‘Tefillin and our work-driven week’

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Exodus 13:1-10 and 11-16 provide the source for the ritual of tefillin, for which reason they constitute two of the four biblical paragraphs sewn into them (The other two being the first two paragraphs of the Shema). The usual reason given as to why we only wear tefillin on working days, not on Sabbaths and festivals, is that tefillin are described in the *Shema* by the word *ot*, ‘a sign,’ an outward demonstration of Israel’s sacred covenant with God, as it says: *Vehayah l**’ot** al yadcha*, ‘And they shall be for a sign upon your hand.’

This sign of the tefillin is needed on weekdays, as a spur to the consecration of our workaday life, to remind us of what God expects of us, and to inject a measure of sanctity into a working day that may well constrain us to compromise with our ethical, moral or religious principles. On Shabbat and festivals, however, the likelihood of this is greatly reduced, since those days are given over to rest, prayer, and family and community interaction. Hence, it was felt that the cautionary objective of the tefillin could be dispensed with on those holy days.

But we may suggest another explanation of the inapplicability of wearing tefillin on those days, in the light of the workaholic culture that is the hallmark of our Western society. Tefillin are so obviously the symbol of a work-driven day; and in the way they are worn they caution us against the excesses of work obsession. We bind them around our arms and head, as if to demonstrate how constrained we feel by the myriad demands of our workplace. The straps that we wind around our arm symbolize how slave-like we can become. They remind us of chains, preventing us from escaping from our manifold tasks and dead-lines.

Each morning the tefillin serve as a mirror to our lives, crying out to us, "Do not become working animals. Remember that you have only one ultimate Master to serve. No one else has the right to claim sovereignty over your life. Take some time off in the day to find yourself in prayer; to rediscover your individuality as a being created in God's image, worthy of entering into dialogue with the Creator of the universe. Let no one imagine, therefore, that they can rob you of your freedom to interact with your parents, spouse, children, friends and, above all, with your Maker. Allow no one to convert you into a robot, a profit-producing machine."

So the tefillin, which symbolize and caution against work obsession, are so obviously inappropriate to the Shabbat or yom tov, when we do indeed consecrate time and celebrate our physical and mental liberation, when we do take our rest, shut out all the feverish demands of the working week, and jump off the treadmill of business, ambition and competition.

In the unusual context of Cain and Abel, the Torah's use of the word *sha'ah*, which, in later Hebrew, came to mean, 'a period of time; an hour,' demonstrates most forcefully Judaism's concept of time. Both brothers offered sacrifices to God, but *V'el kayin v'el minchato* ***lo sha'ah***, "to Cain and his sacrifice God did not ***sha'ah***," literally, '*give the time of day,'* or 'regard as of any consequence'.

Thus, in Judaism, 'time,' *sha'ah*, equates to that which is of real *consequence*, that which is of primary significance. Time is the medium through which we can make ourselves, and the offerings of our hands, pleasing to God. Cain's 'time' was not devoted to God; so God did not reciprocate, and give him 'time' or recognition. When, on the other hand, we do make time for a worthy enterprise - attending synagogue, learning, lending an ear to someone with a problem

or visiting someone in hospital or, God forbid, sitting shivah - then we truly are consecrating time. Then we truly are using it for the purpose for which it was created.

The common belief is that when we are not at work we are at play. Judaism believes that when we are not at work, and are thus able to take control of our own time, that is when true responsibility is called for. The most accurate monitor of a person's quality of heart and religious inclination lies in the way he or she utilizes spare time.

Any hospital chaplain will confirm that no dying patient ever expressed regret that he or she had not spent more time in the office. The regret lies, invariably, in not having had a closer relationship, or spent more time, with family, in having lived a selfish life, having begrudged allocating time to worthy activities and causes, having been a slave to time-tables imposed by others and to valueless routines and selfish indulgences.

One of the explanations of why Jews lead in so many areas of business and cultural endeavor is that, for us, the utilization of time to the maximum is a religious principle. The term 'time-management' may be comparatively modern, but the concept is as old as Cain and Abel.