

For the second in TRADITION's series on the *mitzvot* (the first, on Havdalah, was presented in our Fall 1960 issue), Rabbi Haskel Lookstein treats the commandment of Tefillin and shows its ramifications in Jewish thought. The author, Assistant Rabbi in New York City's Cong. Kehilath Jeshurun, is a graduate of Columbia College. He received his *semikhah* from Yeshiva University, where he is now pursuing his graduate studies.

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"Our Rabbis taught: When the Day of Judgment comes, if a man has been scrupulous in his observance of the commandment of Tefillin, the scales of justice will be tipped in his favor. If, however, he has been negligent with respect to this commandment, the scales will be tipped against him. For there is no single positive command in the Torah which is more important than the directive to don the Tefillin. Indeed, the entire Torah was compared to it in value, as it is written: 'And they shall be a sign upon thy hand and a remembrance between thine eyes in order that the Torah of God might be upon thy lips' (Exodus 13:9). Therefore let every man be most careful in his observance of the *mitzvah* of Tefillin."

These thoughts, ascribed to Rabbi Asher,¹ a great medieval sage, accurately reflect the biblical, talmudic, and post-talmudic assessment of the *mitzvah* of Tefillin. The actual command is repeated in almost identical words in four different paragraphs in the Torah.² It is found in the same context with such fundamentals as: the exodus from Egypt, the acceptance of the Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, and the acceptance of the Yoke of the *mitzvot* (commandments).

In a mystical passage of the Talmud our sages describe how even God Himself dons Tefillin. Usually, however, this ritual is confined to mankind and is considered a deterrent to

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sin and a stimulus for ethical living. "He who has *Tefillin* on his head and arm, *Tzitzit* on his garment, and a *Mezuzah* on his doorpost, will most assuredly avoid sin."⁴

This central feature in the ritual life of the Jew is rendered in English as "Phylacteries." The meaning of this word remains rather obscure. The preferred derivation in dictionaries is from the Greek *Phylakterion*, meaning a safeguard, a charm, or an amulet. An alternate derivation is from the Latin *Phylacterium*, meaning a reminder.

While the Greek derivation, as explained by the lexicographers, cannot but cause even the most casual student of Judaism to shudder inwardly at the thought of magical amulets guarding man from evil spirits, the derivation itself, nevertheless, may not be altogether inappropriate. Tefillin have been viewed by traditional scholars as guards, though not, to be sure, against supernatural agents of darkness.

Thus, the author of the *Sefer ha-Chinukh* writes that God wanted to establish powerful "safeguards" for His people in order that they not stray from the Torah. One of these "safeguards" is the Tefillin on the arm and on the head to remind the Jew to refrain from sinful acts and to avoid being misled by his faulty vision and his evil inclination.⁵

In the same spirit, the prayer recited preparatory to the donning of the Tefillin concludes with the hope: "May the effect of the Tefillin be to extend to me long life with sacred influences and holy thoughts, free from sin and iniquity, even in thought. May our evil inclination neither mislead nor entice us; but may we be enabled to serve the Lord as it is in our hearts to do."

While the concept of Tefillin as a safeguard, when viewed from the above perspective, is a noble one, the predominant attitude of Jewish legal writings views the Tefillin not primarily as a guard, but rather as an *ote* — a sign, a symbol to remind us of a fundamental principle in Judaism. What that principle is might properly be discussed more fully after we have first examined the *mitzvah* itself and the laws which govern its observance.

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THE LAW

The laws concerning the Tefillin can best be divided, for our purposes, into four categories. These would cover the time for Tefillin, the donning of them, the blessings which attend the *mitzvah*, and the removal of the Tefillin. There is obviously no attempt here to treat the laws of Tefillin in an exhaustive manner. The reader will profit by consulting the regular *Shulchan Arukh*, or its abridged version, for a more complete discussion of the subject.

The time for observing the *mitzvah* of Tefillin is a subject of controversy in the Talmud. One opinion asserts that the *mitzvah* is restricted to the daytime. Another view affirms that one may fulfill the *mitzvah* even during the night. The main body of legal opinion has endorsed this latter view.⁶ The Jew is cautioned, nevertheless, against wearing the Tefillin at night lest he fall asleep before removing them.

Originally, the Tefillin were worn all day.⁷ Maimonides encourages this practice because of the healthy attitude which the Tefillin stimulate. "For when the Tefillin are worn on a man's head and on his arm, he is modest and God-fearing; he engages neither in frivolity nor in idle chatter, and he does not entertain evil thoughts. His heart is open only to the contemplation of truth and of righteousness."⁸

The complexity of life, however, made it impossible for a normal individual to maintain, throughout the day, the bodily cleanliness and the proper frame of mind required for one who is wearing Tefillin. Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, in his compendium of law upon which our *Shulchan Arukh* is based, rules, therefore, that the Tefillin should be worn only during prayer.⁹

The Tefillin are not worn on the Sabbath or on festivals because these are themselves symbols of that which the Tefillin represent and there is no need, therefore, to wear Tefillin on these days.¹⁰ The question of the donning of Tefillin on the Intermediate Days of the festivals (*chol ha-moed*) was a source of controversy among the medieval commentaries and is reflected in a diversity of practice to the present day.

The difference of opinion is attributable to two views con-

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cerning the symbol which makes it unnecessary to wear the Tefillin on *Yom Tov* itself.¹¹ One view maintains that the unique *mitzvah* of the particular festival — in the case of Passover, the *matzah*, and in the case of Sukkot, the *sukkah* — is a symbol which can replace that of Tefillin. According to this view, there is no difference between *Yom Tov* and the Intermediate Days inasmuch as the *matzah* and the *sukkah* are in force throughout the festival. Consequently, if Tefillin are not required on *Yom Tov* they are equally dispensable on *chol ha-moed*.¹²

The second view maintains that the symbol which replaces the Tefillin on *Yom Tov* is neither the *matzah* nor the *sukkah* but rather the general prohibition of labor (*melakhah*). This, however, applies only to *Yom Tov*. On the Intermediate Days, when the general prohibition is not in force, there is no symbol which replaces the Tefillin. The conclusion is, therefore, that we are required to don Tefillin on *chol ha-moed*.¹³

The donning of the Tefillin is performed after one wraps himself in the *tallit*. The priority of the *tallit* is due to its greater frequency — it is worn also on Sabbaths and festivals. This follows the standard rabbinic rule that when one is obliged to perform two *mitzvot*, the order of which is not prescribed by the Torah, he first performs the one which is required more frequently.¹⁴

The armpiece is placed on the biceps of the weaker hand in such a manner that, when the arm is lowered into its normal position, the armpiece will face inward, toward the heart. The “weaker hand” is determined not by the criterion of strength but rather by dexterity. The rule of thumb is that the hand with which one writes is considered the “stronger” hand. If one is completely ambidextrous, then he dons the Tefillin on the left hand, following the majority.¹⁵

One might speculate briefly on why the Tefillin, which are a sign that “with a strong hand God brought us forth out of Egypt” (Exodus 13:16), are donned on the weaker hand. One obvious answer is that our emphasis is not the hand on which the Tefillin are placed, but rather on the hand which does the placing — i.e. the stronger hand. The *mitzvah* of Tefillin is not in the wearing but in the binding (“And you shall tie them for a

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sign upon thy hand . . .”). The stronger hand, which is the agent of action, is sanctified with the command to bind the Tefillin.

Another view is that the Tefillin are worn on the weaker hand to balance might with spirit and strength with holiness. This view is reinforced by our recollection that when the Tefillin are placed properly on the left arm, they will automatically face the heart. It is the heart which represents man’s spirit and soul. It is the heart which should supersede and mitigate the “strong arm” of man.

The headpiece should be placed above the hairline and may extend backward to the fontanel — that point at which a baby’s head is soft at birth.¹⁶ The headpiece should be centered so that it is in line with the bridge of the nose, thus fulfilling the biblical command “and for frontlets between thine eyes.”

In this connection, one might call attention to the extremely common misconception that the headpiece belongs on the forehead. This is an error, though not a modern one. It has existed for at least several centuries. The author of the *Arokh ha-Shulchan* writes, with reference to this: “There is need to caution the community concerning this; for we have seen that many wear the headpiece partially on the forehead. This is, alas, a shame, for such people are not fulfilling the *mitzvah* of Tefillin.”¹⁷

The proper placing of the Tefillin is related to their function as a control over man’s actions, according to Samson Raphael Hirsch.¹⁸ The armpiece is placed not on the hand, but on the muscle which rules it— the biceps. Similarly, the headpiece is worn not directly between the eyes, but above them, where the thoughts which direct the eyes are situated and where the images which our eyes perceive are interpreted and recorded in our memory.

The blessings which attend the ritual of Tefillin are two in number. The first, “Blessed are Thou O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who has sactified us with Thy commandments and commanded us to don the Tefillin,” is recited immediately prior to fastening the armpiece in place. The second blessing, “Blessed art Thou . . . and commanded us concerning the com-

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mandment of Tefillin," is recited immediately prior to donning the headpiece.

There is a sharp controversy among the medieval commentaries on the number of blessings over the Tefillin. Rashi leads one group which maintains that only one blessing is required. Rabbi Jacob Tam — Rashi's grandson — leads a second group which understands the Talmud to require two blessings.¹⁹ The Ashkenazic Jewish Community follows the ruling of Rabbi Moses Isserles who accepts the second opinion.²⁰

In view of the controversy, however, we cannot be quite certain that the second blessing is really necessary. In order to avoid a possible *berakhah le'vatalah* (a needless blessing), we recite after the second blessing the words: "Blessed be His Name; the glory of His Kingdom is forever and ever." This is the formula which is used whenever one makes a needless blessing. The words indicate that the previous blessing is not to be construed in a particular sense, as referring to a specific deed or commandment, but rather constitutes a general statement in praise of God. While we may not use God's name in an unnecessary specific blessing, we always enjoy the right to praise His works in general. By using this formula after the second blessing on the Tefillin, we are in a sense saying that, if the blessing was required, we have pronounced it according to the law; while if it was superfluous, it may be construed as a statement of general praise for God Who hallowed us with His commandments.

We remove the Tefillin while standing — as a sign of respect — even as we don them while standing. They may normally be removed after the beginning of the prayer *Uva Le'tzion* which precedes *Alenu*. Rabbi Moses Isserles records an opinion which advises against removing the Tefillin until after the mourner's Kaddish which concludes the service, "And this is the custom of the most scrupulous."²¹ There is no doubt that were his advice more widely accepted in our day, the conclusion of the morning service would assume a much more decorous character.

THE CONCEPTS

Having briefly reviewed the salient features and laws which

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shape the character of the Tefillin observance, we may now turn to the concepts which are inherent in it. If Tefillin are considered to be an *ote* — a remembrance or a symbol — what is it that they call to mind? What do the Tefillin symbolize?

We need look no further than the source of the *mitzvah* in the Torah. Tefillin are mentioned as a symbol in four different places in the Torah. In the passage of *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9), they are symbolic of the unity of God: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." This verse is referred to by the Talmud as constituting *kabbalat ole malkhut shamayim* — the acceptance of the Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven.

In the passage *ve'hayah im shamo* (Deuteronomy 11:13-21), Tefillin symbolize the concept of reward and punishment. This passage is referred to by the Talmud as *kabbalat ole ha-mitzvot* — the acceptance of the Yoke of the Commandments.

We might note parenthetically that God's Kingship and His commandments are both conceived of as yokes by Jewish tradition. The implication is unmistakable that Judaism does not consider man's relationship to God to be at all times a pleasant and easy one. Not every *mitzvah* gives satisfaction to man upon its completion. Not every obligation is rewarding and enjoyable. Not every duty conveys a sense of personal gratification to the one who discharges it.

In this sense, the God-man relationship parallels human relationships. There are elements of both joyful performance and dutiful action in both. There are sublime pleasures and difficult responsibilities. Man sees in God a Father, Friend, and Comforter. He also conceives of Him, however, as a Master, and of himself as the servant, burdened by the dual yoke of God's Kingship and commandments.

In the passage *ve'hayah ki ye'viakha* (Exodus 13:11-16), Tefillin symbolize the exodus from Egypt. "And this shall be a sign upon thy hand and for frontlets between thine eyes, that it was with a strong hand that God brought us forth out of Egypt."

Thus far, three sources in the Torah have provided three concepts which the Tefillin represent. In the fourth source —

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Kadesh (Exodus 13:1-10) — these concepts assume a relationship to each other. In this passage we read: “And it shall be a sign for thee upon thy hand and for a remembrance between thine eyes — so that God’s Torah shall be in thy mouth (or: upon thy lips) — that with a strong hand God brought thee forth out of Egypt.

Superficially, it would seem that the Tefillin here symbolize the study of Torah. The traditional interpretation, however, considers the reference to God’s Torah to be a clause dependent upon the clause which follows it. This interpretation asserts that Tefillin symbolize the exodus, and the awareness of the exodus leads to the observance of God’s Torah. The observance and study of the Torah are not themselves symbolized by Tefillin. They are rather a result of the central symbol of Tefillin — the exodus.

Thus Nachmanides comments: “The verse’s proper arrangement is as follows: ‘And it shall be for a sign for thee upon thy hand and for a remembrance between thine eyes that with a strong hand God brought thee forth out of Egypt, in order that God’s Torah should be upon thy lips.’ This means that you should write on your hand and between your eyes the concept of the exodus from Egypt, remembering it at all times, so that the Torah of God should be upon your lips, in order to observe His commandments and teachings, for He is your Master Who redeemed you from the house of slavery.”²²

The redemption from Egypt entails an *obligation* on our part to accept God’s Kingship and commandments and also constitutes the basis for our *voluntary acceptance* of His Kingship and commandments.

The obligation is clearly delineated by Nachmanides in his commentary to the first of the Ten Commandments. Alluding to the statement “from the house of slavery,” he comments: “They (the Children of Israel) were the captives of Pharaoh in Egypt, in the house of slavery; and He said to them that the basis for their obligation to accept the great, revered, and awesome Lord as their God, to serve Him, lies in the fact that He redeemed them from Egyptian slavery.” This accounts for the verse: “For the Children of Israel are slaves unto Me; they are My slaves

whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt" (Lev. 25:55). This is a further justification for the use of the word "yoke" with reference to God's Kingship and commandments. A yoke implies not only a burden and a responsibility, but also an obligation — one which was not necessarily assumed voluntarily but which is a consequence of the rights of a "Master."

The redemption from Egypt, however, also constitutes the basis for our voluntary acceptance of God's Kingship and commandments. Here, too, we rely on the First Commandment to support our thesis. The question has been frequently posed: if God introduces Himself to Israel in the First Commandment, why does He refer to Himself as the God "Who took you out of Egypt?" If God, as it were, is here presenting His credentials for approval, before giving His law — as, indeed, the *Mekhilta*, quoted by Nachmanides, clearly indicates²³ — would not His credentials be far more impressive if He referred to Himself as the Creator of heaven and earth rather than as the Redeemer?

The answer to this question is a qualified yes. His credentials would be more impressive, but they would entail no decision on our part to accept His Kingship or His commandments. We accept God's law not because He *created* a world — this would inspire only admiration — but because He is *concerned* with the conduct of that world. We are loyal to Him because of our faith in Divine Providence. We follow His commands because we are confident of His personal supervision over, and interest in, our own lives.

This aspect of God is not conveyed by His creation so much as by His intervention in history at the time of the exodus. It is through this act of redemption that we know of God's continuous existence, of the exercise of His Will, of His Omnipotence and Omniscience, and of His Providence in the world.²⁴ Because we know of God's redemption of Israel from slavery, we accept His Kingship. Indeed, Nachmanides considers the First Commandment to represent "the acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of heaven." The logical consequence of the His commandments."

There is one additional ramification of the acknowledgement of the redemption from Egypt: prayer. It is not easy to pray to

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a Creator; prayer comes more naturally when directed to a Redeemer. It is difficult to relate to a cosmic force; one cannot help but pour out his soul to a personal God Whose Providence makes life itself possible. This will account for the requirement, every morning and evening, to introduce the *Shemoneh Esreh* (the central prayer) by the concept of *ge'ulah* — God's redemption of Israel.²⁵ Because God is concerned with the world, man is able to pray to Him.

The symbolism of the Tefillin now appears in proper perspective. It is not that Tefillin represent God's redemption, His Kingship, and His commandments. It is rather that the Tefillin call to mind the redemption, and inherent in the recognition of God's redemptive powers is the acceptance of His Kingship and His commandments. Thus Rabbenu Yonah can say that the symbolism of the Tefillin leads us to the service of God, so that "with the headpiece a man dedicates his soul . . . to God's service; and with the armpiece man similarly dedicates his body."²⁶

We can thus also understand the words of Rabbi Yochanan: "He who desires to accept upon himself the Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven completely . . . let him don the Tefillin, read the *Shema* and pray (recite the *Shemonah Esreh*)."²⁷ Tefillin are symbolic of the redemption from Egypt which serves as the prerequisite for the acceptance of God's Kingship. The *Shema* is the affirmation of that Kingship and leads logically to the acceptance of God's commandments. Prayer is a direct consequence of the recognition of God's providence and constitutes the verbal expression of our relationship with Him as subjects to a King and as children to a Father.

The merger of the three ideas symbolized by Tefillin into one philosophic thought is further indicated by this same sage in another passage: ". . . Said Rabbi Yochanan, '[he who reads the *Shema* without wearing the Tefillin] is like one who offers a burnt offering without the accompanying meal offering, or a sacrifice without its accompanying drink offering.'"²⁸ The implication here is that the *mitzvah* of reading the *Shema* is not fulfilled if the reader is not wearing Tefillin at the time, in the same way as the *mitzvah* of bringing a sacrifice is not completed without the accompanying drink offering. The commandment

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to read the *Shema* requires, simultaneously, the acceptance of the Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. Without the Tefillin this requirement is unfulfilled.²⁹ We can well understand this conclusion. The *Shema* is merely the affirmation of God's Kingdom. The Tefillin, which represent God's Providence in the world through their symbolization of the redemption from Egypt, are the logical prerequisites for the acceptance of God's Kingdom. Without the Tefillin as the symbol of man's justified faith in God's Providence, the recital of the *Shema* is but an empty gesture. The only exception to this rule is on the Sabbath or on a Festival, for these days, as we have seen, are in themselves symbols which represent the redemption from Egypt³⁰ and which, consequently, lay the foundation for the acceptance of God's Kingship.

In the light of our conclusions, we may offer a new interpretation to the statement of Ulla, that "One who recites the *Shema* without wearing Tefillin is like one who testifies falsely against himself."³¹ The traditional explanation of this judgment is that when a man recites the *Shema*, which contains within it the commandment of Tefillin, he is simultaneously violating that command by not wearing the Tefillin, and thus it is as if he were giving false testimony. This interpretation is open to question because the commandment of Tefillin as recorded in the *Shema* can be understood as testimony only in the figurative sense.

We may however, understand the statement in a different sense. The main testimony in the *Shema* is the expression of our creed that the Lord is One and that He is King over all. In the face of a figurative cross-examination, the witness is asked how he knows this creed to be true. His only proof lies in God's intervention in human history, the prototype of which is the exodus. The Tefillin, which symbolize the exodus, give validity to our daily testimony concerning God's Kingship. Reciting the *Shema*, however, without donning the Tefillin renders the testimony groundless in fact and unsubstantiated by any valid evidence.

The statement of Rabbi Asher, with which we opened this essay, is now to be seen not as an inspired homiletical exag-

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geration, but as a sublime truth. The Tefillin are comparable in value to the entire Torah because, without the belief in God's redemption of Israel from Egyptian bondage — which the Tefillin symbolize and to which they testify — it is as if there were no God in the world, Divine Providence is unfounded, the Torah carries no authority, and the *mitzvot* are not obligatory. However, with the symbol of Tefillin firmly implanted in the mind and fastened securely to the arm — facing the heart — God's Providence becomes a reality, His Kingship is acceptable, His Torah is authoritative, and His *mitzvot* are fused into the substance of our life and honored for the length of our days.

NOTES

1. Quoted in *Bet Yosef* on *Orach Chayim* 37.
2. Exodus 13:1-10; 11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21.
3. *Berakhot* 6a.
4. *Menachot* 43b.
5. *Sefer ha-Chinukh*, 420.
6. *Menachot* 36b; *Orach Chayim* 30:1,2 and commentaries thereon.
7. *Menachot* 36a; *Megillah* 28a.
8. *Hil. Tefillin* 4:25.
9. *Tur*, *Orach Chayim* 37.
10. *Menachot* 36b. The symbol which Tefillin shares in common with the Sabbaths and festivals will be discussed shortly.
11. *Sh. A., Or. Ch.* 31; gloss of *Rama*, and comments of *Turei Zahav* and *Magen Avraham*, *ad. loc.*
12. It should be added that the general prohibition of labor on Yom Tov, even according to this view, is in itself a symbol which replaces the symbol of Tefillin. Thus, on *Shavuot*, where no unique *mitzvah* exists, the Tefillin are still replaced by the general prohibition of labor. This view, however, also maintains that a unique *mitzvah* of a festival (e.g. *matzah* or *sukkah*) is also a symbol which makes Tefillin dispensable when that *mitzvah* is in effect.
13. An interesting mystical justification for this latter view is provided by Rabbi Menachem Mendel Aurbach, author of the *Atteret Zekenim*, a commentary on the *Shulchan Arukh*. He reminds us of the talmudic statement, (*Berakhot* 6b) that the verse: "And all the peoples of the earth will see that the name of God is upon you, and they will respect you" (Deut. 28:10), is a reference to the letter *Shin* which appears upon the headpiece of the Tefillin. This letter of the alphabet is equal numerically to 300. This alludes to the 300 days

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during the year when we don the Tefillin. If we subtract from the 365 days of the year, 52 Sabbaths and 13 Festival days, we are left with the figure 300. This leaves no room for intermediate days. It is to be assumed, therefore, that on those days we are supposed to wear the Tefillin.

It need hardly be stressed that Rabbi Aurbach did not record this mystical computation in order to prove the validity of one legal opinion against another. Logically, the computation might be challenged for including the second days of *Yom Tov*, which are rabbinic, to prove a conclusion which would have Torah sanction. The words of Rabbi Aurbach are, therefore, best understood as an halakhic *bon mot* which the reader may or may not find intriguing.

14. *Bet Yosef on Tur, Orach Chayim* 25.

15. *Orach Chayim*, 27:6.

16. *Ibid.*, paragraph 9. In those — not infrequent — cases where the hairline recedes or disappears entirely, the Tefillin are worn above what would be considered the normal hairline.

17. *Arokh ha-Shulchan, Orach Chayim* 27:20.

18. Commentary to Deuteronomy 6:8, edited by Jacob Breuer in *Timeless Torah* (New York: Feldheim Inc., 1957).

19. See their commentaries on *Menachot* 36a.

20. *Orach Chayim* 25:5.

21. *Ibid.* 25:13.

22. Nachmanides on Exodus 13:9.

23. See Nachmanides' extensive comment on Exodus 20:2.

24. *Ibid.*

25. *Berakhot* 9b.

26. Commentary to Rabbi Isaac Alfasi's compilation, relevant to *Berakhot* 14b.

27. *Berakhot* 14b and 15a.

28. *Berakhot* 14b.

29. See Rabbenu Yonah's interpretation, *loc. cit.*

30. That the festivals recall the redemption from Egypt is readily observed by a superficial examination of their meaning, their origin, and the *Kiddush* which is recited at their inception (*zekher li'yetziat mitzrayim*). The Sabbath, besides representing God's creation, also symbolizes the redemption, as can be readily verified by the following verse from the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy, 5:15: "And you shall recall that you were a slave in the Land of Egypt; and the Lord your God brought you forth from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm; Therefore, the Lord your God commanded you to make this sabbath day."

31. *Berakhot* 14b.