

Yizkor Pesach 5776

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Six years ago, a man Yisrael Krysztal received a letter from the City of Haifa that he could not explain. The letter asked him in which school he would be registering for the first grade. Surely there was some kind of bureaucratic mix up, his children thought, so they called the City of Haifa. The answer, as it turned out, was a simple one. When you fill out a form for the city, and list the date of birth, they only leave two boxes to fill in the year, not four. By their calculation, Krysztal was six years old; their calculations were off by exactly a century, as he was born in 1904, not 2004! A few weeks ago, a remarkable ceremony took place in Haifa. In the presence of a representative from the Guinness Book of World Records, young Mr. Krysztal was officially recognized as the oldest man in the world, at age 112. His children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren surrounded him, singing songs like *vezakeini legadel banim*" (let me merit to raise children who love God) and *mi ha'ish hechafetz chaim* (who is the man that desires life). Reb Yisroel has had an epic life; at the age of eleven, he was separated from his parents, during World War I. Eventually, he was reunited with them, and went into the confectionery business, until 1939, when he and his family were moved in the Lodz ghetto. Shortly thereafter, he was taken to Auschwitz, where he was the sole survivor in his extended family, which included his first wife and two children. After the war, he remarried and emigrated to Israel, and

had two more children. All that would be remarkable enough, but listen to this. According to the *official write up* about him in the Guinness Book of World Records,

He has continuously and rigorously been performing the commandment of phylacteries (tefillin) every morning for the last century, with the exception of the Holocaust and both world wars.

I've been thinking about Mr. Krysztal quite a bit lately, and not just because it's the end of Pesach and I'm looking forward to having some good ol' fashioned chametz confectioneries. I've been thinking of him because I believe that his story, and his life lessons, are especially relevant to us today. This morning, we read *Shir Hashirim*, the love song between God and the Jewish people full of the ripest, most explicit prose you will ever encounter in a biblical setting. One of the praises the biblical lover, representing God says, about his intended, representing the Jewish people, is

שניך כעדר הרחלים

Your teeth are like a herd of sheep. A strange image, to be sure, but listen to the way the Medrash expands upon this verse.

שניך כעדר הרחלים, מה רחל זו צנועה, כך היו ישראל צנועים וכשרים במלחמת מדין, ר' הונא בשם ר' אחא אמר שלא הקדים אחד מהן **תפילין** של ראש לתפילין של יד, שאלו הקדים אחד מהן **תפילין** של ראש לתפילין של יד, לא היה משה משבחם, ולא היו עולין משם בשלום, הוי אומר שהיו צדיקים ביותר.

Just as a sheep is modest, so too were the Jewish people modest in their conduct during the battle against the midianites. In what way was this modesty manifest? The Medrash says that no man ever wore his *tefillin shel rosh* first before donning the *tefillin shel yad*. Had that been the case, Moshe would not have praised them and they would not have returned safely from battle.

It's hard to know where to start in analyzing this Medrash, but let's start with a simple question: Really? What is so important about the order of donning Tefillin that it has an effect on successful battlefield outcomes? We've seen the pictures of soldiers in Tzahal davening near their tanks in active battle situations, wearing Tallis, tefillin and their guns. Do you mean to tell me that their safety is entirely dependent on the way they wear their tefillin? Thank God they have the chance to put tefillin on at all! *This* is the defining feature?

Perhaps we can suggest that the Tefillin *shel yad* represent one's internal religious life, a private connection to the Ribbono Shel Olam. This is why they are meant to be covered- because what they represent is private as well. The *Tefillin Shel Rosh* represents the public worship of God; that is why they are also known as *pe'er*, or glory- because they are the symbol of a life lived publicly in the service of God. Putting on your *Tefillin shel yad* before the *Tefillin shel rosh* is a sign of modesty because it shows that you prioritize a life of internal service over a life of external appearances, and the corollary is correct as well; placing the *Tefillin shel Rosh* on first signifies that it is external appearances, rather than internal character, that make the most difference. I believe that one of the reasons the mitzvah of Tefillin is important to Mr. Krysztal is precisely this modesty; if he were not so old, we would never know about him. According to Yisrael Krysztal's family, his age is unimportant to him; what he treasures is that he is the oldest Tefillin wearer alive today, a mitzvah he performs each morning without fanfare.

As we stand before Yizkor, we recall the people who have left us, the people with whom we want to spend just a few more minutes at the end of a chag so deeply devoted to family. But what we recall is not the public persona of our loved ones- the *tefillin shel rosh*, their

pronouncements, their teachings and even their public actions. Instead, we remember our private relationship with them, the *tefillin shel yad*. It's the special moments, the inside jokes, the things we know they did when in their own home and they were their true selves. It is through these *tefillin shel yad* moments that our legacy is passed on. Our children will emulate what they see us doing when no one is looking, not what they know we say in public. The Kotzker Rebbe used to say that children should see their parents studying Torah, and not just hear from their parents that it is important to study Torah. Otherwise, we will raise children who tell *their* children that it is important to study Torah, but who won't study it themselves. If we want our children to stand up to peer pressure regarding the observance of Shabbos and Kashrus, they have to see us observe it with the same level of stringency, in private *and* in public. If we want our children to daven, they have to see us do it regularly and consistently, and not just pay lip service occasionally. If we want our children to give *tzedaka*, they have to see us doing so in ways that no one else will know about, not just in public contexts, though that is critically important as well. If we want our children to wear *tefillin*, our men have to wear *tefillin* as well, and not just tell our children that they should. It's hard to do every morning, isn't it? We have busy schedules, we wake up early (or find it hard to)- there are plenty of legitimate excuses. Even Yisrael Krysztal missed a few days here and there, and he also had great excuses: WWI, WWII and the Holocaust. What's our excuse? And the *tefillin shel yad* moments are not just for *bein adam lamakom*, religious matters. No, they are just as important for *bein adam lechaveiro*. It is easy to make public declarations about the importance of treating people well, to take on social justice causes involving service to underprivileged communities, or to make grandiose and bombastic shows of largesse to people we favor. But the measure of our character is what happens when nobody's looking. How do we treat domestic help? Are we as nice in private as we'd like people to think we always are, or are we actually irascible and churlish?

As we stand before Yizkor and remember the private selves of those we commemorate, let us learn the lesson of the modest Tefillin, the lesson of wearing the *tefillin shel yad* first- and the lesson of the modest man who has been doing so for a century. May our private moments be transformative and significant, mirroring our public persona in the best possible way.



Chazal see

the roots of puim in a place called bikas dura

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף צב עמוד ב

מתים שהחיה יחזקאל עלו לארץ ישראל, ונשאו נשים והולידו בנים
ובנות. עמד רבי יהודה בן בתירא על רגליו ואמר: אני מבני בניהם,
והללו תפילין שהניח לי אבי אבא.....

תנו רבנן: בשעה שהפיל נבוכדנצר הרשע את חנניה מישאל ועזריה
לכבשן האש, אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא ליחזקאל: לך והחייה מתים
בבקעת דורא. כיון שהחייה אותן, באו עצמות וטפחו לו לאותו רשע על
פניו. אמר: מה טיבן של אלו? אמרו לו: חבריהן של אלו מחייה מתים
בבקעת דורא.