



לקוטי שיחות
PROJECT
LIKKUTEI
SICHOS

Arm Before Head

Sicha Summary

Chelek 19 | Vaeschanan | Sichah 2

The Law:

When a person dons *tefillin*, he dons the arm-*tefillin* and then dons the head-*tefillin*. When he removes his *tefillin*, he removes the head-*tefillin* and then removes the arm-*tefillin*.

The Derivations:

This requirement appears in three rabbinic texts, but each derives it from the verses differently:

- a) From the verse “You shall bind them for a sign upon your arm, and they shall be for ornaments between your eyes” (*Devarim* 6:8), the *Talmud* derives that first one must “bind... your arm,” and only then, “between your eyes.” And from the fact that the phrase describing the head-*tefillin* begins, “they shall be,” in the plural, the *Talmud* deduces that as long as the head-*tefillin* is worn, the arm-*tefillin* must also be worn. Therefore, one cannot remove the arm-*tefillin* first because the head-*tefillin* would then be worn alone. (*Menachos* 36a)
- b) The *Mechiltah* cites the verse, “And it shall be to you as a sign upon your arm and as a remembrance between your eyes” (*Exodus* 13:9) to demonstrate that “as long as the head-*tefillin* are between your eyes, you shall be wearing two” sets of *tefillin*. Therefore, “the *mitzvah* of *tefillin* is that he dons the arm-*tefillin* first and then the head-*tefillin*,

and when he removes it he removes the head-tefillin first and then the arm-tefillin.” (*Mechiltah* to *Exodus* 13:9)

- c) The *Sifrei* uses the same wording as the *Mechiltah*, but derives the laws using *Talmud*'s second derivation from the phrase, “they shall be.” Because head-tefillin can only be worn when the arm-tefillin is also worn, it follows that a person must don the head-tefillin second, and remove them first. (*Sifrei* 35)

What is the theoretical and practical difference between these derivations?

The Explanation:

The priority of the arm-tefillin can be explained in three ways:

- a) **As an element of the *mitzvah* of the head-tefillin.** Meaning, one of the details of the *mitzvah* of head-tefillin is for it to be donned by a person who is also wearing arm-tefillin . Therefore, a person must don the arm-tefillin first. However, if a person donned the head-tefillin first, he would not need to remove both and perform the *mitzvah* in the proper order. Since in the end, the head-tefillin is indeed on a person who concurrently wears arm-tefillin, the demands of the head-tefillin are still satisfied.

This is the position of the *Talmud*, which derives the law from the verse describing the head-tefillin, “**they** shall be...between your eyes.” Meaning, what is important is that the head-tefillin is worn at the same time the arm-tefillin is worn.

- b) **As an essential element of the general *mitzvah* of tefillin.** If a person dons the head-tefillin first, the *mitzvah* has not been fulfilled. This is the position of the *Mechiltah*, which states that “the *mitzvah* of tefillin is that he places the arm-tefillin first and then the head-tefillin,” i.e. this order in which they are donned is fundamental to the *mitzvah* of tefillin itself. Thus, the verse used to establish this law is the first verse that mentions the *mitzvah* of tefillin, in *Shemos*,

because this verse indicates that the order of *donning* the tefillin is essential to the *mitzvah* itself.

- c) **As an obligation concerning the individual's behavior.** The person is commanded to don tefillin in a specific order — first the arm-tefillin, then head-tefillin. This stipulation can either be non-essential to the *mitzvah* (if the order was reversed, the *mitzvah* is still complete), or it can be essential to the *mitzvah* (if the order was reversed, one must redo the *mitzvah* and don the tefillin in the proper order).

The *Sifrei* maintains that the order a person dons his tefillin is essential to the *mitzvah* itself. Thus, its formulation is identical to the *Mechiltah*, “he dons the arm-tefillin first and then the head-tefillin” which indicates that the order itself is important. Yet, its derivation is from the verse “You shall bind,” which is directed to the individual. Thus, the *Sifrei* sees this law as an essential element of an individual's performance of tefillin.

The Deeper Dimension:

The arm-tefillin, opposite the heart, the seat of emotions, represents a person's awe of G-d. The head-tefillin, over the brain, represents intellectual comprehension of G-d. The “arm-tefillin,” awe and humility before G-d, is a prerequisite for the “head-tefillin,” seeking to connect to G-d intellectually.

Additionally, as the *Talmud* says, “as long as the head-tefillin is worn, both tefillin must be present.” Awe of G-d is not just a precursor to intellectual contemplation; it must persist even when the mind is active.

Finally, giving priority to the arm is not a means to an end — to guide and protect intellectual activity — but rather, it is essential to the *mitzvah* itself. Meaning, awe and simple humility are closer to the soul's essential core than intellectual accomplishment. As the Baal Shem Tov taught: The arm-tefillin represent simple Jews, the head-tefillin represent intellectually

accomplished Jews. Yet G-d first dons the arm-tefillin because simple Jews are most precious to Him.