



OF SCROLLS & A SCRIBE

AN INTERVIEW WITH RABBI ARYEH SCHECHTER, SOFER STA"M

BY ESTY MENDELOWITZ

Walking down the steps into the modest office and workshop of Rabbi Aryeh Schechter, located on a quiet residential street in Boro Park, one enters a sacred space. The countertop is piled with numerous individual tefillin batim in various stages of repair. A computer and large magnifier sit on the side, ready to check for minute errors on the parchments lined up in rows. Behind the counter are shelves of sefarim related to safrus, some of them written by Rabbi Schechter himself.

Rabbi Aryeh Schechter is a sofer who has been serving the Boro Park community for many decades. In addition to his years of writing and checking sifrei Torah, tefillin and mezuzos, he has had the privilege of interacting with the many Gedolim who have used his services. He has also introduced several innovations, especially in regard to tefillin, to make them as mehudar as possible.

In honor of Shavuos, Rabbi Schechter takes Inyan readers on a fascinating journey through the world of STa"M; the writing and maintenance of sifrei Torah, tefillin and mezuzos.





The Kopycznitzer Rebbe, Harav Avrohom Yehoshua Heschel, *zy"a*, at the *chasunah* of Rabbi Schechter's uncle Rabbi Luzer Kaufman

ORIGINS

Leaving blood-soaked Europe after the war, Rabbi Schechter's family, along with many other families of Kopycznitzer Chassidim, settled in Colombia in South America.

Young Aryeh Schechter came to New York after his bar mitzvah to learn in Yeshiva Torah Vodaath.

"Rabbi Avraham Talansky, *z"l*, was the dorm *mashgiach*, and to keep us busy, he arranged for a variety of classes after yeshivah hours ended. One of them was a class on *hilchos* STa"M, by Rabbi Yossi Ostrich, and I was very intrigued," Rabbi Schechter says. "The boys in the dorm came from a variety of cities and countries with varying levels of *Yiddishkeit*, so a *sofer* came down each year to check the boys' *tefillin* to make sure they were kosher.

"When the *sofrim* came each year, I sat with them and asked them many questions. Rabbi Aharon Berlin from Eretz Yisrael taught me how to write *megillos*. I also learned from Rabbi Baruch Greenfeld and his son Rabbi Duvid Leib, who came from Eretz Yisrael and built up the Vaad Mishmeres STa"M in New York."

HOUSE CALLS

In the 1970s doctors made house calls, but Rabbi Schechter initiated the *sofer's* house call. "In addition to problems in the actual *mezuzah*, often they are not properly hung in homes. I come down to the customer's home with another two *sofrim* and we take down the *mezuzos*, check them, and replace them properly.

"There was a *frum* family that had no idea that *mezuzos* need to be checked. When a friend made them aware, they called us. We went to their house, and not only were they missing many *mezuzos*, but they had *mezuzos* on the bathroom doors!"

Says Rabbi Schechter, "You never know what you will find on a house call."

Together with Rabbi Uri Auerbach, Rabbi Schechter wrote a *sefer, Pischei She'arim*, an encyclopedia of *hilchos mezuzah*, with diagrams on how to place them correctly. "Just recently I was in Chicago for the wedding of my first grandchild. There was a *shiur* in the local shul based on the *sefer*, and the participants were very excited when I introduced myself as the *sefer's* coauthor!"

Rabbi Schechter has also published various *kuntreisim*.

TINY TEFILLIN — OR THE ORIGINAL?

About 35 years ago, Rabbi Schechter received a tiny set of *tefillin* from a *baal teshuvah*, who was a grandson of a Rav in



The actual *tefillin* from Turkey

Turkey. The *tefillin* were very old, and the *tefillin shel yad* were tall and narrow. Rabbi Schechter was asked to research whether they were kosher, as they appeared much smaller than our *tefillin shel yad* today.

"My intensive research showed that smaller *tefillin* are the way *tefillin* were originally made. *Tefillin shel yad* need to fit comfortably on half the bicep, and big ones that take up the area of the entire bicep are only kosher *b'di'eved*. When *tefillin* starting being written on ox skin, which is very tough, it became harder to write small *parshiyos*, so the size of the *tefillin* gradually got bigger."

Rabbi Schechter has innovated a unique way to roll standard-size *parshiyos* more narrowly, so they can fit into smaller *batim*. "Harav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg was the first to order these smaller *batim* from me. Many, many Rabbanim and Rebbes have followed suit. The small size allows men to wear both Rashi and Rabbeinu Tam *tefillin* at once, which is the preferred way."

Rabbi Schechter met Harav Shimon Schwab, *zt"l*, at a Torah Umesorah convention, and he showed him the smaller *tefillin*. Rav Schwab called over his wife to show them to her, saying, "This is the size *tefillin* we had in Europe." In Rav Schwab's *kehillah*, there was a very short bar mitzvah boy, and Rav Schwab told him to get the smaller-size Schechter *tefillin* to fit his small arm. He told him, "If you are embarrassed to wear the small *tefillin*, I will purchase new small *tefillin* for myself so you won't feel uncomfortable."

During the Holocaust, many heroic Jews hid *tefillin* even in concentration camps, and their small size was an advantage. "When they needed to hide their *tefillin* quickly from the Nazis, they would tie the *retzuos* around their waists like a belt, and hide the small *batim* in their mouths."

THE POWER OF A MITZVAH

Rabbi Schachter relates a story cited in the *sefer Aleinu L'Shabei'ach* by Rabbi Yitzchak Zilberstein. "A man bought expensive *mezuzos* at a *sefarim* store. When he later inquired about the *sofer* who wrote them, he discovered the *sofer* was not *makpid* on *shemiras halashon*. The customer wanted to return the *mezuzos*, since he felt the sale was invalid. The question was brought to Rabbi Zilberstein: Was the sale considered a *mekach ta'us*?

"Rabbi Zilberstein *paskened* that the *mezuzos* were kosher; however, the sale could be invalidated because *mezuzos*, in addition to being a *mitzvah*, are also a *shemirah*. And if the *sofer* is not careful with his speech, the *mezuzos* won't bring *shemirah*. In addition, the Chasam Sofer said that if someone speaks *lashon hara* while wearing *tefillin*, it's as if he is wearing *tefillin* when his body is unclean."

Tefillin, properly written, have tremendous *kedushah*. "I was told that whenever the Brisker Rav could not get to a *minyan* to *daven Minchah*, he would *daven Shemoneh Esrei* with his *tefillin* on. He said if there is no choice, wearing *tefillin* is equivalent to *davening* with a *minyan*."



Harav Chaim Pinchas Scheinberg, *zt"l*, ordering small *shel yad tefillin*

Rabbi Schachter has personally witnessed many incidents where *mezuzos* brought *shemirah*, and unfortunately, the opposite as well: when unkosher *mezuzos* hang in a home, it causes a lack of *shemirah*. He illustrates this with some incidents in which he was personally involved.

"A woman called me to her home to check the *mezuzos* in her house. Using the computer, we checked the *mezuzah* in the kitchen, and there was a mistake: Instead of *"v'achalta v'savata* — you shall eat and be satisfied," the word *v'achalta*

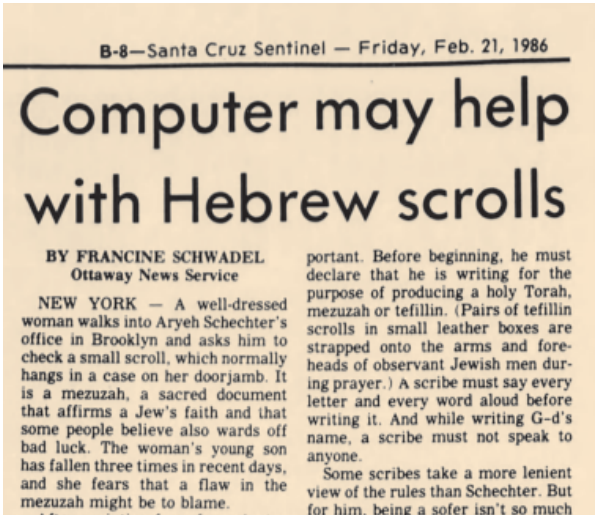


shel yad* next to a regular size *shel rosh

"HARAV CHAIM PINCHAS SCHEINBERG WAS THE FIRST TO ORDER THESE SMALLER BATIM FROM ME. MANY, MANY RABBANIM AND REBBES HAVE FOLLOWED SUIT. THE SMALL SIZE ALLOWS MEN TO WEAR BOTH RASHI AND RABBEINU TAM TEFILLIN AT ONCE, WHICH IS THE PREFERRED WAY."

was written twice, and the word *v'savata* was missing. When we showed her the mistake, she told us that her husband had died recently from a heart attack that was brought on by his overeating (*lo aleinu*). He ate constantly, because he was never full."

In 1986 *The Wall Street Journal* wanted to print an article about how new scanning software would affect the jobs of *sofrim*: Would they be out of business because they would be replaced by computers? Rabbi Schechter agreed to be interviewed. A reporter sat in his office for ten hours, as Rabbi Schechter explained the significance of the *mitzvah*, and how computers, while they could assist *sofrim* in finding double or missing words, would never actually replace them, as they cannot check for letters touching each other, nor can they check for cracks in the letters.



B-8—Santa Cruz Sentinel — Friday, Feb. 21, 1986

Computer may help with Hebrew scrolls

BY FRANCINE SCHWADEL
Ottaway News Service

NEW YORK — A well-dressed woman walks into Aryeh Schechter's office in Brooklyn and asks him to check a small scroll, which normally hangs in a case on her doorjamb. It is a mezuzah, a sacred document that affirms a Jew's faith and that some people believe also wards off bad luck. The woman's young son has fallen three times in recent days, and she fears that a flaw in the mezuzah might be to blame.

portant. Before beginning, he must declare that he is writing for the purpose of producing a holy Torah, mezuzah or tefillin. (Pairs of tefillin scrolls in small leather boxes are strapped onto the arms and foreheads of observant Jewish men during prayer.) A scribe must say every letter and every word aloud before writing it. And while writing G-d's name, a scribe must not speak to anyone.

Some scribes take a more lenient view of the rules than Schechter. But for him, being a sofer isn't so much

The article from the *The Wall Street Journal* about how new scanning software would affect the jobs of *sofrim*. It was reprinted in the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* in 1986.

During the interview, a *frum* woman walked into the office and asked Rabbi Schechter to check one *mezuzah*. "I was surprised," said Rabbi Schechter, "because normally a *frum* person has more than one *mezuzah* at home, and brings a few at a time to check. The woman would not tell me where the *mezuzah* was from, but asked me to examine it."

Rabbi Schechter found that the foot of the letter *gimmel* was broken (fun fact: there is only one *gimmel* in the entire *mezuzah* text, and it's found right in the middle, in the word *deganecha*). When he pointed it out to the woman, she was visibly shaken. She explained that her son had broken his foot in *cheder* three times that year! They checked the *mezuzos* in the house, and they were fine. The *mezuzah* she brought was the one from his classroom.

"All this time, the reporter was sitting in the corner of my office. I explained to her that in Hebrew *gematria*, the letter *gimmel* is equivalent to the number three, and how the boy had broken his foot three times. This story made it to the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*. It was a tremendous *kiddush Hashem*."

"ALL THIS TIME, THE REPORTER WAS SITTING IN THE CORNER OF MY OFFICE. I EXPLAINED TO HER THAT IN HEBREW GEMATRIA, THE LETTER GIMMEL IS EQUIVALENT TO THE NUMBER THREE, AND HOW THE BOY HAD BROKEN HIS FOOT THREE TIMES. SHE WAS ASTONISHED BY THE STORY, WHICH HAPPENED WHILE SHE WAS THERE.

CLOSENESS TO GEDOLIM

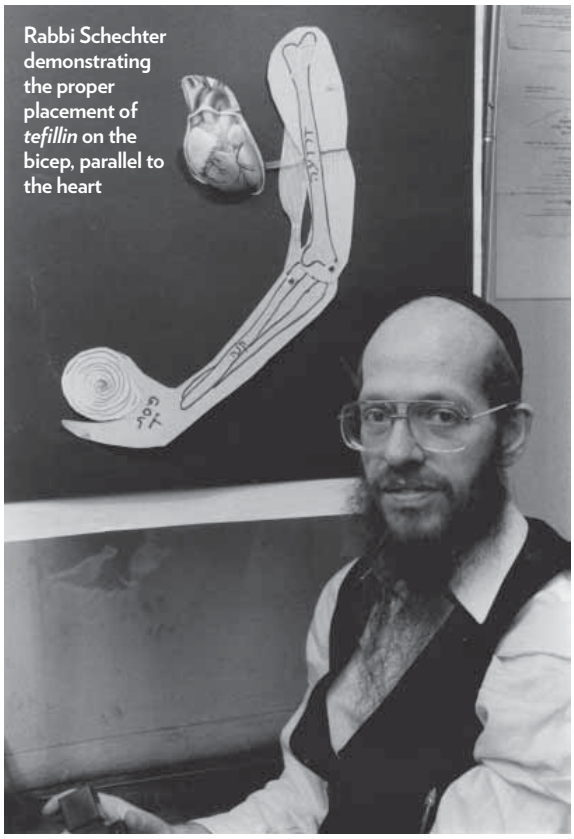
One of the benefits of Rabbi Schechter's many years in *safrus* is the opportunity to grow close to the many *Gedolim* he studied under and for whom he checked *tefillin* and *mezuzos* that they brought. He was *zocheh* to learn not just the intricacies of *hilchos tefillin* and *mezuzos* from them, but also some valuable life lessons.

"Harav Moshe Bick, *zt"l*, Mezbuzher Rav in Boro Park, had a congregant who gave me his *tefillin* to check. It was one of my first *bedikos* as a certified *sofer*, and since I wasn't experienced yet, I made a list of 24 potential questions. I told him to take them to Rav Bick, who said the *tefillin* weren't *pasul*, but advised him to buy a new, more *mehudar* pair.

"Rav Bick then asked to see me, and when we met, asked that I write my name in *ksav Ashuris*, which is used to write *sifrei Torah*. *Ksav Ashuris* is also used to write, *lo aleinu*, *gittin*, and he called on me to be the *sofer* for many of the *gittin* he presided over. I was fortunate to receive a lot of *shimush* from Rav Bick," says Rabbi Schechter.

"He told me that when we have *sifrei Torah* or *mezuzos* written by *sofrim* of the previous generation, we can't tell people an item is *pasul* just because it's not the exact *ksav* we are used to today. He told me to fix any mistakes I found, and not say anything negative about the *tefillin*."

Rabbi Schechter would go to the home of Harav Avraham Pam, *zt"l*, to check his *mezuzos*. "Rav Pam would always tip the assistants, even before he asked how much he owed us. He showed appreciation even before he paid the fee. He used to tell us, in the name of Rav Yisrael Salanter, that being a *sofer* is a big *sakanah*, because his job is to find problems and mistakes, and this can affect the *sofer* as a person. He said we need to be positive, and not



Rabbi Schechter demonstrating the proper placement of *tefillin* on the bicep, parallel to the heart



With the Yoka Rav, *zt"l*, who was *niftar* this year on Erev Pesach

knock the work of other *sofrim*."

YOU CAN'T OUTSMART HALACHAH

Recently Rabbi Schechter was called to the home of a family who was renovating. "The non-Jewish painter knew enough to take off the *mezuzos* before he painted the doorways, but the problem was, he put them back on after the paint was dry. Only a Jew may install a *mezuzah*, so we had to remove them all and put them on again."

Tefillin and *mezuzos* should be checked every three and a half years, according to *Halachah*. However, if they were exposed to extreme weather, such as extreme cold or heat, or if they became damp, they must be checked even if three and a half years have not elapsed. During Hurricane Katrina, for example, many *mezuzos* needed to be replaced since many basements flooded and the *mezuzos* on the basement doors got soaked. "It used to be the *minhag* in Europe to check the *mezuzos* each year at Pesach time," says Rabbi Schechter. "They didn't have waterproof cases then, and after the walls and doorways were washed, the *mezuzos* needed to be checked for damage due to dampness."

Tefillin and *mezuzos* must be written *k'sidran*, which means in the proper order. Unlike a *sefer Torah* or a *megillah*, in which just one word can be fixed, if a word is found to be missing or cracked in the beginning of the *tefillin* text, the rest of the text must be erased and rewritten, in order. Practically speaking, if a mistake is found, the *parshiyos* are usually replaced. By checking *tefillin* and *mezuzos* regularly, especially with new magnifying technology, tiny cracks can be located and be repaired before the parchment is *pasul*.

"HE TOLD ME THAT WHEN WE HAVE SIFREI TORAH OR MEZUZOS WRITTEN BY SOFRIM OF THE PREVIOUS GENERATION, WE CAN'T TELL PEOPLE AN ITEM IS PASUL JUST BECAUSE IT'S NOT THE EXACT KSAV WE ARE USED TO TODAY. HE TOLD ME TO FIX ANY MISTAKES I FOUND, AND NOT TO SAY ANYTHING NEGATIVE ABOUT THE TEFILLIN."

"Cracks that aren't visible to the naked eye do not render a *mezuzah* or *tefillin pasul*," says Rabbi Schechter. "And when we repair them at an early stage, the *tefillin* or *mezuzah* does not have to be rewritten. Checking early on prolongs the life of the parchments, and saves a lot of money in the long run."

Unless there is an obvious *p'sul*, such as a word missing, Rabbi Schechter will not sell *tefillin* or *mezuzos* to someone if he found a *she'eilah* in the ones they came

"THESE TEFILLIN HAD BEEN CHECKED 22 TIMES SINCE THE MAN'S BAR MITZVAH, BUT IT WAS RABBI MANDEL WHO NOTICED A DOUBLE WORD! TODAY, NO STA"M ARE SOLD WITHOUT BEING CHECKED BY COMPUTER. THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF MISTAKES FOUND IN A SEFER TORAH THAT ARE CAUGHT BY A COMPUTER IS 500!"



Rabbi Schechter inspecting a *mezuzah*.

to have checked. This is a safeguard against a *sofer* subconsciously finding mistakes in order to make a sale.

A young man in his 20s came to Rabbi Schechter to check his *tefillin* before his wedding. He had never checked his *tefillin* since his bar mitzvah. "I opened the *tefillin shel rosh*, and recognized the *ksav* as one of a *sofer* I knew, but there was a big problem. The *sofer* hadn't let the ink dry properly before rolling the parchment, so the young man had been wearing *pasul tefillin* since his bar mitzvah. I called the *sofer*, who ran over to replace the parchments," says Rabbi Schechter. "I never told the *chassan* that his *tefillin* weren't good. It's no *mitzvah* to make people feel bad."

A more shocking story took place when Rabbi Schechter checked the *tefillin* of a man in his 80s who had bought his *tefillin* in Eretz Yisrael. The *sofer* who wrote his *tefillin* had also written the *tefillin* of Harav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, *zt"l*, and the *ksav* was exceptionally beautiful. "This was before computers, and at that time I had a helper, Rabbi Yishai Mandel, who specialized in text errors. These *tefillin* had been checked 22 times since the man's bar mitzvah, but it was Rabbi Mandel who noticed a double word! Today, no STa"M are sold without being checked by computer. The average number of mistakes found in a *sefer Torah* that are caught by a computer is 500!

"*Tefillin* and *mezuzos* need *siyatta diShmaya*," he says. On the other hand, Rabbi Schechter is quick to underscore the importance of checking *tefillin* regularly. "I once visited a community out of town, and a prominent *Rosh Yeshivah* came to have his *tefillin* checked. He told me his *minhag* had always been not to check his *tefillin* (there are some circumstances, such as if a person wears *tefillin* all day, when *me'ikar hadin* they do not have to be checked) until his son had his *tefillin* checked, and they were found to be missing the word "*echad*" of *Shema*. When he heard that, he nearly fainted. He learned his lesson and now checks his *tefillin* as dictated by *Halachah*.

"You need *siyatta diShmaya* to have kosher *tefillin*," Rabbi Schechter reiterates, "but you can't outsmart *Halachah*!" ■