

The Tefillin Strap Mark: In Search of an Obscure Minhag

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For my son, Yair Aviezer, on his Bar Mitzvah

On the recent day that my son began wearing *tefillin*, one month prior to his thirteenth birthday, we reviewed the *halakhot*, as is customary. That day we also read “*Shnei Zugot*,” the charming Hebrew short story written in 1926 by Nobel Laureate S.Y. Agnon (in his volume *Elu ve-Elu*; in English as “[Two Pairs](#)”). The semi-autobiographical story depicts a young boy coming to the age of mitzvot and receiving his own pair of *tefillin*, including the memories of that day as well as the fate of that pair of *tefillin* consumed by fire years later. It is also one of the most explicit depictions of Agnon distancing himself from observance, followed by his mid-life road back. Agnon is hardly the only Jewish author to use *tefillin* as a symbol for being bound to, or untethered from, the tradition, but he does so with his distinct tone of nostalgia tinged with irony and artistry.

The adult narrator recalls his youthful enthusiasm for his new *tefillin*:

Mornings I would run to the synagogue. Sometimes I would arrive before the appointed hour for prayer and I would stare out the window at the sky to spot the sunlight when it would first appear so that I could then put on my *tefillin*. When prayer time arrived I would take out my *tefillin*, and a fragrance of prayer would emanate from them. As I lay the *tefillah* on my arm I could feel my heart pounding alongside them and I would then wind the warm straps around my arm until they pressed into my skin. And then I would circle my head with the other *tefillah*. When the cantor recites the prayer that thanks God for “girding Israel with strength and crowning Israel with splendor,” I stand astonished that I myself am “girding” and “crowning” like a man of Israel and I am overjoyed. [...] Sometimes my praying would be soulful and plaintive, sometimes melodious and joyful. In either event, I would continually touch my *tefillin*—something

like a shepherd making music out in the field who periodically remembers his charges and looks around to see if any of them have wandered off—until I completed my praying, removed my tefillin, and saw pressed in my arm's flesh the remaining evidence of the straps (“Two Pairs,” 78-79).

Sitting with my son that morning, I hoped these would be sentiments which would bind themselves to his heart and mind as he began what we expect will be a lifelong relationship with this precious mitzvah. I also pointed out a special connection with Agnon’s story. The author always claimed to have been born in his Galician hometown of Buczacz on Tisha B’Av 1888, which fell out on August 8 of that year (the numerically lyrical 8/8/88). This is not actually true, but it is part of the mythologizing of his own biography that he conducted throughout his literary career. In fact, the Ninth of Av did not occur on 8/8/88, and, in fact, we now know that he was born a year earlier, on 18 Av 1887. That means that young Shmuel Yosef Czaczkes (Agnon being a pen name) became a bar mitzvah on *Parashat Ekev* 1900—exactly 120 years before my own son, who will read from the Torah this coming Shabbat.

What aroused my son’s curiosity while reading the story was a particular line that I must confess had been lost on me, despite the very many times I had read and taught this story. The narrator continues: “I wouldn’t eat or drink until the indentations on my arm had completely disappeared.” With the fresh *tefillin* marks still on his own arm from his initial wrapping, and with thoughts of breakfast in mind, he asked if this was the actual halakhah. No, I replied, it is certainly not normative practice, nor is it a custom I had ever encountered or heard of (outside this story).

Perusal of the usual halakhic codes and guides to *minhagim* resulted in a dead end. Was this just an idea the author invented to add some color to his story? That would be possible, but highly unlikely. Although a writer of fiction, Agnon very carefully documented religious life as depicted in his works, particularly nineteenth-century Galicia and early-twentieth-century life in *Eretz Yisrael*. His use of halakhic sources and portrayal of the lived *minhagim* has itself been analyzed by some as a type of “literary-halakhic” literature. I could not believe that his recording of this unfamiliar practice was not authentic, although I failed to find a source.

Turning to the brain trust of friends and teachers, I became aware of two other mentions of this obscure practice. The hive mind pointed me to the memoirs of Dr. Avraham Yaakov Brawer, *Zikhronot Av u-Veno* (Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1966). Brawer (1884-1975) was born in Stryj, near Lvov. He was a rav and academic with specialties in history and geography, and had a distinguished career as an educator in Jerusalem after his arrival in 1911. (From middle age onward, he and Agnon maintained a warm friendship.) In a chapter of his memoir recalling his youth in *kheyder*, he writes:

I was careful to be “crowned” with tefillin for at least an hour a day. Some of the boys would not eat as long as the impression of the tefillin strap was still visible on their arms. It is possible this custom is recorded somewhere in some book; I have not found it in writing (241).

On the one hand, I was comforted to be in the company of such a noteworthy scholar—if Brawer knew of no source, then my own inability to find one might be forgiven. At the same time, here was a second anecdote, which, as everyone knows, is often itself considered data.

Rabbi J. David Bleich, despite his encyclopedic knowledge of, well, just about everything, similarly knew of no halakhic source, but drew my attention to a novel by Soma Morgenstern (1890-1976). Morgenstern, a novelist, critic, journalist, and close friend of the more famous writer Joseph Roth, was born in Budaniv, in the Ternopol district (today part of western Ukraine). In his novel, *The Son of the Lost Son* (JPS, 1946; trans. from German by J. Leftwich and P. Gross), we encounter the protagonist, Velvel, standing at morning prayer. Morgenstern compares the leather straps to a horse's reins. This is no sacrilege; Velvel, girded in his *tefillin*, is described as “God’s steed, harnessed for prayer.” Upon completing his prayers, he enters the farmhouse kitchen.

On the table stood jugs and little jugs, cups and saucers, coffee, milk, cream, butter, eggs, rye bread, rolls of rye flour with buttermilk and poppyseed, and rolls of white flour with whipped white of egg. There was honey cake and a big bottle of brandy. Velvel sat motionless for a while. He was still far away from the mundane world, no longer a worshipper, but not yet an eater. The awe of the prayers had given him an appetite, but he still held back. For though the law does not prohibit it, the really pious man shrinks from taking food as long as the marks of the phylactery straps are still visible on his left arm. Then he took a little brandy, sipping it slowly, poured coffee and milk and cream into a cup, added sugar, stirred it, and hardly noticed how his thoughts, unguarded by his will, moved aimlessly [...]. Velvel sighed a deep sigh of forced relief and turned back to the breakfast table. There were no longer any marks of the phylactery straps on his left arm. He could now take his breakfast. He helped himself, with the calm, slow, heavy movements of a peasant, yet generously, like a rich landowner (11).

So here we have three records of our mysterious *minhag*. Morgenstern makes clear what we may have understood intuitively from Agnon and Brawer: this is not a strict law but a mark of piety. Two of the records, Agnon and Brawer, depict the practice among young boys around the age of bar mitzvah and initiation into the practice of wearing *tefillin*. Morgenstern’s protagonist is an adult, and the story is set in 1924, but Velvel would have become a bar mitzvah at around the same time as those in the other sources. Only Agnon mentions neither drinking nor eating; the others seem to limit the practice only to food, and, in fact, Velvel takes a little brandy and coffee while he awaits the fading of the strap marks which will enable him to eat.



L to R: Morgenstern, Brawer, Agnon

What is significant is that all three were near contemporaries and hailed from the same general region of eastern Galicia, that former area of southern Poland, which since the 1772 partition of Poland had been the easternmost province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. All three were young men of Hasidic stock raised in religious homes. Was this a little-practiced, regional *minhag* even then, preserved not in halakhic codes but in works of memoir and autobiographical fiction? It is very likely. If so, these three texts are testament to how the world of *minhag* is often preserved more in actual lived religious experience, fleeting as that may be for researchers and historians, than in the codices of the Beit Midrash.

In all cases, this has been a felicitous scavenger hunt for sources, brought about by my son's entering the yoke of mitzvot and the straps of *tefillin*. His mother and I pray that Agnon's description of his own bar mitzvah, now 120 years later, will be true for our boy as well: "Tefillin ... have been dear to me every single day from the very first time that I wore them" (80).