The Weekly Shiur of Maran HaRishon LeTzion HaGaon Rabbi David Yosef shlit"a - Motzaei Shabbat Parashat Shoftim 5786 Shiur #364

English

Parashat Ki Tetzei

Checking Tefillin and Mezuzot During Elul

Shiur Topics: How often one must check *tefillin* and *mezuzot* | Reciting a *berachah* upon affixing a *mezuzah* after checking it | Pitfalls regarding *tefillin* | Writing *STa"M lishmah* | Writing the Name of Hashem with sanctity | Writing in sequence (*kesidran*) | The reliability of the *sofer* | *Chok tochot* and *chok yerechot* | Importing *mezuzot* from China | Black straps | At what age a boy should begin laying *tefillin* | Weighing spirituality against materiality | "Five minutes" of Maran zt"l | Paying attention to the soul

Remarks from the Introductory Speaker, HaGaon Rabbi Eliyahu Sa'adon shlit"a, Rosh Kollel at Bet HaMidrash Yechaveh Daat:

"With the permission of Maran shlit"a: This past Shabbat we read regarding the mitzvah of judges and officers, where it is written, 'For bribery blinds the eyes of the wise' (*Devarim* 16:19). On the other hand, in *Parashat Mishpatim* we find almost the identical verse: 'For bribery blinds the clear-sighted' (*Shemot* 23:8). In one verse it says 'the eyes of the wise,' while in the other it says 'the clear-sighted.' The Vilna Gaon explains that a *Dayan* must possess two qualities: First, he must be wise in the wisdom of the Torah—to know the *halachot* and the law thoroughly. Beyond that, he must also be clear-sighted (*pike'ach*) regarding worldly matters—understanding how the world works and the nuances of human nature and culture. If a judge knows the entire Torah but lacks an understanding of worldly matters, that is a deficiency, and he will be unable to render true judgment. Based on this, the Vilna Gaon explains the Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 7a), which says, 'If a matter is as clear to you as the morning, state it; if not, do not state it.' Yet on the other hand, it is written, 'Say to wisdom, "You are my sister"' (*Mishlei* 7:4)—'If a matter is as clear to you as your sister being forbidden to you, state it; if not, do not state it.' Should a matter be as clear as a forbidden sister, or as clear as the morning? The Vilna Gaon explains that 'morning' refers to worldly matters (*millei d'alma*), while 'a forbidden sister' refers to halachic precision and Torah wisdom. True wisdom lies in combining the two—knowing the Torah thoroughly while simultaneously understanding worldly affairs.

Maran HaRishon LeTzion shlit"a leads the nation through both of these dimensions: through the wisdom of Torah and through keen discernment of worldly affairs. He understands people and knows the heart of every individual. Through this, he successfully guides us, with Hashem's help, until the coming of *Mashiach Tzidkenu* speedily in our days, Amen."

Shiur of Maran HaRishon LeTzion shlit"a:

Yashar koach to HaGaon Rabbi Eliyahu Sa'adon shlit"a, Rosh Kollel at our Bet HaMidrash Yechaveh Daat. May it be Hashem's will that he continues to spread his wellsprings outward and ascend ever higher to magnify Torah and glorify it, *b'ezrat Hashem*. We extend our warm *mazal tov* wishes to him, as he is marrying off his son this week; may he merit to see righteous and blessed generations, *amen ken yehi ratzon*.

I also welcome our dear friend Rabbi Tzvi Amar, head of Radio *Kol Barama*, who by Hashem's grace does great and wonderful things to magnify Torah and glorify it. This radio station broadcasts much Torah and fear of Heaven and operates fully according to *halachah*. A few weeks ago, we blessed you here on the radio upon your privilege of making *aliyah* to *Eretz Yisrael*; fortunate are you and fortunate is your portion. I also welcome the CEO of Radio *Kol Barama*, Rabbi Ariel Deri, who likewise accomplishes great things to magnify Torah and glorify it.

Checking Tefillin and Mezuzot

It is a custom among pious and conscientious individuals to check their *tefillin* and *mezuzot* during the month of *Elul*. This is merely a custom, because strictly speaking, according to the letter of the law, *tefillin* do not require checking, whereas *mezuzot* must be checked once every three and a half years—twice every seven years. This subject is a dispute among the *Tannaim*, cited by *Tosafot* (*Menachot* 42b, s.v. *Tefillin*). The difference between *tefillin* and *mezuzot* is that a person lays *tefillin* daily; they are constantly handled and exposed to fresh air, so they do not easily deteriorate. A *mezuzah*, on the other hand, is completely enclosed in one fixed spot, making it far more susceptible to damage over time.

Once at my home, the *mezuzah* was completely sealed, but when we took it out to check it, I noticed that water had penetrated inside when the doors were washed. Despite being sealed, water had seeped in, invalidating the *mezuzah*, and we had to replace it.

A Basic Visual Inspection

When rechecking a *mezuzah*, a basic visual inspection is practically sufficient, provided one knows the *sofer* (scribe) who wrote it and that it was properly checked before being affixed to the door. Nowadays, computer proofreading is used, which is extremely important, but the most crucial factor remains knowing the identity and reliability of the *sofer*, as I will explain shortly. Therefore, when removing a *mezuzah* for routine checking, one does not need to recheck for missing or extra letters (*chaserot v'yeterot*), as it has already undergone computer proofreading. A simple visual inspection to ensure that the parchment and lettering remain intact and undamaged is sufficient.

Reciting a Berachah Upon Affixing a Mezuzah After Checking It

After checking a *mezuzah* and finding it kosher, when returning it to its place, one must recite the *berachah* "*likvoa mezuzah*" anew. This is because at the moment it was removed, one did not know for certain whether it would be returned, since if found invalid, it would have to be replaced. Since its removal was based on uncertainty, a new *berachah* is required upon affixing it. This means that one cannot be considered as having had explicit intention to return that specific *mezuzah*. Conversely, if a person removed a *mezuzah* merely to repair the door, and then returned it after repairing the door, he does not recite a new *berachah*, because from the outset he removed it with the explicit intention of returning it immediately.

Reciting a Berachah Upon Replacing a Mezuzah

However, when one removes a *mezuzah* to check it, and certainly if one replaces it with a different *mezuzah* (even if the previous one was completely kosher) a new *berachah* must be recited. This is similar to a person wearing a *tallit* who replaces it

with a different *tallit*; he must recite a new *berachah* over the second *tallit*. Similarly, if a person lays Rashi *tefillin* and then replaces them with another pair of Rashi *tefillin*, he must recite the *berachah* again. Regarding *tefillin*, however, if he removed them with the intention of putting them back on within less than half an hour, he does not recite a new *berachah*. On the other hand, if he removed them specifically to enter a restroom, since it is strictly forbidden to enter a restroom wearing *tefillin*, then even if he puts them back on within a few minutes, he must recite the *berachah* over the *tefillin* again. By contrast, regarding *tzitzit*, the law is different, because strictly speaking according to the letter of the law, it is permitted to enter a restroom while wearing *tzitzit*, though doing so with a *tallit gadol* is avoided out of respect for the *mitzvah*. For instance, we enter restrooms wearing a *tallit katan*; no one removes his *tallit katan* before entering a restroom. With a *tallit gadol*, it is primarily a matter of honoring the *mitzvah*, whereas with *tefillin*, entering a restroom wearing them is a strict prohibition.

Tefillin Do Not Require Routine Checking

As mentioned, a *mezuzah* must be checked twice every seven years because it is enclosed in a doorpost and lacks airflow. Conversely, if one purchased beautiful, high-quality *tefillin* that were properly checked when the *parshiyot* were placed inside the compartments (*batim*), there is no halachic requirement to check the *tefillin* even after many years, as they are regularly handled and exposed to air. However, several *Acharonim* argue that sweat can seep into them, warranting periodic checking. In reality, we see today that this is true; people have told me that upon checking their *tefillin*, they discovered insects inside! Some people sweat profusely, and over time the sweat penetrates the compartments, damaging the scrolls. Similarly, if a person accidentally left his *tefillin* in a car under scorching heat of 45°C (113°F), the scrolls often degrade. Therefore, nowadays, whenever there is even the slightest doubt that the *tefillin* may have been compromised, it is highly advisable to have them checked.

Nevertheless, strictly according to the letter of the law, Maran the *Shulchan Aruch* (*O.C.* 39:10) ruled that *tefillin* do not require checking, stating: "*Tefillin* that have an established status of kashrut never require checking; however, if one lays them only periodically, they require checking twice in a *shevua*"—where *shevua* refers to a seven-year cycle (i.e., twice in seven years). This applies only if he lays them sporadically, leaving them for a month or more without use. But if he lays them daily, the basic law requires no checking. Still, since we frequently see various problems arising in *tefillin*, if there is any slight doubt, it is proper to check them.

Checking Small Tefillin

Another issue sometimes occurs with small *tefillin*. Because the parchment of the passages can be somewhat thick, it must be pushed forcefully into the small compartments, particularly in the *tefillin shel rosh* (head *tefillin*), which contain four separate compartments. As a result, while inserting the scrolls, a single letter may crack or break. A single broken letter is enough to render the *tefillin* completely invalid. Therefore, it is very worthwhile to check *tefillin*.

My father and teacher, Maran zt"l, related to me that when he was a young man, he studied the laws of *tefillin* in depth. These are complex, extensive laws. To be a qualified scribe of *STa"M* (*Sefer Torah*, *Tefillin*, *Mezuzah*), it is not enough to merely recognize letter forms. Unfortunately, today there are individuals who look at the shapes of letters, practice 'drawing' them on paper for a week or two, and then consider themselves a *sofer STa"M*. But it is not so at all! There are numerous *halachot*, and if the *sofer* is not thoroughly versed in them, he will produce invalid *tefillin*, *mezuzot*, and Torah scrolls. In fact, *tefillin* and *mezuzot* are even more complex, and there is a far greater likelihood of producing invalid items if the scribe has not learned all the laws properly. Therefore, as I emphasized at the outset, one must know from whom he purchases *tefillin*, ensuring that the scribe is certified, well-learned, and knowledgeable in every halachic detail.

Writing STa"M Lishmah

I will share several examples of critical details in the laws of *tefillin* and *mezuzot* that everyone should be aware of, as negligence in these areas can cause many stumbling blocks. Above all, a *sofer* must be God-fearing (*yirei Shamayim*), because there are requirements that no one in the world can verify except the scribe himself. For example, before he begins writing *tefillin*, he must explicitly state: "I am writing for the sake of the sanctity of *tefillin*" (*Hareini kotev leshem kedushat tefillin*). If he fails to state these words, the *tefillin* are invalid, as writing must be done *lishmah* (with explicit holy intent). The same rule applies when writing a *mezuzah* or a Torah scroll. The only difference is that when writing a Torah scroll, stating this intent at the very beginning of the project suffices for the entire scroll. In contrast, when writing *tefillin* or *mezuzot*, he must explicitly state this intent before beginning each individual scroll.

Sanctifying the Divine Name in Writing STa"M

Similarly, whenever the scribe reaches the Divine Name (Hashem's Name), he must state: "I am writing for the sake of the sanctity of Hashem's Name" (*Hareini kotev leshem kedushat Shem Hashem*). If he fails to say this, the text is invalid. For instance, if he was writing while listening to the radio or even a Torah lecture and wrote Hashem's Name without sanctifying it, the text is completely invalid. There is a dispute among the *Rishonim* whether it helps to declare at the outset of writing that all Divine Names written throughout the project should be sanctified for the Holy Name. However, this is not straightforward, and even if he made such a declaration, it requires that he remained fully attentive when writing each Name, rather than writing mindlessly. I would not recommend anyone to lay *tefillin* whose validity is subject to halachic dispute... Conversely, there are names that must *not* be sanctified. For example, in the verse "And you turn aside and serve other gods (*elohim acherim*)" (*Devarim* 11:16), the word *elohim* refers to idolatry and must not be sanctified. But every Holy Divine Name must be sanctified, as explained. When you purchase from a scribe and he assures you that he sanctified every single Divine Name and wrote the text *lishmah*, there is no physical way to verify his claim, as it is not stamped on the parchment. This illustrates why purchasing from a truly God-fearing *sofer* is so essential—so that we can rely on his integrity that he wrote everything *lishmah* properly.

Writing in Sequence (Kesidran)

Similarly, there are writing errors that a scribe might make which cannot be detected after the fact, yet render the *tefillin* or *mezuzah* completely invalid.

There is a fundamental law in *tefillin* and *mezuzot* derived from the word "And they shall be" (*ve'hayu*)—meaning "they must remain in their exact sequence" (*be'havayatan yehu*). That is, the text must be written in exact sequential order (*kesidran*), letter after letter. If a scribe writing a *mezuzah* accidentally omitted a letter, it does not help to simply insert the missing letter later. By the time he writes the missing letter, all subsequent letters have already been written, violating the requirement of sequential order. The only way to fix it would be to erase every single letter from that point onward and rewrite them all in order—a nearly impossible task. This requirement of *kesidran* is a unique law applying to *tefillin* and *mezuzot*, but not to a Torah scroll. In a Torah scroll, one may erase and insert a missing letter out of order, provided it does not involve erasing Hashem's Name, which is strictly forbidden to erase.

A Divine Name Written Without Sanctity

Once, a scribe invented a tool that many scribes use today: a light table (tracing table). According to *halachah*, when a scribe writes a Torah scroll, he must copy directly from a written text (*mitoch haketav*). He must place a *Chumash* beside him, read aloud *Bereshit bara E-lohim*, and then write it. It must be copied directly from a written text. To save time from constantly looking back and forth to check for missing or extra letters, they invented a table where the template text is illuminated from below, allowing the scribe to place the parchment over it and copy the exact letter outlines. However, the scribe who invented this method marked on his template whether each Divine Name was holy (*kodesh*) or secular (*chol*), so that scribes using the table would know whether to sanctify the Name. Many scribes purchased and used this light table. Unexpectedly, it was discovered that in *Parashat Ha'azinu*, the inventor had made two errors, marking certain Holy Divine Names as secular! People had already purchased Torah scrolls written using this template. When this was discovered, several individuals who had bought these scrolls approached me asking how to fix them.

Replacing the entire parchment sheet (*yeri'ah*) is a straightforward option. However, erasing the Name presents a problem, as this is Hashem's Name written without sanctity, and there is a dispute whether erasing Hashem's Name written without sacred intent is forbidden. Here it was the opposite—it was written explicitly as a secular word. Initially (*lechatchilah*), we certainly do not permit erasing it, as many *poskim* disagree with the *Shach* (*Y.D.* 276:12) who permits it. The solution is to excavate (*likdor*) the parchment—carefully peeling away the top layer of parchment from underneath. Since parchment has thickness, one can peel away the top layer bearing the ink and then rewrite Hashem's Name with proper sanctity. A few specialized scribes developed expertise in this delicate procedure. It is extremely difficult work, as there is a risk of accidentally erasing the Name during the process. There was a scribe here in Yerushalayim, in the Har Nof neighborhood, whom we would send such parchments to. He was an expert at excavating the parchment with extreme care and writing Hashem's Name properly in its place; naturally, we paid him accordingly...

Chok Tochot

There is a fundamental law from which numerous details emerge: *chok tochot*. If a letter in *tefillin* was formed via *chok tochot*, it is invalid; the letter must be formed through writing (*chok yerechot*). Let us explain. Suppose a scribe reaches a place where he must write the letter *Alef*, but a drop of ink accidentally fell on the parchment exactly where the *Alef* belongs. What did the scribe do? He waited for the ink to dry and then scraped away the excess ink around the shape until an *Alef* remained. In this manner, the letter was formed by default through scraping away surrounding ink, rather than actually writing the letter with a quill. This is called *chok tochot* (engraving the interior rather than writing the strokes), and it is completely invalid. While a falling drop of ink is rare, consider how this becomes a very common question. A scribe must write the letter *Hei*, which consists of a *Dalet* and a small leg underneath. Suppose he accidentally made the small leg touch the top roof of the letter, turning it into a *Chet*.

The Form of the Letter Chet

We do not write the letter *Chet* as a single arch; rather, we write two separate letters *Zayin* side by side and connect them at the top with a small bridge (*chatoteret*). Some Kabbalists write the *Chet* as a *Vav* and a *Zayin* joined by a bridge at the top, a practice followed by students of the Arizal. However, there is no explicit statement regarding this in the writings of the Arizal, and Kabbalists debate the matter. My father, Maran zt"l, once showed me a manuscript of the *Kaf HaChayim* that he possessed at home—a letter sent by the *Kaf HaChayim* to the *Ben Ish Chai* discussing whether the letter *Chet* should be written as a *Vav-Zayin* or as two *Zayins*. The *Kaf HaChayim* explained that in his view, there is insufficient basis to write *Vav-Zayin*, and it must be written as two *Zayins*. He relied on *Masechet Shabbat* (104b) regarding prohibited work on Shabbat: "If one intended to write a *Chet* and instead wrote two *Zayins*," illustrating that the letter *Chet* is composed of two *Zayins*. According to *Rashi* (s.v. *nitkaven*), connecting two *Zayins* forms the letter *Chet*. Although most *Rishonim* disagree with *Rashi*'s exact description, the *Shulchan Aruch* (*O.C.* 32:25) rules that we form two separate *Zayins* connected by a bridge at the top. Some Kabbalists maintained the practice of writing *Vav-Zayin*, but the *Kaf HaChayim* wrote to the *Ben Ish Chai* that he considered this improper. At the time, my father did not possess the *Ben Ish Chai*'s response to the *Kaf HaChayim*. However, twenty or thirty years ago, the 'Machon Ha-Ketav' institute published an edition of *HaMe'assef* containing the *Ben Ish Chai*'s newly discovered response, wherein the *Ben Ish Chai* concurred with the *Kaf HaChayim* that the letter *Chet* should indeed be written as two *Zayins* connected by a bridge at the top.

Chok Tochot and Mukaf Gevil

Returning to our subject: If a scribe needed to write a *Hei*, but the leg accidentally touched the top roof, making it resemble a *Chet* according to *Rashi*, if he scrapes away the tiny bit of ink connecting the leg to the roof, this constitutes *chok tochot*! The letter *Hei* was formed passively by default—it was a *Chet*, and through scraping away ink, it became a *Hei*. This is identical to the example mentioned earlier where ink fell and he scraped around it to form a letter. Now, if a scribe made an error in a letter and this error was discovered after he finished writing the scroll: In certain specific cases where the essential letter shape was not transformed, scraping away excess ink is permitted according to detailed legal rules. If scraping is halachically viable, that is fine. But if scraping would constitute *chok tochot*, erasing the letter and rewriting it in *tefillin* or *mezuzot* is impossible, because writing from that point onward would no longer be in sequential order (*kesidran*). The moment he erases the letter, the text becomes incomplete, and when he rewrites it, the subsequent letters have already been written, violating *kesidran*. Consequently, these *tefillin* or *mezuzot* have no halachic remedy whatsoever and must be placed in *genizah*. There is nothing to be done; despite his hard work, the scroll is invalid.

Improper corrections involving *chok tochot* are very common among scribes who have not studied the laws thoroughly. The critical principles in writing *STa"M* are: sequential order (*kesidran*), prohibition of default letter creation (*chok tochot*), and surrounded by blank parchment (*mukaf gevil*)—each letter must be completely surrounded by blank parchment. If a scribe was negligent in these principles and made invalid corrections afterward, the scroll is invalid, and often no inspector can ever detect that he made an illegal fix. Therefore, when purchasing *tefillin* or *mezuzot*, it is vital to know the scribe's credibility and not rely blindly.

Importing Mezuzot from China

A few weeks ago, Rabbi Shlomo Muallem from Bnei Brak, author of *Yeri'ot Shlomo* and a distinguished scholar deeply versed in these topics, visited me. He showed me that *mezuzot* are now being imported from China! Usually, if a *mezuzah* is printed by computer or machine, I can detect it immediately because the spacing between letters is entirely uniform—a computer is mathematically precise, and every letter *Shin* looks identical. Human scribes, even the best in the world, have slight variations between letters. He showed me these imported *mezuzot* from China and asked me to identify why they were invalid. I examined them, checked the *Shins*, and noticed that every *Shin* had a slightly different shape, all beautifully crafted. Even the letter spacing within words was varied; I do not know how they created such a sophisticated forgery! Furthermore, real ink on parchment is raised, and on these forged *mezuzot*, the ink was raised above the parchment, making them look like the most gorgeous *mezuzot* imaginable! Yet these *mezuzot* are completely invalid—mass-produced printings imported from China! Unfortunately, I do not know who initiated this operation, but he will give an accounting before Heaven. We must be vigilant, as such counterfeits exist in the market today. Therefore, when buying, one should purchase directly from the scribe and ask him if he wrote it himself according to *halachah*. Otherwise, modern counterfeits are so convincing that I tell you, based on my experience and extensive study of these matters, no human being can visually distinguish between these forgeries and a kosher *mezuzah*!

Six Hundred Invalid Pairs of Tefillin

As mentioned, my father, Maran zt"l, related a fascinating account to me. When he was a young man, he studied these laws thoroughly and mastered the *halachot* of Torah scrolls, *tefillin*, and *mezuzot*. He would go to synagogues, approach people, and ask to inspect their *tefillin*. In those days, *tefillin* were commonly made from thin animal hide (*behemah dakah*), resembling cardboard, yet bearing a lead seal of kashrut certification from the "Ministry of Religious Affairs"—no less! Unfortunately, that was the reality back then. My father would open the *tefillin* compartments and frequently discover distorted, misshapen lettering—unbelievable! He began visiting various synagogues daily, offering to inspect *tefillin*. He told me that in a single year, he checked and found 600 invalid pairs of *tefillin*! He went from one synagogue to another, saving 600 people from laying invalid *tefillin*.

I believe the situation has improved today, but issues still arise. Recently, a person came to me who had purchased "extra-fine" *tefillin*. The script appeared neat and beautiful, but he had never run a computer proofreading check, and a letter was missing! That poor man had been laying invalid *tefillin* for years—he was a *karkafta de-lo manach tefillin* (a head that has never laid valid *tefillin*). So many potential pitfalls exist in these matters.

Black Straps

Furthermore, regarding *tefillin* laid daily, over time the leather straps (*retzu'ot*) wear down. Sometimes the minimum required width of the strap decreases below the halachic threshold, rendering them invalid. Similarly, the outer surface of the strap must be black—the inner side does not strictly need to be black, but the outer side must be black—and sometimes the black paint fades or peels, invalidating the strap. One must know that black straps are a *Halachah LeMoshe MiSinai* (a tradition taught to Moshe Rabbenu at Har Sinai). This requirement is even more fundamental than painting the compartments (*batim*) black. Strictly speaking, the *batim* could technically be made in another color; if someone decided to make his *batim* yellow, they would not be invalid. Custom dictates painting the *batim* black, but it is not strictly invalid if otherwise. In contrast, black straps are an absolute *Halachah LeMoshe MiSinai*. Similarly, the perfect square shape (*ribu'a*) of the *tefillin* compartments and base is a *Halachah LeMoshe MiSinai*. Over time, the corners may get bumped or damaged, ruining the exact square. Therefore, it is very important to occasionally take *tefillin* to a specialist to maintain and reshape them. Thus, although strictly according to the letter of the law, if you purchased *tefillin* and *mezuzot* with an established status of kashrut from a God-fearing scribe, routine checking is unnecessary, nevertheless, because of the frequent pitfalls we discover, the custom to inspect *tefillin* and *mezuzot* during *Elul* is very worthwhile.

At What Age to Begin Laying Tefillin

I once asked my father, Maran zt"l, from whom he purchased my *tefillin*. He told me there was a scribe in Yerushalayim named Rabbi Tawil, a great Kabbalist and a righteous saint, and people had to wait years for him to make a pair of *tefillin*; there was a long waiting list. When I was ten years old, my father had already ordered *tefillin* for me from him. By the time I turned twelve, the *tefillin* were ready, and I began laying them.

This is also very important: teaching children to lay *tefillin*. Some begin only on the exact day of the bar mitzvah, and others begin a month prior. But if a boy is mature and responsible, knowing how to preserve the sanctity of *tefillin*, he may begin laying *tefillin* as early as age twelve—why not?! My father had me and all my brothers begin laying *tefillin* at age twelve.

The Importance of the Mitzvah

Consider how meticulously one must verify the validity of *tefillin* and *mezuzot*. For example, I once went with my wife to purchase a refrigerator. We arrived at a large appliance store, and the salesman began explaining the various models. I did not understand what he was talking about—what was the difference?! They all looked identical and beautiful. Why did one cost 5,000 NIS while another cost 10,000 NIS?! He said to me, "Don't you notice the brand name? This is a renowned, top-quality brand!" I thought to myself: A *sofer STa"M* is also a brand! One scribe is renowned and superb, while another is unestablished! I watched shoppers in the store opening and closing refrigerator doors repeatedly. Why was it so important?! One shopper told me, "You don't buy a refrigerator every day; perhaps once every ten years..." I reflected: Here are *tefillin*, which a person sometimes purchases for a lifetime and lays every single day—should we not exercise care with them?!

About thirty years ago, a wealthy gentleman moved here to the Har Nof neighborhood, purchasing a large, beautiful home. On his first day, he came to the synagogue and said to me, "I am a new resident. God willing, I plan to pray and attend Torah classes here; I heard you have classes throughout the day. But please, today I am hosting a *chanukat habayit* (housewarming celebration) and would love for you to attend."

I went to his home. Upon entering, he said, "Rabbi, before sitting down, let me give you a tour." We toured the house—one practically needed GPS to navigate it! It was a very large, stunning home. When I sat down, I asked him, "Tell me, what about the *mezuzot* for your home?"

He smiled and said, "Rabbi, you must not know me. Do you think I would buy just any ordinary *mezuzot*? I bought all the *mezuzot* for my house from Scribe So-and-So!" I remarked, "He is an outstanding scribe, excellent!" He then said, "Rabbi, to tell you the truth, I left his shop feeling cheated. That man is a thief! Why a thief? Poor guy, what did he do to you?"

He explained, "I checked the math. Parchment costs one dollar; ink costs maybe ten cents. He writes a few lines on it and demands $100 per *mezuzah*! How does that add up to $100?! Isn't that theft?" I deliberately remained silent, but after a few minutes I said to him, "Listen, I noticed your kitchen cabinets are stunning; I really admire them. I would love to install similar kitchen cabinets in my own home. Could you tell me how much they cost?" He replied, "Sure, I'll calculate it for you." He took a pen and paper and calculated the linear meters, totaling $40,000. I exclaimed, "$40,000?! You are so naive! You paid $40,000 for wood from the jungle?!" He replied, "Rabbi, you don't understand these things! This is specialty timber imported from Italy, designed by a specialized architect who planned all the cabinetry in my house. Look at the carvings on the doors, the handles, the exquisite craftsmanship! Rabbi, I tell you, it is worth every cent!" I said to him, "Shameful! Worth every cent?! A few carpenters sat in a workshop, took wood from the jungle, crafted an armoire—it originated in the jungle—

and you say it is worth every cent?! On the other hand, a scholar and scribe who spent years studying the *halachah* painstakingly writes the *mezuzah* line by letter. By the way, that pious scribe immerses in a *mikveh* every morning before writing! Scribes often suffer from eye strain and back pain from this taxing work. He sits and writes, and after finishing, sends it for proofreading. If a tiny irreparable mistake is found, he must place it in *genizah*, losing all his labor for nothing—and in your eyes, he is a thief?! But carpenters taking wood from the jungle and making cabinets is worth every cent?!" I said to him, "Do you know why you talk like this? Because you do not appreciate the value of the *mitzvah* enough to spend money on it. Twenty *mezuzot* for the house cost $2,000, and you view that as a huge expense because you do not value the *mitzvah*. You value cabinets, so that seems important, but the *mezuzot* do not!"

Spiritually Compromised

Let us sit and reflect: We are preparing for the Days of Awe (*Yamim Noraim*); tonight we begin reciting *Selichot*. Each of us should sit and contemplate. We feel awe; *Rosh Hashanah* is approaching, when *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* judges every person for life or death. Once *Rosh Hashanah* passes, we intensify our preparations for *Yom Kippur*. At the conclusion of *Yom Kippur*, we return home cheerful and glad of heart, eating, drinking, and rejoicing. But afterward, how do we behave?! Exactly as we did before *Elul*...

In other words, we effectively say to *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*: "Master of the Universe, we were just going through the motions... We merely pretended to behave properly so we would receive a favorable decree for a good life; now that we received it, goodbye and all the best."

Whom are we fooling?! We are only fooling ourselves! *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* searches hearts and minds; He knows when it is a facade, so what is it worth?! We must truly begin striving today to become transformed individuals, continually improving leading up to *Rosh Hashanah*. It is not simple or easy. The most vital point to internalize is the lesson of the kitchen cabinets versus the *mezuzot*—how we prioritize spirituality (*ruchniyut*) versus materiality (*gashmiyut*). This is a crucial perspective. We see this contrast in everything we do. Consider how attentive we are to obtaining top-grade, high-quality meat. If someone served us spoiled meat, we would be outraged and demand a refund! Yet when there is a concern that something is 'spoiled' spiritually—where the kashrut certification is questionable—why do we not inspect it with equal scrutiny?!

The Internal Struggle

Consider also how we view our eating and sleeping compared to Torah study. Let me give a small example.

A rabbi delivers a class from 8:00 to 9:00, scheduled to end at 9:00. He speaks beautifully, people attend and listen, fulfilling the *mitzvah* of studying Torah. At 8:45, people glance at their watches and think, "Great, fifteen more minutes and he finishes." But 9:00 arrives, and the rabbi has not finished... he did not notice the clock and kept speaking. People sit shifting uncomfortably, checking their watches: "Why is he continuing? He was supposed to finish at 9:00, and now it is 9:02, 9:05, and he is still speaking!" They feel aggrieved: "Why is he speaking so long?! We are in a hurry! We want to recite *Kaddish* and leave..." Strictly speaking, they are correct; he should have finished at 9:00, not 9:05! Yet that same person who establishes daily times for Torah study finds an extra five minutes of class difficult. He is careful every morning to wake up and pray with a *minyan* on time without being late, arriving at the synagogue at 7:00 AM sharp. To arrive at 7:00 AM, he must wake up at 6:30 AM. So he sets an alarm, and when it rings, he gets up. However, "morning sleep"—as stated in *Pirkei Avot* (3:10)—is very enticing; sleep in the morning is sweet. In summer, the morning air is pleasant; in winter, one snuggles under the blanket. Just minutes before he needs to wake up, the *yetzer hara* (evil inclination) brings him a vivid dream... traveling the world from Hodu to Cush... Suddenly, the alarm rings, disrupting his dream. He opens his eyes and thinks, "I am tired; it is hard to get up, but I must! I am careful to pray on time every day!" An internal struggle ensues: to get up or not? What do people usually do? They compromise: "I'll sleep just five more minutes; nothing will happen." He resets the alarm, rolls over, "and he slept and dreamed a second time" (*Bereshit* 41:5)—like Pharaoh... Five minutes later, the alarm rings again, and he realizes that if he does not get up now, he will be late for the synagogue. He overcomes his inclination like a lion, performs *netilat yadayim* (hand washing), and goes to the synagogue, arriving at 7:00 AM sharp. Is there any inherent problem with sleeping five extra minutes? Of course not! What difference does it make how long he slept, provided he ultimately arrived at the synagogue on time?! Yet *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* says to him: "Tell Me, when the rabbi spoke for an extra five minutes, you did not say, 'Oh, Rabbi, please speak a little longer!' You could not tolerate those five minutes! But when you slept in bed, it felt so wonderful to sleep five extra minutes?!"

"Five Minutes" of Maran zt"l

For a long period, I used to study late at night with my father, Maran zt"l. My father studied late into the night, never going to sleep before 2:00 AM, even in his old age, until the final months of his life. Whenever he returned home after delivering lectures, my mother a"h would have dinner ready waiting on the table; he would eat quickly and go to study. One night, he arrived home and dinner was not on the table yet, so he said to me, "The food isn't ready; let us sit and study." We sat down and began studying. Two minutes later, my mother a"h heard us studying, came quickly, and said, "Forgive me, the food is hot and ready, I just hadn't plated it for you yet; please come eat." My father replied, "That is fine, but I cannot now; we have already begun studying and it is difficult for me to stop." My mother persisted, "Please, I troubled myself to cook for you; please come eat." My father then said to her, "You know what? I will come eat in five minutes." Consider what "five minutes" meant to Rabbi Ovadia! My mother asked, "Do you promise to come eat in five minutes?" He replied, "Yes, certainly!" So my mother went to sleep. At 5:00 AM, she woke up and saw the dinner still untouched on the table... She approached my father and said, "This is not right; you promised you would eat, and you left the food to get cold! Dawn (*alot hashachar*) has arrived, and it is now forbidden to eat!" My father replied in surprise, "I don't understand; I told you I would come eat in five minutes!" She said, "Five minutes, fine—but not five hours!" When he was absorbed in study, he forgot the entire world!

Once, he had a very complex halachic responsum to write and invested all his energy into it. At the time, I was a young student studying in yeshiva, returning home at 11:00 PM to study with him. Over Shabbat, he had explained his plan for writing the responsum. On *Motzaei Shabbat*, after returning from his lecture, he began writing the responsum, and I sat studying with him until 3:00 AM. At 3:00 AM, I said, "Father, I have no energy left; I am exhausted and must go to yeshiva tomorrow morning!" He said, "Fine, go sleep." My father had a synagogue in our home, and I needed to help complete the *minyan*. At 7:00 AM, my father woke me: "Get up for prayer!" So I got up; what choice did I have?! On Sunday night, I returned from yeshiva and saw my father still writing the responsum. I sat down to study with him: "Open this book for me," "Bring me that volume..." checking sources and arguments. We sat studying until 4:00 AM. I said, "Father, my eyes are closing; I am exhausted!" He said, "Fine, go sleep." At 7:00 AM, he woke me for prayer again. I pleaded, "Father, please let me sleep; what do you want from me?!" My father said to me in genuine astonishment: "I don't understand—you slept three hours, while I haven't slept since Saturday morning!" I stood up shocked: "Father, since Saturday morning—48 hours without sleep?! Why haven't you slept?!" My father sighed and said simply, "What could I do? I forgot..." He said it in complete sincerity; that was genuinely the reason. He simply forgot to go to sleep because he was so immersed in his Torah study! He never forgot his Torah knowledge; even past age ninety, he remembered *halachot* he had learned at age seventeen, discussing insights he studied over seventy years prior. But eating and sleeping—he forgot!

Pay Attention to the Soul

Gentlemen, I do not expect that we can easily reach such an exalted level, but we should at least strive to prioritize spirituality (*ruchniyut*). In every matter, we must weigh the material against the spiritual: sleep versus Torah study, strict kashrut versus gourmet quality, and so on—evaluating ourselves in every area. There is a sacred *piyut* (liturgical poem), "*Odeh LaEl Levav Choker*," which contains the words "Pay attention to the soul" (*Shimu lev el haneshamah*)—this is the key focus we must hold now during the month of *Elul*: paying attention to our soul, our spirituality, our Torah, and our *mitzvot*.

May we merit, with Hashem's help, to be inscribed and sealed in the Book of Good Life, the Book of the Righteous and Pious, and the Book of Sustenance and Good Livelihood. I bless the entire congregation present here, as well as the thousands listening to the *shiur* on Radio *Kol Barama*; may you be blessed with all the blessings in the Torah and succeed in all your endeavors, *amen ken yehi ratzon*.