

Orchos HaAmud

Weekly Presentation Highlighting an Amud of the Week



SHABBOS 49A BY RABBI AVIGDOR BERENSTEIN

Rabi Yannai said, “*Tefillin* need a clean body like Elisha of the Wings.” What is that? Abbaye says not to pass gas while wearing them. Rava says not to sleep while wearing them. Why was he (Elisha) called “of the Wings”? Once, the evil Roman government decreed that whoever wears *Tefillin* would have his brain punctured. Elisha used to wear them and go out in the street. Once, an officer saw him. He ran away and the officer chased him. As he was catching up to him, he removed the *Tefillin* from his head and held them in his hand. When the officer asked him what was in his hand, he replied, “Dove wings.” He opened his hand and there were dove’s wings! Therefore he was called “Elisha of the Wings”. Why [did he say] dove’s wings rather than any other bird? Because *Klal Yisroel* is compared to a dove, as it says, “Dove wings covered with silver...” Just as a dove’s wings protect it, so do *Mitzvos* protect *Yisroel*. (*Shabbos Daf 49a*)

The *Gemara* needs some explanation. True, we see Elisha’s dedication, but how do we see from him that *Tefillin* require a clean body? (*Tosafos* raises this question.)

Moreover, the *Gemara* later (*Shabbos Daf 130a*) mentions this story of Elisha of the Wings in the context of Rabi Shimon ben Elazar’s statement that any *Mitzvah* for which *Klal Yisroel* gave up their lives during a decree, such as *Avodah Zarah* and *Bris Milah*, is still observed firmly, but any *Mitzvah* for which they did not give up their lives during a decree, such as *Tefillin*, is observed weakly. The *Gemara* there illustrates *Tefillin* by quoting the entire above-mentioned *Gemara*. *Rashi* explains that from the story of Elisha, we see that he was exceptional, that only he gave up his life for the *Mitzvah*. Still, it is unclear why the *Gemara* there quotes the statement of Rabi Yannai and the explanations of a clean body. It would have been enough to quote the story of Elisha.

Another difficulty is that *Rashi* says that Elisha gave up his life for the *Mitzvah* of *Tefillin*. Although we see that he endangered himself by wearing *Tefillin* in the street, we see from the rest of the story, how he ran away from the officer, removed his *Tefillin*, and said that they were dove wings, that he did not give up his life for this *Mitzvah*. (Indeed, *Tosafos* there says that the *Gemara* means to show from this story that no one gave up his life, not even Elisha.)

The *Gemara*’s explanation of why Elisha chose to mention dove wings because *Mitzvos* protect us like a dove’s wings also presents a difficulty. It implies that Elisha wanted the *Mitzvah* to protect him. The *Tefillin* appearing to the officer as dove wings implies that, indeed, the *Mitzvah* did save him. How is this possible if he had already removed his *Tefillin*?

The story itself also begs for explanation. Clearly, in light of the Roman decree, Elisha was not obligated to wear *Tefillin*, as we see that he removed them when he saw the official, as *Tosafos*, the *Ramban*, and other *Rishonim* say. By the same reasoning, he could have gone into the street without *Tefillin*, because even according to the opinion that wearing *Tefillin* is obligatory all day, one need not give up his life to do so. The *Ramban*, the *Rashba*, and other *Rishonim* justify his decision to go into the street wearing *Tefillin* because one may sacrifice his life to fulfill a *Mitzvah* even when it is not obligatory; it is very noble and merits great reward.

However, the Maharil Diskin on Chumash (at the end of *Parshas Voeschanan*) asks that if that was Elisha’s intention, why did he remove his *Tefillin* when he saw the official and not give up his life as he intended?

Another intriguing point is why Elisha ran away when the officer saw him, thus arousing suspicion and, when caught, ruining his excuse that he was not doing a *Mitzvah*, because an innocent man has nothing to hide. He also angered the official by making him exert himself to catch him, which could only aggravate his punishment. Everyone knows that if a law officer saw him breaking a law, he must act calm to excuse himself; running away will only complicate his situation.

Also, why did Elisha remove his *Tefillin* and hold them in his hand when the official approached him? If to pretend that he was not wearing *Tefillin*, as it seems from his response that they were dove wings, removing them was more suspicious. Didn’t he realize that the official would ask him what he was holding? If they were on his head, he could also say that they were dove wings. If he wanted to save himself, covering the *Tefillin* would be less conspicuous, and he also would continue fulfilling the *Mitzvah* while the official was speaking to him.

Let us first explain why Elisha ran away from the Roman official. Certainly he wanted to give his life for the precious *Mitzvah* of *Tefillin* even though he was not obligated to do so. However, he knew that when the official saw the *Tefillin*, he would forcefully remove them, as his job required. The Vilna Gaon in his commentary on *Shabbos* says that Elisha did not think he would escape by running; he wanted to gain a few more seconds of giving his life for the *Mitzvah* of wearing *Tefillin* publicly. That is why he ran as fast as he could, even though he increased his danger, so it would be clear that he did have what to hide, that he did not fulfill the Roman laws.

But this strengthens the question raised earlier: Why did he remove his *Tefillin* when the official reached him? Why didn’t he try to gain a few more seconds of the *Mitzvah*?

The Maharil Diskin (mentioned above) answers that when the Roman official approached, Elisha found himself in immediate, mortal danger and felt intense fear. The *Gemara Megillah Daf 15a* says that such fear can cause a strong need to empty one’s bowels, and that is what happened to Elisha. He felt the need to relieve himself, so he removed his *Tefillin* to protect their holiness and not wear them with an unclean body.

This explains Rabi Yannai’s words: “*Tefillin* need a clean body like Elisha of the Wings.” To be sure, Elisha is a prime example of how one must maintain a clean body to wear *Tefillin*.

This also resolves all the difficulties about what Elisha hoped to accomplish by removing his *Tefillin*. Yes, it was futile and even counterproductive, but he did it to protect the sanctity of his *Tefillin*, ideally fulfilling this detail of the *Mitzvah* in accordance with *Halachah*.

Now the precision of the *Gemara* on *Daf 130a*, showing that except for Elisha, no one gave his life for the *Mitzvah* of *Tefillin*, becomes clear. We asked why it was necessary to quote Rabi Yannai’s *Halachah* about a clean body to show this. According to the Maharil Diskin, that *Halachah* is precisely what Elisha gave his life for, endangering himself by removing his *Tefillin*. Also, it was necessary to quote the whole story, because, as the Vilna Gaon and the Maharil Diskin explain, both the running away and the removal of the *Tefillin* were the result of Elisha’s self-sacrifice to fulfill every aspect of the *Mitzvah*, and not just his going into the street wearing *Tefillin*.

We posed the problem presented by the *Gemara*’s explanation of why Elisha chose to mention dove wings because *Mitzvos* protect us like a dove’s wings. It implies that Elisha wanted the *Mitzvah* to protect him. The *Tefillin* appearing to the officer as dove wings implies that, indeed, the *Mitzvah* did save him. How is this possible if he had already removed his *Tefillin*?

Based on the above, it is readily understandable, because the removal of the *Tefillin* was actually part of the self-sacrifice of fulfilling the *Mitzvah* and surely was a worthy merit to save Elisha.

Now everything fits together: Elisha said that he had dove wings, the *Gemara* explains that a dove’s wings protect it, and *Tosafos* cites a *Medrash* that the difference between a dove and other birds is that when other birds tire, they rest on a rock, but when a dove tires, it rests one wing and flies with the other wing.

The explanation of *Tosafos* with the *Medrash* is simple. Other birds’ flying ability is limited; if pursued, they eventually tire and are caught. In contrast, the dove can alternately fly with one wing and rest the other. Since the pursuing bird cannot do that, it eventually tires and gives up the chase. That is how the dove’s wings protect it.

If we think about it, the dove’s resting its wing is not just rest; it is part of the flight, because resting gives the wing strength to continue the flight when the other wing tires.

Based on the above, the comparison of *Tefillin* to dove wings is as follows: Elisha’s going into the street wearing *Tefillin* is self-sacrifice for the *Mitzvah*, his fleeing is self-sacrifice for the *Mitzvah*, and his removing the *Tefillin* is self-sacrifice for the *Mitzvah*, just as both flying and resting are part of flight.

“Therefore he was called ‘Elisha of the Wings’”. What is this title’s message? That he was once saved from the Roman government? Wouldn’t it be more appropriate to call him “Elisha of the *Tefillin*”?

There is a much deeper message here. The same Elisha who fearlessly defies the wicked decree, publicly flaunting it and going into the street with his *Tefillin* clearly visible, who when he perceives the policeman chasing him and is in mortal danger focuses entirely on how to gain a few more seconds of the *Mitzvah*, who for this purpose runs as fast as his physical abilities allow him, driven to get a few more seconds of *Tefillin* with self-sacrifice and purity until his strength gives out, who manages to maintain his mental clarity and bodily cleanliness as he flees, getting those few more seconds of *Tefillin* in accordance with *Halachah*, nonetheless, when the terror of imminent death takes hold of him physically, when his oppressor overtakes him, his mind remains focused on fulfilling the *Mitzvah* of *Tefillin* in purity as mandated by *Halachah*, and when he feels that his bodily needs no longer permit him to wear *Tefillin*, with otherworldly tranquility he removes his *Tefillin* in full view of the gendarme, fully aware that he is increasing his danger, because he is totally dedicated to wearing *Tefillin* only according to the dictates of *Halachah*. His self-sacrifice to wear *Tefillin*, based on his desire to do good, not to fulfill any obligation, is not mere fiery enthusiasm generated by his heart’s desires. His self-sacrifice is assessed and guided by intellect and absolute *Halachah*. He wears his *Tefillin* until the last moment that he may, and not one moment longer.

He is exactly like the dove who knows when to flap its wings to escape its enemy and when to rest one wing and fly with the other so that one will be ready to take over and continue the flight when the other can no longer fly. Both moving one wing and restraining the other serve the purpose of escaping the pursuer. Elisha, too, knows when to exert himself to the fullest to keep his *Tefillin* on and when to sacrifice himself to remove them, all for the purpose of guarding the sanctity and spiritual quality of his *Tefillin*. He is the master of the wings, one flying and one resting, the Torah intellect dominating his every action and movement, knowing when to flap and when to desist, when to wear *Tefillin* and when to remove them, all to do the will of our Heavenly Father.

Therefore he was called “Elisha of the Wings”.