

## **And it should be for you a sign on your arm. (13:9)**

*Horav Aryeh Levin, zl*, the *Tzaddik* of Yerushalayim, reached out to Jews of all backgrounds and religious persuasions. He made it a point to visit the prisons run by the British and also visit those with contagious diseases, such as leprosy. Indeed, he was one of the few who did this. Certainly, no one of his exalted stature carried out such exalted acts of *chesed*. During the British Mandate, political prisoners – such as the young, Jewish freedom fighters – were sentenced to the gallows by the British courts. The shadow of death was hardly ever overruled by a pardon. (This is not the forum for discussing the cruel, vindictive vileness of these government executions.) One thing all the condemned men had in common was their last request: to have *Rav Aryeh* by their side in their final moments. His love for these martyrs was boundless. He often commented, “None of us has any idea how elevated is the spiritual rank of these martyrs.” Frequently though, he was so overcome with emotion that the condemned men comforted him, rather than vice versa.

Moshe Barzani and Meir Feinstein were two young martyrs sentenced to death by the British. They requested to see *Rav Aryeh* before they took leave of this finite world. When the *tzaddik* entered their cell, they begged him to put on *Tefillin* with them one last time. The emotion and weeping, the love for Hashem and His *mitzvos*, were palpable in the cell. They wrapped the *Tefillin* on their arms with the greatest *kavanah*, intention/concentration, realizing that this was the last time they would have the privilege of performing the *mitzvah*. When *Rav Aryeh* was once asked to address a group of upper elementary students in a non-religious school’s *bar mitzvah* celebration for their students, he vividly and emotionally described the heartrending scene, characterized by the extraordinary love they expressed for this *mitzvah*. They knew this was their last chance, and they wanted it to achieve the apex of spiritual devotion.

“Now, my dear young students, think about it. Just because Hashem lovingly grants us extra years to carry out His *mitzvos*, does it mean that it does not behoove us to perform those *mitzvos* properly with the requisite *kavanah*?”

Veritably, adds *Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita*, this question applies to all who arrive late for *davening*, quickly don their *tefillin*, *daven* as if it were something they were compelled to do, and leave as soon as they can fly through the words. We fail to remember that the extra time we are granted is a gift. There are those who would have given anything for another chance to *daven* as a Jew who knows before Whom he stands. Sadly, they were not granted this opportunity. We, however, have the good fortune to *daven* as a Jew should. Are we taking advantage of this gift?

*Reb Menachem Beinisch Frankel, zl* (*niftar* 1986, Petach Tikva), was dedicated to the *mitzvah* of *tefillin* to the point of self-sacrifice, as portrayed in the following story. His willingness to prioritize the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*, even in the most challenging situations, demonstrated his extraordinary commitment to Hashem. Every single day, *Reb Menachem* donned his *tefillin*, even if but for a moment. This tradition continued, even when his community was turned into a ghetto. The Nazis at Buchenwald were unable to sway many of their prisoners to cease *mitzvah* observance. If any of

these proud Jews was caught, *achas daso l'hamis*, he was murdered on the spot. The Nazis were frustrated knowing that they were unable to destroy the Jew's resolve, his spiritual bond with Hashem. If they would catch a Jew in the midst of "rebellion" against the murderous regime, he would express his pent-up anger at the hapless victim.

*Reb* Menachem would often relate that he had had two days in his life in which he had been unable to maintain his commitment to the *mitzvah* of *Tefillin*. The first time was when a Nazi discovered him wearing his *Tefillin*. The Nazi was filled with uncontrollable rage. He jumped on *Reb* Menachem and pelted him with his fists. Here these murderers were doing everything they could to destroy the Jewish people, and this Jew had the temerity to continue observing his religious activities. Did he not know that soon there would not be a Jew walking the face of the earth? The rage was so maniacal that the Nazi pulled off the *Tefillin* (*shel rosh*), took hold of the straps and kept on striking *Reb* Menachem on the head with the (sharp) black box. The blood was gushing, and he finally passed out. All outward signs indicated that he had succumbed to the beating. Disgruntled, the Nazi threw the *Tefillin* onto *Reb* Menachem's body. For all intents and purposes, the *Tefillin* would lay there with the dead Jew. Hashem had another plan. *Reb* Menachem was very much alive – battered and beaten – but alive. Once he was able to move, he crawled with the smashed *Tefillin* to his bed.

The next day, he was unable to don *Tefillin*, because he had none. He learned that, in the next block, a Jew had a pair of *Tefillin*. It meant climbing over a barbed wire fence and hoping the guards did not see. Otherwise, he would be shot on sight. He did this every day until the Americans liberated the camp.

After liberation, he was so physically wasted that he lay down on a pile of straw and slept for thirty straight hours. That was the second time that he did not put on *Tefillin*.

How fortunate are we that we do not have to endure such inhumane travail to fulfill such a critical *mitzvah* effortlessly.

A last caveat: An elderly *Slonimer chassid*, who was gravely ill, blind and deaf, and in constant pain, came to the *Rebbe* and asked for a blessing that he should die. His life had no value; this suffering was too immense for him.

The *Rebbe* asked, "Did you put on *Tefillin* today?" "Of course," he answered. "If you live tomorrow, will you continue to put on *Tefillin*?" "Surely," he replied. "What Jew does not put on *Tefillin*?"

The *Rebbe* raised his voice a notch and declared, "It is worth living eighty years, experiencing the most intense pain one can imagine, just to put on *Tefillin* tomorrow morning!"