chassidic tefillin. People from Northern Africa, Morocco, Italy, Salonika, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Egypt generally use Sephardi tefillin.

Before WWII, most people lived in the same location for centuries, and you would go to your local sofer who knew your family or which shul you attended, and he would supply you with the appropriate tefillin. Today, however, the world is a cholent, as people have been displaced from different countries and may not always remember or know their original minhag.

When purchasing tefillin, if you don't know, you should try to determine your correct minhag. Although I personally was raised with Chassidic minhagim and have always davened nusach Sephard, it was only after studying the different minhagim and looking at my own tefillin that I realized I was using minhag Ashkenaz tefillin.

In 1976, I was on a summer trip to Israel and walked into a soferim store in Mea Shearim to purchase a replacement pair of tefillin for my father. The owner was selling tefillin for \$125 USD and when I asked him how he could sell tefillin at half the usual price, he said he was instructed by "The Rebbe" to sell them at cost. When I got home, my father said they couldn't be kosher — they were much too cheap. My father took them to a well-respected sofer in Toronto who assured him that not only were they kosher, but he knew who the sofer was from the script.

After my father passed away, I started using his tefillin. They are Ashkenazi Gassot (from the word Gass (thick) as in B'heima Gassa (referring to a cow) tefillin but they wind outward and have a square knot on the neck according to Chassidic minhag. I looked at my original bar mitzvah tefillin which are Chassidic tefillin. They are Dakkot from the word Dak (thin) as in B'heima Dakka (referring to a goat), and were brought from Israel for my bar mitzvah. I realized that I should be using Chassidic tefillin as my father was a Ostrofer Chossid before the war. So, obviously, these tefillin I bought for my father in 1976 were minhag Ashkenaz. This is not a critical error, just something I wish I had known.

Having tefillin that do not always exactly match your ancestral minhag nor does a combination of different minhagim negate the halachic status of otherwise halachically acceptable tefillin.

## **The Type of Batim (Boxes) for Tefillin**

Whichever minhag you have, one needs to determine the type and quality of the Batim that you want to purchase. Tefillin can be made of two types of skin/hide, which can be glued

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6. Tefillin Custom and Script: [www.hasofer.com/page.pl?p=styles](http://www.hasofer.com/page.pl?p=styles).

together or made from one piece. The least expensive tefillin are made from a “thin” animal like a goat and are called Dakkot. Since the skin is thin, the tefillin may easily deform and lose their square shape over time. The corners can also become worn and even develop a hole. These tefillin can also be glued together from pieces of skin or can be made from “one piece.” The more expensive tefillin are made from a “thick” animal and taken from the neck of a cow and are called Gassot. These tefillin are made from one piece of hide and are formed by using dies and a press.<sup>7</sup> Gassot are a relatively new, post-war development because of the technology involved in manufacturing them. Gassot are much more durable than Dakkot due to the thickness of the hide and have all but replaced Dakkot in the Orthodox world. If you go directly to a sofer, you will probably not get Dakkot – they are mostly sold online.

In order of quality, you will find the following types of tefillin:

1. **Peshutim (Dakkot)** – These tefillin are the least expensive. They are formed by relying on a halachic leniency which allows gluing several pieces of skin together into a single piece. These are generally of poor quality, halachically problematic and do not last long. Peshutim that are sold online have no certification.
2. **Mehudarim (Dakkot)** – These tefillin are made from one piece of skin that is cut like a puzzle so that it can be glued together to form a box. These are better than the Peshutim, because the upper section is from one piece of skin. However, it is still not Mehudar because glue is used to piece it together to make it “one skin.”
3. **Dakkot** – These tefillin are made by making a base from thicker hide glued together. Afterwards a thin skin is then stretched over this base, so that it is covered with one piece of skin. This is considered to be one solid piece of skin and they are sturdier than the first two types and last 10 to 20 years. Some internet sites state that these batim are not halachically acceptable<sup>8</sup> and do not sell them.
4. **Gassot or Ohr Echad** – These tefillin are made of a single piece of thick hide stretched over metal plates and then folded and pressed to form a perfectly square shape. These are the best type of tefillin available, both in terms of their adherence to halakha as well as durability. No glue is used whatsoever when making these tefillin and they will likely last a lifetime. They are the best choice for someone who will use them daily.

A little note to illustrate the lifetime of good-quality tefillin: My great-nephew is now using his great-great-grandfather’s Gassot tefillin that were purchased in the 1950s.

## **The Shin on the Shel Rosh**

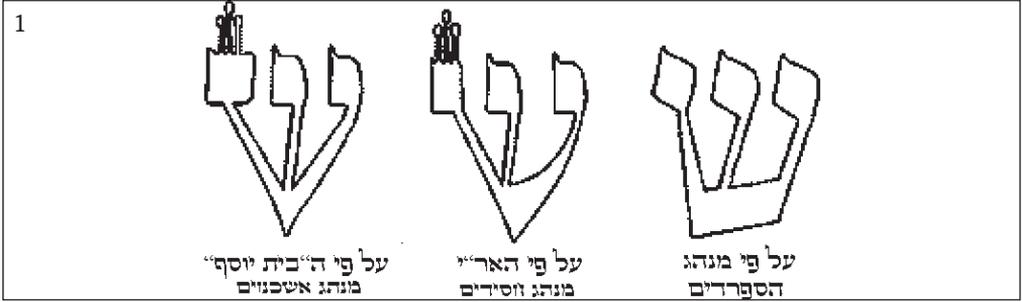
On the Shel Rosh (head tefillin) there are two shins: one on each side, a regular three-headed one and a Kabbalistic four-headed one. The shape of these shins is different depending on your minhag. In diagram 1 below, Ashkenazi is on the left, Chassidic is in the middle and Sephardi is on the right.<sup>9</sup> Looking at the bottom of the shin on the tefillin is a dead give-

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7. Making of Gassot: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1mrM6ZUJOw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k1mrM6ZUJOw).

8. Dakkot not Acceptable: [www.hasofer.com/page.pl?p=tefillin#Which](http://www.hasofer.com/page.pl?p=tefillin#Which).

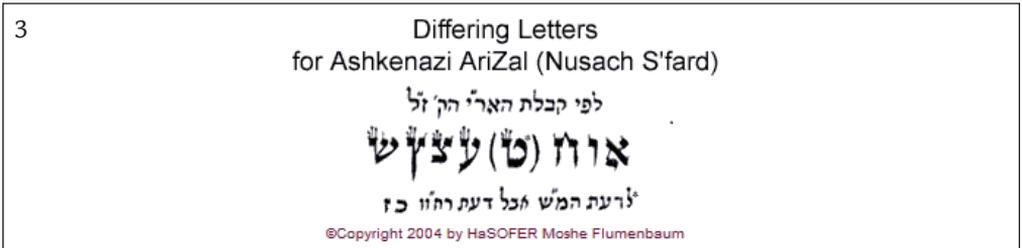
9. Types of Shins: [www.judaism.stackexchange.com/questions/90949/tefillin-shin-minhagim](http://www.judaism.stackexchange.com/questions/90949/tefillin-shin-minhagim)



away to know the minhag of your tefillin. The minhag Chassidic has a thicker base than the minhag Ashkenazi. Clearly, the Sephardi shin has a flat base. The script of the inside parchments will also match each minhag.

### The Type of Script on the Parchment

The scripts<sup>6</sup> used to write tefillin vary according to the minhag, and correspond with the shin on the shel rosh. These variations arose when communities were geographically separated and are all halachically acceptable. Below are illustrations with examples of each. The Ari script is the same as Beis Yosef except for the letters shown.



## The Quality of the Script

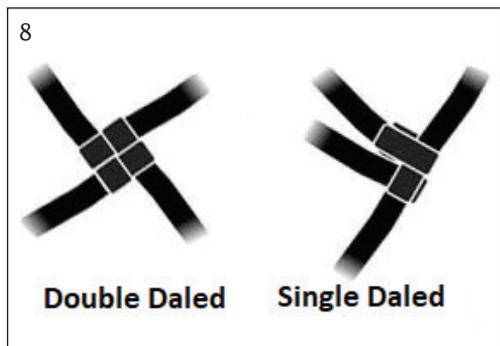
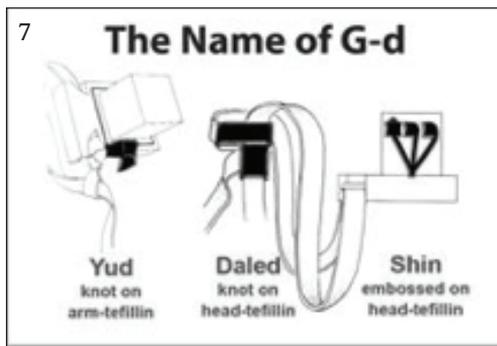
In addition to the type of script discussed above, there are also variations in the quality of the script.<sup>10</sup> On the better script the letters are formed more carefully since the scribe takes more time and care while writing. The lowest quality level 1 script is on the left (diagram 5) and the highest quality level 5 script is on the right (diagram 6). The difference is obvious. The script on the left looks shaky and inconsistent while the script on the right looks as if it came off a printer.

Different sites call the different grades by different names. Unless specified, you will get the lowest quality kosher script. The better the script the more expensive the tefillin will be.

## The Type of Knot on Back of Neck

Tefillin have the name of G-d, Shad-dai, incorporated in them. There is a Shin on the Shel Rosh, a Daled on the knot at the back of the neck and a Yud on the knot on the Shel Yad (arm tefillin). See diagram 7 below.

For the daled knot there are two options: a single daled knot or a square knot representing two daleds. The single daled knot developed after the older custom of using the double daled knot.<sup>11</sup> The square knot does not look like a daled, but the single daled does.



10. Script Quality: [www.mezuzamehudar.com/c-102/tefillin](http://www.mezuzamehudar.com/c-102/tefillin).

11. Double Single Daled: <https://lavlor.blogspot.com/2020/?m=0>.

Generally, Ashkenazi tefillin use a single daled and the others a double daled. Either one is acceptable. See diagram 8.

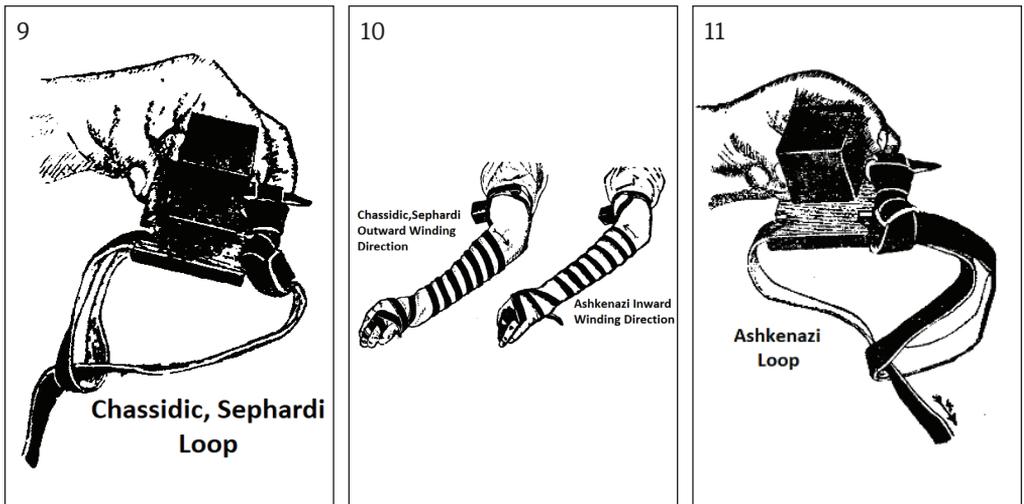
When I had the straps of my tefillin replaced, the sofer changed the knot from a double daled square knot to a single daled knot telling me it was better. This is probably due to the historic change mentioned above. Subsequently, I decided to change it back since the single daled was not my minhag and I felt more comfortable with a double daled knot.

In defence of the double daled knot, this is a possible explanation. If you look at the word Shad-dai in any place in Tanach, for example in Genesis 17:1, you will notice that there is a dageish or dot in the daled. In most Chumashim, there is no differentiation between a Dagesh Chazak or Dagesh Kal but if you check in a Feldheim Tanach Simanim, the dageish in the daled is a Dagesh Chazak. The Dagesh Chazak doubles the pronunciation of the letter so that it is pronounced as two Daleds. This doubling may be why Shad-dai is spelled with two 'd's in English. This may also be why the knot has two daleds representing the double letter found in square knot.

## Winding Direction of the Straps

There are two directions to wind the straps on the arm. They can be wound in two ways: inwards towards yourself or outwards away from yourself. Inwards is the Ashkenazi minhag and outwards is the Chassidic and Sephardi minhag. Also, the loop on the strap of the shel yad is configured differently depending on the winding direction. For the inward wind, the loop on the strap does not pass through the channel in the shel yad tefillin but it does for the outward direction. Below is an illustration showing the inward Ashkanazi minhag on the right and the outward Chassidic and Sephardi minhag on the left.

There are also different minhagim on how to wind the straps on the arm, hand and fingers. These minhagim do not affect the purchase of tefillin. The method of winding is



usually a family minhag passed down from father to son. I still remember being taught one minhag in school but when it came to my bar mitzvah my father corrected it and taught me the method used in our family.

## Are You Right- Or Left-Handed?

The shel yad is placed on the non-dominant hand, so depending if you are right or left-handed the straps on the shel yad are inserted in the direction where the Yud on the Tefillin face your heart. The illustration shows this for Ashkenazi tefillin. If you are definitely right-handed and write with your right hand, you are right-handed for the purposes of tefillin and the same with your left hand (Kitzur Shulhan Arukh, 10:12). If you are ambidextrous, consult your Rabbi.

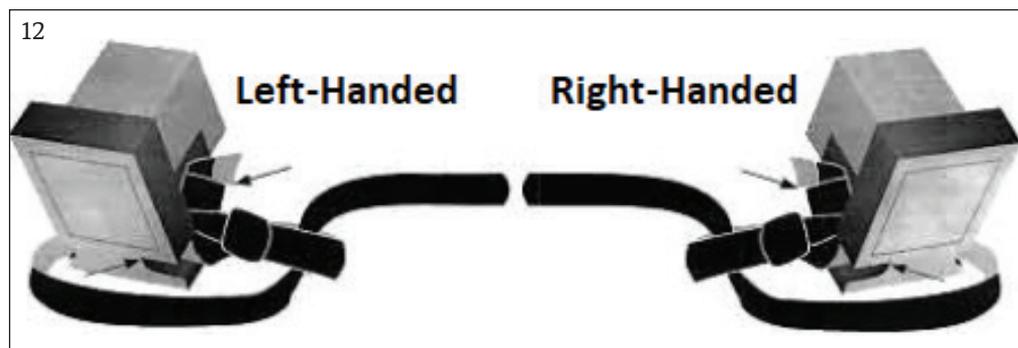
## The Type of Strap on the Tefillin

The straps on the tefillin have to be black. Until recently the front of the strap was a polished black and the back was natural leather colour. There is now a new option to purchase straps with the back side also died an unpolished black. The reason for the change is when the straps of the shel rosh twist, black is always visible. The straps are made of different qualities with the quality of the straps varying with the quality of the tefillin. If purchased separately and they wear out, there are different qualities to choose from.<sup>12</sup>

## Certification of the Tefillin and Parchments in the Tefillin

Tefillin must have rabbinical certification. If you go to a trustworthy sofer, who you are able to rely on for his expertise including that they tefillin was made by a pious individual, who had the proper intent, the parchments were properly written and have been checked. He will probably also have the relevant certifications.

If you are purchasing online, you must determine the name of the certifying organization, Rabbi and/or Sofer. Plus, you must be comfortable that their authority meets your



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12. Straps: [www.ajudaica.com/category/79/Tefillin-Parts](http://www.ajudaica.com/category/79/Tefillin-Parts).

standards. This should be done before laying out any funds since some sites only provide certificates upon delivery. Their supervision should be both on the batim and parchments. They will certify that the materials were sourced correctly, the manufacture was done with the correct intent by pious and skilled individuals, and the final product meets all halachic requirements.

For any tefillin you purchase, the parchments must be checked manually by another sofer to make sure there are no errors or incorrectly formed letters. In addition to the manual check the parchments must also have a computer OCR (Optical Character Recognition) check done on them. The manual check, is better at finding fine detail errors whereas the computer is better at finding missing letters or misspelled words. A certificate attesting to these successful checks should be supplied with the tefillin. With better tefillin, a photocopy of the actual parchments in your tefillin may be supplied.

## **Conclusions**

I hope this essay will provide insight into the tefillin that you have or are about to purchase. I know learning about tefillin has given me a deeper understanding about the tefillin that I have and the minhag I should be using. I have attached a summary table of the options that need to be considered when buying tefillin. May we all be Zocheh to use our tefillin for many years and have the proper kavanah during our davening.

### **Summary Table of Tefillin Options**

<b>ITEM</b>	<b>ASHKENAZI</b>	<b>CHASSIDIC</b>	<b>SEPHARDI</b>
Type of Tefillin Batim	Dakkot or Gassot	Dakkot or Gassot	Dakkot or Gassot
Shin on Shel Rosh	Beis Yosef	Ari	Vellish
Script on Parchment	Beis Yosef	Ari	Vellish
Quality of Script	Kosher or Mehudar	Kosher or Mehudar	Kosher or Mehudar
Daled on Neck Strap	Single Daled	Square Double Daled	Square Double Daled
Winding Direction	Inwards to body	Outwards from body	Outwards from body
Dominant Hand	Right or Left	Right or Left	Right or Left
Type Of Strap	B/W or B/B	B/W or B/B	B/W or B/B
Name of Certifying Rabbi	Yes	Yes	Yes
Script Certification	Manual & Computer	Manual & Computer	Manual & Computer
Batim Certification	Yes	Yes	Yes
Copy of Parchments	Optional	Optional	Optional