

VEBDE REBDE

Lateral Position of T'filin Shel Rosh - parts 1 & 2

Question: Must the t'filin shel rosh be exactly in the middle of the head, to the extent that some people spend several seconds adjusting it in front of a mirror?

Answer: We have writing several times that the main issue with the position of t'filin shel rosh is their likelihood to be too far down. But the lateral position also deserves a look. [Part one will focus on classical sources and basic possibilities; part two will get into details and practicality.]

The Rambam (T'filin 4:1) says that the bayit of the shel rosh is in the middle of the front of the head. The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 27:10, mixing between the language of the Rambam and Tur) describes it more starkly: "The bayit should be lined up to the middle, so that it is opposite 'between the eyes,' and the knot should also be in the middle of the oref (posterior neck), and lo yiteh (should not be over (? difficult to translate)), not to this side nor to that side."

The requirement of the middle of the head is actually not obvious. While the Torah writes of t'filin "between the eyes", the gemara (Menachot 37b) derives that this refers to the top of the head, based on a gezeira shava from the prohibition of a mourner

pulling out hair. Tosafot (Kiddushin 36a) asks that accordingly we would expect that t'filin shel rosh would be in the same area - the entire part of the head in which hair grows (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 180:9). Yet, they and the Rambam (ibid.) posit that a vestige of the literal idea of "between the eyes" limits the area, with the Rambam reasoning that the middle is above the area of "between the eyes".

The gemara describes the location of the shel yad and the front-back location of the shel rosh, not its lateral position, so what is the Rambam's source? The Beit Yosef (OC 27) cites the gemara (Menachot 35b), which says that the back knot "faces the face". Rashi explains: "opposite the oref (posterior neck) and not the side of the head." The Beit Yosef surmises that this is the Rambam's source: just as the knot is in the middle of the back of the head, so too the bayit should be in the middle. He adds in that this is anyway apparent from "between the eyes", which the Rambam mentions (although he does not usually independently derive halachot from p'sukim).

What does in the middle mean? First, the middle of the head can refer to a line precisely in the middle, but the entire t'filin, which has width, cannot fit on a line! One logical possibility is that it suffices that any part of the bayit is on the line, giving us significant leeway, especially if we have big t'filin. Or it can mean that the middle of the

t'filin must be in the middle of the head. But does that mean that the precise middle has to be on the precise middle?! As the Satmar Rebbe points out (Divrei Yoel I:4), we accept the opinion that man is incapable of being precise (see Gittin 78a), even with mirrors, not to mention that t'filin move slightly when we move our head. One possibility is raised by the Shulchan Aruch Harav (addendums to Hilchot T'filin) based on an inference of a different gemara: two of the four parshiyot must be right of center and two left of center. This requires near perfection (in addition to the fact that the chambers for the parshiyot are not necessarily equidistant - see Mishna Berura 32:182), and it is shocking that earlier sources would not warn us!!

Another approach, which seems to be posited by most of the poskim, is that the middle is an area of the head (similar to the front-back and arm areas) within which the entire t'filin must be resting. It follows that if the t'filin's edges are within this area, it makes no difference, other than zeh keili v'anveihu (doing mitzvot aesthetically) whether it is centered. The question then begs - how wide is this area? What are its borders? If we know the answer, each person will have to compare that area to the width of his t'filin and determine his leeway (accordingly, the smaller the t'filin, the better).

We will now search for the area's

width/borders.

The gemara (Eiruvim 95b) provides a clue. The halacha that one who is saving t'filin, found on Shabbat in a place where one may not carry, wears two pairs at a time, is because there is room on the head to wear two t'filin in a halachic manner. How big is this area on the head?

Important sources, both early (see midrash, cited by Tosafot, ad loc.) and more recent (see Bi'ur Halacha to 32:41), indicate that the standard size of t'filin is 2 etzba'ot (4 cm. according to Rav Chaim Naeh). It is unclear (see Divrei Yoel ibid.) as to whether this includes the ma'avarta (through which the retzuot go); we will assume not. Thus, the area, from hairline going back is at least 8 cm. Most poskim assume that if you can put two normal size t'filin, you can also put one big t'filin up to their combined size (see Bi'ur Halacha ibid., Divrei Yoel ibid.). Therefore, we can dismiss what a fringe source claims - that the t'filin must fit in within the space in between (not including) the eyes, which is approximately 3 cm. width. According to this, some 95% of today's t'filin (as well as Chazal's) are unusable.

In a widely quoted teshuva, the Divrei Chayim (OC II:6) reacted with disdain to the then new idea of using a mirror to get the t'filin centered exactly. He argues that t'filin can be off-center, as there is room for two t'filin also laterally. (Some ask that if he is right,

why couldn't the gemara (ibid.) allow bringing 4 (2*2) t'filin in at a time.) The Tzitz Eliezer (XII:6) agrees with the Divrei Chayim but says that it is best to have the t'filin quite centered, and that the latter objected only to use of a mirror. In the past, men were prohibited to use a mirror, as it was a feminine activity (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 156:2), without real need.

If the middle refers to an area and it cannot be limited to the area in between the eyes, what is it? The Magen Giborim (Shiltei Giborim 27:6) suggests that the entire top of the head is okay, as it is parallel to the placement on the arm, but this does not fit well with the language of the Rambam and Shulchan Aruch. If the Beit Yosef is correct, that the bayit is learned from the knot, Rashi by the knot seems to say that anywhere opposite the oref is fine; extending that to the front of the head, this would be most but not all of the width of the top of the head. You get a similar width by taking "between the eyes" literally, but including the width of the eyes. Measuring from the center of one eye to the other gives 6.4 cm. for the average person (# courtesy of my optometrist), which works out reasonably if the 4 etzba'ot (see above) includes the ma'avarta, which does not exist on the sides.

Perhaps "between your eyes" is not literal but teaches the general area, in the middle of the head. From there one

is to follow normal guidelines - the Torah was not given to angels and does not want us to be OCD. For the average t'filin, that requires them to be approximately centered (no mirror required, just as people don't use for the knot). If we take the permitted area from front-back and turn it into a square, we also aim for the center but have reasonable leeway with normal-sized t'filin. The same is true if any part of the t'filin's width needs to be over the exact middle. All these possibilities are consistent with the mainstream approach, including the Tzitz Eliezer (above). Middle - apparently; precise - NO.

In summary only fringe opinions make exactness/mirror necessary for centering t'filin shel rosh. But given that opinions exist and centering is probably laudable, using a mirror is not something to criticize (it is not less important than centering a tie). One who is very careful about centering and lax on how low the t'filin go is misguided.

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