

And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead, in order that the teachings of the Lord may be in your mouth, that with a mighty hand the Lord freed you from Egypt. --- Exod. 13:9

And so it shall be as a sign upon your hand and as a symbol on your forehead that with a mighty hand the Lord freed us from Egypt. --- Exod. 13:16

This is not a symbolic statement, but a directive that you should write these passages (concerning the Exodus), and bind them on the head and on the arm... *with a mighty hand the Lord freed you from Egypt*: Hence we learn that the purpose of **tefillin** is to remind us of the Exodus. --- **Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael**

A sign on your hand: The straightforward meaning of this command is that the Exodus should forever be in a Jew's thoughts as if its description were inscribed on his arm. This is similar to the metaphorical verse *Set me as a seal upon your heart* (Song of Songs 8:6). --- Rashbam

The avoidance of leavened bread and the consumption of matzah during the seven days of Pesach are insufficient to instill a belief in providence in Israel's hearts. For that we require a daily reminder and sign that God is master of the universe. This may be compared to a man who teaches his son an important life lesson, and then proceeds to give him subtle and regular reminders of that message. After a year, and on an annual basis, the father once again reviews the entire lesson for his child. Similarly, we are commanded to discuss the Exodus at great length during the Passover festival, but to maintain abridged forms of the story throughout the intervening months. These are to be affixed on the arm and the head, parts of the body signifying a person's physical and mental submission to God... --- **Ha-emek Davar** (Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, 19th c. Belarus/Poland)

Sanctity and slavery are mutually contradictory. Slavery is rooted in the profane, in impurity, in the unworthy; it cannot be paired with holiness and with the spiritual fitness of the personality. That is why the holiness of a slave who immersed himself for the purpose of being a slave is defective, and that is why the slave's testimony is unacceptable. He cannot contract a marriage because the ability to betroth stems from having a hallowed personality. The moment a slave achieves personal sanctity, his slavery is annulled. The **halakha** expresses this idea very

nicely: “A slave whose master placed **tefillin** upon him goes free” (Talmud, **Gittin** 401). Why? Because slavery cannot harmonize with the proclamation of God’s unity and the acceptance of God’s commandments expressed in the four passages contained in the **tefillin**. --- Joseph B. Soloveitchik, Festival of Freedom, p. 85

To understand this properly, we must transpose the verse: “And it shall be a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead, that with a strong hand God brought you out of Egypt, that the Torah of God may be within your mouth.” Thus the meaning is that you are to inscribe the Exodus in the **tefillin**, on your hand and between your eyes, and remember it always so that God's Torah be in your mouth and you will keep His commandments and teachings, for He is your Master *Who freed you from the house of bondage*. (Deut. 13:6)

I will now reveal to you a principle that encapsulates the reasons for many of the commandments. Idolatry made its first appearance in the world in the time of Enosh (Gen. 4:25f), and naturally that led to a corruption of the true axioms of faith. Some people denied the most basic foundation of belief by arguing for the eternal nature of the world and rejecting the historicity of creation. Other factions refused to accept the existence of God, while a third sect claimed that God lacked awareness of events in the world, positing that God is ignorant of earthly activities. Still others felt that although God might know what happens on earth, He has no interest in intervening in the affairs of man. thus providence does not exist, and since God treats people like the fish of the sea, He does not bother to punish or reward people for their behavior. Now when God desires to educate a nation or an individual, He will perform a wonder that alters nature and the usual laws of physics. The effect of such a miracle is to disprove all the above-mentioned faulty ideas. For a wondrous sign illustrates that indeed the world is governed by God, who must then have created it, who is familiar with its workings, and who is able and willing to act in nature and history. But of course, the Blessed Holy One will not stoop to providing signs and wonders to satisfy the skepticism of every heretic in every generation. And hence He has commanded us to fashion signs and remembrances to recall what we witnessed with our own eyes. He instructs us to transmit these truths to our children, and to persuade them to tell their own children about the events of the Exodus, in every generation, until the end of time. ---
Nachmanides

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Ancient cultures had a custom, observable today in some eastern societies, of adorning their bodies with signs of fealty to their gods. Furthermore, modern Arabs maintain a practice of copying verses from their scriptures directly onto their skin; they record their holy lines on doorways and city gates. Some scholars claim that the ancients would customarily carry tablets on their foreheads or permanently record pronouncements on their bodies as amulets against witchcraft. But in an effort to distance His people from such severe behavior, God commanded Israel merely to wear some Torah excerpts on our arms and heads. These are intended as constant reminders of the whole of God's word, such that we and our children will forever think about God's message. --- Shadal (Shmuel David Luzzatto, 19th c. Italy)

The Torah here instructs its readers to place the current passage in the **tefillin** of the arm and the head. Such a practice will serve as a constant reminder of the Exodus from Egypt, which God brought about *with a mighty hand*. In turn, the wearers of these signs will never forget the wonders that God performed for us. This will ensure that we continue to believe in God's providence and powers. --- Abarbanel

Since **tefillin** are worn as a sign, they are not worn on days that are themselves referred to as signs, such as festivals and Shabbat. --- Jerusalem Talmud, **Berakhot** 2:3

The Hebrew term **yad'kha**, your arm, appears in v. 9 in its standard spelling, but in v. 16 with an extra **heh**. The resulting word can be broken into the words "**yad keha**," the weaker arm; hence the rule that the **tefillin** should be worn on the weaker arm (i.e., the left arm for right-handers). --- Rashi

What this teaches is that military success is not a function of brute strength, but is always due to the assistance granted by God. For the hand of man is always weak and ineffectual. Were God not to take man by the hand and lead him to success, people would never really accomplish anything, great or small. It is not one's own right hand that gives him strength, because man in fact depends on the right hand of God to prop up his weak left. And this is why God commanded Jews to don **tefillin** on the left arm, to wear a symbol containing the name of God within it. This demonstrates that the power of God, placed on the left arm, provides the

power to that limb. --- **K'li Yakar** (R. Ephraim Luntschitz, Prague, 16th – 17th c.)

The Torah presents the **shel yad** before the **shel rosh** because of what the two objects symbolize. When one wears the **shel yad**, he demonstrates that he has mastered his desires and is in full control of his passions. The **shel rosh** signifies purity of thought and contemplation. For such is the process of character development. First a person must wage an inner war against his evil impulses, and only then can he turn his eyes upward to contemplate God. --- **Malbim** (Meir Leibush ben Yechiel Mikhel Wisser, 19th c. Ukraine)

Rabbi Eliezer taught that the **tefillin** were only to be worn in the daytime, for the following verse says: "*You shall keep this law at its set time, **miyamim yamima** (from year to year, but literally, from days to days).*" How then, he asked, shall I fulfill the obligation of *he studies that Torah day and night* (Ps. 1:2)? Rabbi Joshua said, through the recitation of **Sh'ma**, for if a person does this morning and evening, the Holy One, Praised be He, considers it as if he had labored in Torah day and night. --- Midrash on Psalms, 1:17

The word "**ot**" (sign) in this verse is written without a **vav** to represent the vowel "o". (Note: this author possessed a different text from our Masoretic text.) From this we learn that the four passages contained within the **tefillin shel yad** should be written on a single parchment and placed within a single compartment...The "sign" is "for you," for the person wearing the **tefillin** and not for others. One should not wave the **tefillin** about and show it off to the world, but wear it with modesty. The order teaches us that one should first put on the **tefillin shel yad**, and after that affix the **tefillin shel rosh**; when they are removed, the **shel rosh** is removed first. --- **Midrash Lekach Tov**

Rabbi Yehudah said: why are these to be placed "on your hand" and "between your eyes"? Just as you can be defiled with your hand, so you may be defiled through what your eyes see. --- **Masekhet Tefillin**, one of the minor Talmudic tractates

The two **tefillin**, the **shel yad** and the **shel rosh**, correspond to the two components of Torah, the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The Written Torah is comprised in

its entirety of the names of the Holy One, Praised be He, and so he who wears the **shel rosh** loyally fulfills the verse *And all people of the earth shall see that you are called by the Name of God* (Deut. 28:10). --- **Ha-emek Davar**

The hand is mentioned before the forehead, because the heart (with which the **shel yad** is associated) outranks the brain. --- Abarbanel