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Proper position of T'fillin Shel Rosh

Question: Where is the exact place to put the T'FILLIN SHEL ROSH (of the head)? It appears that many men position it too low in front, and no one says anything!

Answer: There is nothing new under the sun. Rav Kook wrote a pamphlet called CHEVESH P'ER to strengthen the fulfillment of the mitzva of t'fillin. His main complaint was that men wear the T'FILLIN SHEL ROSH too low (forward) on their heads, and he urged leaders to rectify the matter.

The Gemara¹ derives that when the Torah instructs us to place the t'fillin BEIN EINECHA (between your eyes), it refers to the part of the head that can be shaved, not the forehead (contrary to the Tzedukim). Thus, the

forward-most part of the t'fillin may go no lower than where the roots of the hairline are on the scalp.² If the front part of the t'fillin does not sit directly on the head, but is suspended (which is sometimes a sign that it is too low), one draws an imaginary perpendicular line to the head in order to determine if it is positioned high enough.

There is a machloket³ among Rishonim whether the upper part of the t'fillin (i.e., where the strap goes through the box) can be placed anywhere on the top of the head or only on the front half. The Gemara⁴ allows putting t'fillin on, or up to and including, the place of a baby's soft spot.⁵ The most stringent interpretation of this Gemara is that the t'fillin must fit within the first four finger-widths (or slightly more) of the head, starting from the hairline.⁶ This is based on the statement of the Gemara that there is room on the head to place two pairs of tefillin⁷ (assuming that the minimum size of tefillin is two finger-widths).⁸ Poskim agree that it is more crucial that the tefillin not be even slightly too low than to be concerned that they not

¹ *Menachot* 37a-b.

² *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 27:9.

³ Disagreement.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ See *Beit Yosef, Orach Chayim* 27 and *Bi'ur Halacha* on 27:9.

⁶ See *Kaf HaChayim* 27:41.

⁷ *Eruvin* 95b.

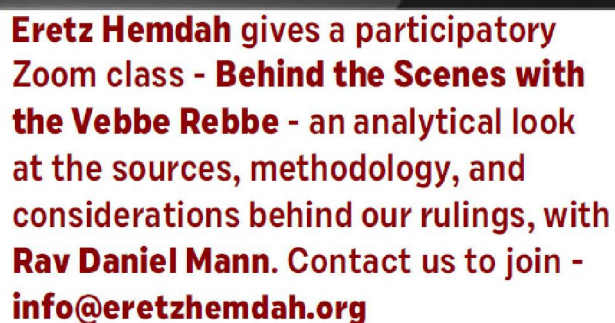
⁸ See *Mishna Berura* 32:189.

extend too far back.⁹

Why do so many men put their t'fillin too low? When large t'fillin are fastened (by the part that is furthest back and the knot) so that they feel secure on the head (which is usually when they are relatively forward), they are likely to extend beyond the end of the hairline. (Although it is easier to make mehudar¹⁰ t'fillin that are large, having large t'fillin increases the problems of improper placement.) Even with smaller t'fillin, it is common that people are fitted when they get new t'fillin or retzuot¹¹ and assume that they are “set for life.” However, the retzuot stretch as they are used, causing the t'fillin to extend further forward. Few people know how to adjust the knot to compensate for this stretching, and many do not know that this is periodically necessary. Even someone who knows the halacha is likely to assume that “all is well” and that the t'fillin look low because the wearer is bald or has a receding hairline. Although we do follow the original hairline, many exaggerate how low it was, and it is difficult to precisely determine to where the roots of one's hair once extended.

It is important to correct people whose t'fillin slip down and, certainly, those whose retzuot are so loose that they may not have fulfilled the mitzva in years and make a b'racha l'vatala¹² daily.¹³ However, one must be very careful how he corrects others.¹⁴ It is best if the rabbi periodically urges men to ask him to check and/or adjust the t'fillin. If this isn't done, an individual may have little choice but to gently approach those who need help. For some, it pays to leave an anonymous note. The sensitivity issue is usually more acute for older people, who are more likely to resent being approached by someone much younger. Asking, “Do you want your knot adjusted?” is preferable to saying, “Your t'fillin are on wrong.”

It takes just a little dexterity and training to adjust the knot, and it does not require undoing it. Therefore, we suggest that readers learn how to do it for themselves and for others.



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⁹ *Chevesh P'er*, 2; *Bi'ur Halacha*, ibid.

¹⁰ Of high quality.

¹¹ Straps.

¹² A blessing of no value.

¹³ See Rav Kook's appeal.

¹⁴ See *Rashi*, *Vayikra* 19:17.