

# THE GOLDEN TEFILLIN

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"My son's tefillin," Meir used to say, "will be the most beautiful tefillin the world has ever seen!" For years now, ever since his Nathan was born, Meir used to boast of the tefillin he would get for his son's Bar Mitzvah.

Ordinarily, one would think nothing of such a boast. But coming from Meir, it was just a little strange. You see, Meir had lived all his life in a forest in Russia. This forest was part of the vast estate of a rich Russian nobleman and Meir was the supervisor and caretaker of this forest. Meir had even been born in the forest — his father had been appointed caretaker by the nobleman and Meir simply inherited his father's job.

There were no other Jews in that forest. You had to travel for miles and miles before you could find a Jewish community. When a traveling Jew would stop into Meir's house, the whole family was so overjoyed that you would think a Yom Tov was being celebrated.

But such visitors were few and far between. Meir began to live more and more like his peasant neighbors. Not being a talmid chochom, all Meir knew about Jewish laws and customs was what he remembered from his father's teachings — and his father had not been a very learned man, either. But he was pious and he made sure to keep carefully whatever he remembered from his father's ways. He davened every day, said a few chapters of Tehillim every once in a while, and observed the laws he knew. These things Meir also taught to his son Nathan.

So, you see, it was a little strange to hear Meir boast so often about his son's future tefillin. After all, for a man who was slowly forgetting all about Jewish laws and customs to be so concerned about this one mitzvah — well. . . But, then again, Meir was unhappy about drifting away from his religion. He probably felt that he just could not help himself, but he would make things different for Nathan, he promised himself. Somehow — he was not quite sure himself just how — but somehow, Nathan would grow up to lead a real Jewish life. Nathan's tefillin, the most beautiful and perfect tefillin ever seen, were to be the first step.

Nathan's Bar Mitzvah was finally approaching. There were only six months left.

I've got to start doing something about those tefillin, Meir said to himself.

So, one clear, sunny day, Meir set out for a certain large Jewish community. He wanted to find Elyokim. Now, Elyokim was famous in that whole region as a wonderful scribe and artist. Almost every Jew in that part of the country had seen and admired examples of Elyokim's drawings and beautiful lettering. Meir even had a drawing of the Kosel Ma'arovi made by Elyokim,

After three days of traveling, Meir arrived at Elyokim's house. He told him about his plans for Nathan's tefillin.

"I want you to make them," said Meir. "Come to my house for the next six months, so that you can devote all your time to these tefillin. It will be worth your while, Elyokim. I'm not a very rich man, but you shall have free board and lodging — and I'll pay you double your regular price for such work!"

Elyokim agreed to this arrangement.

When Elyokim arrived at Meir's house, joy filled the air. A visitor — and a Jewish visitor, too! Elyokim was given a separate room, carefully kept clean and comfortable. After all, he was going to make Nathan's tefillin, such tefillin as no one had ever yet seen! Each meal was like a feast, and between meals Elyokim was kept well supplied with all sorts of rich fruits and delicacies. In short, a six-month-long celebration!

"Well, sir," said Meir to Elyokim after he had settled himself in his new surroundings, "are you ready to start? Now, for the parshios I have some parchment made from the skin of a lion I killed several months ago. A tanner not far from here has made some excellent parchment from it."

"Very good," said Elyokim, "and I have a wonderful idea for the ink. If we can get some gold dust, I can add certain chemicals and liquids to make gold ink!"

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" shouted Meir with joy. "Let me tell you! No one will have such beautiful tefillin as my boy Nathan! No one!"

Elyokim set to work with the most painstaking care. Slowly — not rushed — he drew perfectly precise letters, each one decorated with delicate design work. After three months, the parshios were finished. He was now ready to make the batim.

At this point Meir's wife stepped forward.

"For years I've kept an old gold necklace locked up in my personal trunk. It was given to me by my mother, who got it from her mother. I had thought to save it for one of our daughters, but I want to make sure that these tefillin are outstanding. Let's melt the necklace and make the batim from its gold! With G-d's help, we'll get something else by the time Malkah gets married."

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Elyokim worked hard. But he worked so carefully and perfectly that it took him almost another three months to finish the batim.

The day of the Bar Mitzvah was coming closer. Three weeks before, Meir had written a letter to the nearest Jewish community that he was coming in for his son's Bar Mitzvah. He gave orders to prepare a great feast to which everyone was invited. Tuesday before the Bar Mitzvah, Meir and his family and Elyokim left the forest.

On their arrival in the city, Meir and Nathan and Elyokim went to the rabbi to introduce themselves. There they found the president and the gabboim of the community. Meir started telling about his life in the forest and how happy he was to be among Jews for at least a while.

Of course, it was not long before his pride and joy, the most beautiful tefillin in the world, were mentioned.

"Here, see what I've had made," he beamed, taking the tefillin out of their velvet sack, "the most perfect tefillin ever made! Everything only from the best. The parchment from the skin of a lion, the king of beasts! The ink — of gold, the most precious of metals! The lettering — by one of the greatest artists, Elyokim! And the same with all the rest. Have you ever seen such beautiful tefillin before?"

Meir was so excited while talking about these tefillin that he had not noticed the people around him. He finished his speech with his face wreathed in smiles, but then he looked at the other faces — shocked stares . . . and silence!

"Heh-heh," he said forcing a little laugh, "have you ever . . . have you . . . what's the matter? Why are you looking at me like that? What have I done?"

When the others overcame their surprise enough to speak, there were whispers of "Such an am ho'oretz!" "Such ignorance!" "He must be joking!"

Meir could have died — he felt so bad! He had wanted to have Nathan perform at least this one mitzvah of tefillin in the most beautiful and perfect

manner he knew. Now these people were laughing at him! Some were even scornful! But why?

The rabbi sensed Meir's embarrassment.

"Will everyone except Meir please leave the room!"

After they had gone, the rabbi came over to Meir and asked him to sit down.

"I really don't know how to begin," he said. "I realize that everything you did for your son's tefillin was done with the best intentions. You wanted to do a mitzvah in what you thought was the very best and most beautiful way. But you were wrong, nevertheless. Elyokim was wrong, too. He may be a fine artist and all, but he doesn't know the laws of tefillin!"

"But why should it be wrong?" Meir asked pleadingly. "Isn't parchment from the skin of a noble lion better than ordinary parchment?"

"I know it would seem that way," soothed the rabbi, "but listen for a moment. You realize that your tefillin cost a lot of money, don't you? And you'll admit that not everyone could afford such tefillin?"

"Yes," agreed Meir, "but. . ."

"Please let me finish. G-d crowned His people with the commandment of tefillin. At the age of thirteen, everyone receives this crown — rich and poor alike. No more is written in a rich man's tefillin than in those of a poor man.. All tefillin must be written on parchment made from the skin of a kosher animal. Everyone's ink must be black. The letters must be written alike for everyone. You see, this is the exact way that Hashem commanded it to be done, on Har Sinai. Hashem does not expect the rich Jew to 'improve' the standard tefillin in any way; in fact, every addition and every 'improvement' simply makes the tefillin unfit to be used. Isn't that exactly what you have done?"

Meir dropped his eyes to the floor. "Yes, I see," he mumbled.

"I shall give you a pair of kosher tefillin. These golden ones will be sold as a work of art and the money given to charity. In this way your good intentions will lead to really good results."

"One more thing," continued the rabbi. "You know, don't you, what led you to these mistakes. You've lived far away from your people. You've forgotten how Jews really live. You must give up your job in the forest and move to a

town. With your knowledge, you'll surely find another job. Take my advice, Meir. You'll be happier that way. “

After Nathan's Bar Mitzvah, Meir followed the rabbi's suggestion. He was surprised to find how quickly he — and everyone else — forgot about the golden tefillin. He was too busy, and too happy, enjoying his new life — as a Jew among other Jews. His dream that his son Nathan would someday lead a real Jewish life had come true — it had even come true for Meir himself!

