“And I will betroth You unto Me”:
On Fading Tefillin Strap Marks
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Above all the Torah asks for love: Thou shalt love thy God: Thou shalt love thy neighbor. All observance is a training in the art of love.
– Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man

A fascinating, if obscure, custom is discussed by R. Jeffrey Saks in his Lehrhaus essay, “The Tefillin Strap Mark: In Search of an Obscure Minhag.” The custom, found in Shai Agnon’s short story entitled, “Two Pairs,” tells of the author’s love of 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 straps around my warm arm until they pressed into my skin. And then I would circle my head with the other tefillah... [When] I completed my praying, removed my tefillin, and saw pressed in my arm’s flesh the remaining evidence of the straps. I wouldn’t eat or drink until the indentations on my arm had completely disappeared... How I loved them. Maimonides, of blessed memory, had surely done the right thing when he included the regulations pertaining to tefillin in his Book of Love.

What intrigued R. Saks was that he had never heard of such a custom, nor could he find a source for it in any book of Halakhah or minhag. After not a little bit of detective work, he found the custom mentioned in two other works, both written by authors from the place and time of Agnon’s youth: late-nineteenth century to early-twentieth century Galicia.

For R. Saks the mystery was solved, but for me it had only just begun. I was enchanted by the custom and thought – as Nahmanides famously wrote in his Letter to his son, “when you rise from reading a book, see if there is something you can implement from what you have learned” – that I could perhaps keep this custom.

So the next morning, upon removing my tefillin, I started the stopwatch on my phone and waited. After thirty minutes there was no sign of fading and I began to realize that this was no simple custom. After one hour I went to eat breakfast, but kept the stopwatch running. One hour turned into two and two into three; I could still see faint traces of the tefillin after three-and-a-half hours! Sadly, then, I am forced to report that as much as I identified with this magical custom, fasting daily for half a day is not in my ambit.

Still, I still wondered about the motivation for the custom. What is the point of it? What is its message? After pondering the question for a long time, I came to the realization that love is the answer.

To begin, love is an essential element of one’s relationship with the divine. The Torah mentions the notion of loving God no less than ten times in the book of Deuteronomy.

The first occurrence has Moses asking rhetorically,
"And now, Israel, what doth the Lord thy God require of thee, but to fear the Lord thy God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul; to keep for thy good the commandments of the Lord, and His statutes, which I command thee this day?" (10:12-13).

While love is not the only thing God asks — as fear, walk, serve, and keep are also on the list — nevertheless, love is central to the relationship. Indeed, regarding Moses’s appeal to love God, Midrash Hagadol (30:20) explains that love is of the essence to the relationship for “love is the great virtue above which there is none higher.” So critical is love to our relationship with God that the Torah commands that we love God six times (6:5; 11:13; 11:22; 19:9; 30:16) — two of them appearing in the verses written on the parchments of the tefillin.

This brings us back to Agnon’s love of tefillin. He concludes his description of the custom of not eating until the strap marks fade: “How I loved my tefillin. Maimonides, of blessed memory, had surely done the right thing when he included the regulations pertaining to tefillin in his Book of Love.”

Indeed, when we put on our tefillin we manifest love by reciting the following verses:

And I will betroth you unto Me forever;  
And I will betroth you unto Me in righteousness,  
and in judgment, and in loving-kindness, and in compassion.  
And I will betroth you unto Me in faithfulness and you shall know the Lord. (Hosea 2:21-22).

If putting on our tefillin is like getting engaged to God, perhaps we can say that taking off our tefillin is like taking leave from one’s betrothed. Accordingly, waiting for the imprint of the tefillin straps to fade is like longingly watching one’s betrothed leave on a trip. One wants not to take leave but to savor every moment, even to the last glimpse as she fades over the horizon. It is a love affair.

And it is this love that is all important. It is important in our relationships with people. It is important in our relationship with God. And it is at the heart of what is lacking in religious observance today:

Religion declined not because it was refuted [which is to say, people did not decide to drop religion because there is proof that God does not exist or that the mitzvot make no sense], but because [religious observance] became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit… its message becomes meaningless.  
Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man

Heschel thus declaims the problem with religion in his day (1955), which sadly remains the problem with religion in our day (2021). Importantly, he is not saying that there is no place for creed, no place for discipline, no place for habit. Rather, he is saying that when these things have become all there is to religion, all is lost. If the great movement of faith has been reduced to avowals of principles, if the awe-inspiring encounter in worship has become a mere act of discipline, if the passion of love has given way to the monotony of habit — then all is lost.

Love is that which brings life and meaning to the relationship. Without love the relationship is instrumental. Without love the relationship is “irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid.” This is why God asks for love. This is why one waits for the tefillin strap marks to fade.
A NEW BOOK BRINGS HEBREW LANGUAGE AND LITURGY TO LIFE

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On my first trip to Israel 50 years ago, I took a bus tour of the Galil with an overnight stop at Kibbutz Ayelet HaShahar. I couldn’t help but notice the kibbutz’s distinctive emblem, which featured a leaping gazelle and a star:

![Kibbutz Ayelet HaShahar Emblem]

The usual translation of “Ayelet HaShahar” is “morning star,” but the literal meaning is “gazelle of the morning.” What was the story behind such a pretty but enigmatic expression? Where did the term come from, and how did it come to be translated as “morning star”? All these years later, I have Mitchell First to thank for supplying an answer, or actually a plethora of possible answers, in his new book, Links to Our Legacy (Kodesh Press, 2021), a treasure house consisting of 34 articles on Hebrew word roots, 25 articles on Jewish history, and seven more on Jewish liturgy.

I have been following First’s work for years now. He has a J.D. from Columbia Law School and an M.A. in Jewish history from Yeshiva University’s Bernard Revel Graduate School. One could say we are kindred spirits, with my own Y.U. and law school education and our common avocation as “independent scholars” of Judaica.

First’s approach to scholarship is reminiscent of aspects of Nehama Leibowitz’s, who generally collected, compared, contrasted, and critiqued the views of others rather than offering entirely new content of her own. But just as Leibowitz did, First puts this approach to fine use, writing in a scholarly yet accessible style (with occasional touches of endearingly corny humor). The result is that we are not only informed but entertained and occasionally even startled, finding answers to questions that, in many cases, we never thought to ask but should have.

To see how First accomplishes this, it is instructive to survey his earlier works before exploring Links. The first of First’s books is Jewish History in Conflict (Jason Aronson Inc., 1997). Subtitled A Study of the Major Discrepancy between Rabbinic and Conventional Chronology and based on First’s M.A. paper, this book meticulously examines the clashing views of the Seder Olam Rabbah—the classic rabbinic chronological work attributed to R. Yose b. Halafta of the second century C.E.—and the “conventional” chronology based on Greek and Persian sources, specifically with regard to the length of the Persian and Second Temple periods of Jewish history.

Yes, this discrepancy matters, because it represents one front in a longstanding culture war about how to determine the “truth.” According to some, accepting the conventional chronology that most of the world embraces is unthinkable for an Orthodox Jew, given that it contravenes the Talmud, Rashi, and Tosafot. And yet, reviewing more than 100 Jewish sources from ancient to modern, First shows that there has been a variety of views expressed on this issue, even among traditionalists. And he concludes that the Seder Olam chronology may best be explained as an attempt to formulate a time frame that would fit in with certain predictions in the Book of Daniel, regardless of whether this time frame was compatible with the “truth” that could be obtained from outside sources. First explores the matter in a rigorous and—it must be said—courageous way, shedding light on a controversial but important topic that many Orthodox Jews may have wondered about.

First’s second book, Esther Unmasked: Solving Eleven Mysteries of the Jewish Holidays and Liturgy (Kodesh Press, 2015), continues the author’s investigations into Jewish history but also branches out into a new area of focus, the origins and meanings of particular Hebrew words and phrases. The essay that the title refers to delves into the question of how to identify Ahashverosh and Esther in light of ancient non-Jewish sources. In this instance, there is no real conflict between Jewish and outside authorities, but for centuries scholars were stumped by the apparent lack of any clear parallels to these royal names in the Greek sources. First explains that it was only in the nineteenth century, when Old Persian cuneiform was at last deciphered, that it became clear that the king the Greeks called Xerxes was actually named Khshayarsha, only a few vocal shifts away from “Ahashverosh.”

As for Esther, First theorizes that her identity has remained hidden in plain sight. The Greek historians Herodotus and Ctesias mention a wife of Xerxes named Amestris, and they depict her as a cruel and vengeful woman, leading some scholars to suggest that she was Vashti. But First points out...

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that “Amestris” is not all that dissimilar from “Esther.” Furthermore, identifying Esther with Amestris “does not mean that one has to accept the tales told about her by Herodotus and Ctesias,” says First, because these writers were often unreliable and might well have been engaging in anti-Persian polemics. Thus, First sides with the relatively few authorities who have made this identification, and has made a scholarly topic more accessible to the lay reader.

Other investigations included in Esther Unmasked involve the origin of the “Fast of Esther” (an innovation in Geonic Babylonia that actually had nothing to do with Esther’s three-day fast in the month of Nisan), the original format of the Mah Nishannah (there were only three questions), and the true meaning of the phrase recited at the Seder, Arami oved avi (the interpretation “An Aramean [Laban] sought to destroy my father” is an ancient one, but the more literal “A wandering Aramean was my father” was a mainstream Tannaitic interpretation, not a later introduction).

Esther Unmasked is mostly a collection of articles that First had first written for the journal Hakirah and seforimblog.com. First’s third book, Roots and Rituals: Insights into Hebrew, Holidays, and History (Kodesh, 2018), is instead a collection of his weekly columns for the Jewish Link (a newspaper that covers New Jersey, where First resides, and also New York and Connecticut). Some of the 62 topics addressed in this book are the origin of the controversial blessing “Who has not made me a woman,” suggested connections between the words zakhar (male) and zekher (memory) and the words lehem (bread) and milhamah (war), an examination of wordplay in Tanakh, and a look at biblical words of Egyptian origin.

And now comes First’s fourth book, Links to Our Legacy, once again an anthology of Jewish Link articles, although enhanced with additional material and footnotes. Here are a few of the book’s highlights:

- Is there a connection between mishpahah (family) and shifhah (maidservant)? First observes that both words may possibly be derived from a root meaning “join, attach.” This seems to make sense, he says, since a shifhah is attached to a family and a mishpahah is a group of people who are attached to one another. He also notes a parallel from Latin, in which familia means “family” and famulus and famula are the words for male and female slaves.

- When did Jews first use gematria, the system of numerical equivalents of the letters of the alef-beit? Noting that there are many references to gematria by Amoraim and some by the earlier Tannaim, First probes further and reports that the earliest attested Jewish use of gematria—similar to a technique utilized by the Greeks as least as long ago as the 3rd century B.C.E.—is found on coins issued by the Hasmonae king Alexander Yannai in 83 B.C.E., where the letter kaf indicates the twentieth year of his reign.

- What is the meaning of the unusual word sekhvi in the morning prayer in which we bless God for giving “the sekhvi understanding to distinguish between day and night”? First observes that the word appears only once in Tanakh (Job 38:36), where it apparently means “heart” or “mind,” but that there is a statement in the Talmud (Berakhot 60b) that one should recite the blessing in question upon hearing the sound of the rooster, and that this statement gave rise to the interpretation of sekhvi as “rooster.” Ultimately, First concludes that the word should be understood as having one meaning in Job and another meaning in Shaharit.

- Who wrote the stirring High Holiday piyyut, Unetanneh Tokef? As First says, “We have all heard the story of this prayer and R. Amnon of Mainz,” a 10th-century figure who, it is said, evaded pressure to convert to Christianity, was tortured and mutilated upon his refusal, was brought to the synagogue on Rosh Hashanah, and recited Unetanneh Tokef just before dying. I, for one, always assumed that the story was a myth and that the prayer was actually written by R. Kalonymos ben Meshullam, who supposedly heard it from R. Amnon in a dream. But First explains that the truth is more surprising. Discoveries in the Cairo Genizah have shown that the piyyut is several centuries older and was probably written by the Byzantine-era poet Yannai in Eretz Yisrael. This finding is well-known in scholarly circles, but First is trying to bring it to the attention of the general davening public as well.

For his sources and authorities, First employs an eclectic toolbox: dictionaries and concordances such as Brown-Driver-Briggs, Koehler-Baumgartner, Jastrow, Mandelkern, Tawil, and Ernest Klein, and biblical commentaries from Rashi and Shadal to Samson Raphael Hirsch and Mossad HaRav Kook’s Daat Mikra.

Now then, what’s the story with that odd term Ayelet HaShahar for “morning star,” that I began with? First notes that the initial appearance of the term in Psalm 22:1 is ambiguous. It appears as part of the psalm’s superscription, suggesting that it serves as a musical instruction to the reader or performer—perhaps it is even the name of a musical instrument. First offers four possible
interpretations by Rashi and five more by Radak (including the instrument approach), but instead endorses the modern theory that Psalm 22 was meant to be sung to the tune of a then popular song called Ayelet HaShahar, “The Doe of the Dawn.” In this discussion, he observes that the term was understood (or misunderstood) by some authorities quoted by Radak to mean “strength of the morning,” which may have been taken to imply “sunrise” or “morning star.” Whatever the etymological truth may be, the kibbutz chose a lovely name and an evocative emblem to go with it.

Again, we owe Mitchell First our thanks for tackling such questions and broadening our Jewish horizons. Most importantly, in this age of shocking ignorance of Hebrew, even among better-educated American Jews, First performs a valuable service by sharing his enthusiasm for the Hebrew language and, hopefully, passing it along.