

Tefillin

Tefillin are two small black boxes with black straps attached to them; Jewish men are required to place one box on their head and tie the other one on their arm each weekday morning. *Tefillin* are biblical in origin, and are commanded within the context of several laws outlining a Jew's relationship to G-d. "And you shall love the Lord your G-d with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a frontlet between your eyes" (Deuteronomy 6:5-8).



Certain Jewish groups — including probably the Sadducees, and definitely the medieval Karaites — understood the last verse to be figurative; it means only that one should always be preoccupied with words of Torah, as if they were in front of one's eyes. The Pharisees, however, took the text literally; the words of the Torah are to be inscribed on a scroll and placed directly between one's eyes and on one's arm. *Tefillin* are wrapped around the arm seven times, and the straps on the head are adjusted so they fit snugly.

The text that is inserted inside the two boxes of *Tefillin* is hand-written by a scribe, and consists of the four sets of biblical verses in which *Tefillin* are commanded (Exodus 13:1-10, 11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21). Because each pair of *Tefillin* is hand-written and hand-crafted, it is relatively expensive, and a well-made pair costs several hundred dollars.

The word *Tefillin* is commonly translated as "phylacteries," though the Hebrew term is more often used.

Putting on *Tefillin* is the first *mitzvah* assumed by a Jewish male upon his Bar Mitzvah. Usually, boys are trained to start wearing them one to two months before their thirteenth Hebrew birthday. During the training period, boys don *Tefillin*, but do not recite a blessing. Subsequent to the Bar Mitzvah, a specific blessing, "Blessed are You, Lord our G-d, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to put on *Tefillin*," is recited whenever they are worn. Many Jews say an additional blessing and prayer upon putting on *Tefillin*.

Tefillin are worn each weekday morning, but not on the Sabbath or on most Jewish holidays. On the fast day of Tisha Be'Av, and on that day only, they are put on during the afternoon instead of the morning service.

Among observant Jews, *Tefillin* is a *mitzvah* of the greatest significance.