

Elisha's Wings, Unclean Bodies, and Tefillin

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The debate about women wearing *tefillin* rages. The issue has many moving parts, some are halakhic, most are sociological. In this piece, I want to touch upon only one aspect of the debate, the concept of *guf naqi* (clean body) and its application to the question of whether women should wear *tefillin*. In this first piece, I will simply discuss what the concept means in rabbinic literature.

Elisha's Wings

The idea that *tefillin* require a *guf naqi* comes from a passage in the Babylonian Talmud (*Shabbat* 49a):

אמר רבי ינאי: "תפילין צריכין גוף נקי
כאלישע בעל כנפים." Rabbi Yanai said: "*Tefillin* require a *guf naqi* (clean body) like Elisha, the man with wings."

This statement is enigmatic, both because it is unclear what it means by "clean" and because of the reference to this strange person, Elisha with the wings.

¹ Morethodoxy shut down, so I am posting my previously published articles as PDFs here. They have not been revised.

Before answering these questions, it is worth pausing and asking what the halakhic consequences of such a statement are meant to be. Assuming Elisha with the wings was an extraordinary person (we will discuss this more a little later), does that mean that most people should not wear *tefillin*? As will be seen, there is more than one way to understand the import of the statement about Elisha.

Model 1 – Persecution and the Pure Spirit

The Babylonian Talmud (*Shabbat* 49a) relates Elisha's story:

ואמאי קרי ליה בעל כנפים? שפעם אחת גזרה מלכות רומי הרשעה גזירה על ישראל, שכל המניח תפילין ינקרו את מוחו. והיה אלישע מניחם ויוצא לשוק. ראהו קסדור אחד - רץ מפניו, ורץ אחריו. וכיון שהגיע אצלו נטלן מראשו ואחזן בידו, אמר לו: מה זה בידך? אמר לו: כנפי יונה. פשט את ידו ונמצאו כנפי יונה. לפיכך קורין אותו אלישע בעל כנפים.	Why do they call him, “the man with wings”? Once the wicked Roman government made a decree against the Jews that anyone who wore <i>tefillin</i> would have his head pierced. Elisha, however, put on his <i>tefillin</i> and went out in public. An official saw him. [Elisha] ran away and the man chased him. When he was about to catch up, [Elisha] removed them from his head and held them in his hand. The man said: “What is that in your hand?” [Elisha] replied: “Dove’s wings.” He opened his hand and there were dove’s wings. Therefore, he is called, “Elisha with the wings.”
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According to this story, Elisha's righteousness was that he risked his life to fulfill the mitzvah of wearing *tefillin*. Not only that, he wore them in public, a bold if risky move.

Following this story, a number of commentators assume that the meaning of Rabbi Yanai's dictum is that one should not wear *tefillin* during a time of persecution unless one is as righteous as Elisha. Rav Hai Gaon, for instance, in a responsum dedicated to convincing

men that they should wear tefillin and should not worry about the cleanness of their bodies, writes (*Sha'arei Teshuvah* 153):

ואם בא אדם לומר תפלין צריכין גוף נקי כאלישע בעל כנפים כך פירשו חז"ל במה דב"א בשעת השמד שגוזרים כל המניח תפלין ינקרו את מוחו אמרו חכמים כל היודע עצמו שהוא צדיק גמור כאלישע בעל כנפים שעשו לו נס בשעת השמד ומסר עצמו למיתה יניח תפלין ואם לאו אל יביא עצמו לידי סכנה שאם אתה אומר כן ס"ת גדול ומקודש שיש בו כמה פרשיות והוא שלם ואתה פותח בו וקורא בו בכל זמן וק"ו תפלין מכאן אתה למד שלא שנו חכמים תפלין צריכין גוף נקי אלא בשעת השמד ולא בזמן אחר.	If one were to argue that <i>tefillin</i> requires a <i>guf naqi</i> like Elisha with the wings, the Sages explained it thus: In what context was this stated? During a time of persecution, where they made a decree that anyone who wore <i>tefillin</i> would have his head punctured. The Sages said: ‘Anyone who knows that he is as righteous as Elisha with the wings, for whom a miracle was done during the persecution when he risked his life, should wear <i>tefillin</i> . Otherwise, do not put yourself at risk.’ For if you do not interpret it this way (but assume that one should not wear <i>tefillin</i> unless one is immaculately clean), a Torah scroll, which is bigger and holier and has many <i>parshiyot</i> and is complete – we open this and read from it all the time, certainly we can wear <i>tefillin</i> ! Rather, learn from this that when the Sages said that <i>tefillin</i> needs a <i>guf naqi</i> , this refers to during a persecution and to no other time.
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In other words, in Rav Hai Gaon's interpretation, *guf naqi* means something like “a pure spirit” and the halakha refers only to wearing *tefillin* at the risk of one's life. It has nothing to do with physical cleanliness at all.

Clarifying this position, R. Shmuel bar Meshullam Yerundi (*Sefer Ohel Moed*, Laws of *Tefillin*, *Mezuzah* and *Tzitzit* 1:1) translates the term *guf naqi* as “free from sin (כלומר נקי) (מעבירות).” This is R. Tam's position as well (*Sefer Ha-Yashar*, *Novelae*, 675):

תפילין צריכין גוף נקי כאלישע בעל כנפים. כלומר אי בעי דאיתרחיש לי	<i>Tefillin</i> requires a <i>guf naqi</i> like Elisha with the wings – meaning, if one wishes for a miracle to be performed
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ניסא כמו שנעשה לאלישע צריך on one's behalf as was done for Elisha, he must have a
להיות גוף נקי כאלישע בעל כנפים. pure being like that of Elisha with the wings.

For R. Tam, the import of R. Yanai's position is only about hoping for a miracle. In other words, R. Yanai is discouraging men from endangering their lives in order to wear *tefillin*.²

Model 2 – Immaculate Bodies but not Halakha Le-Maaseh

Another interpretive tradition assumes that the statement was meant to limit tefillin wearing to very select individuals. The Jerusalem Talmud (*Berakhot* 2:3) makes this point clearly:

תמן אמרין כל שאינו כאלישע בעל Over there (Babylon) they say that anyone who is not
כנפים לא ילבש תפילין. like Elisha with the wings should not wear *tefillin*.

Although this statement mentions nothing about Elisha's "clean body", it states that if a person is not like Elisha, in whatever way he was special, he should not wear *tefillin*.

Significantly, the Jerusalem Talmud attributes this position to "them," which implies that it does not accept the statement as authoritative.

The Jerusalem Talmud is not the only one to distance itself from this position. Rabbi Menachem ben Shimon (*Midrash Sekhel Tov*, Exod. 13) writes:

ואסור לישן בהן לא שינת עראי ולא It is forbidden to sleep in tefillin, whether just nodding
שינת קבע, גזירה שמא יפיח בהם, off or really sleeping, lest one flatulate while wearing
אבל משום קרי לא מיתסרי לאנוחי, them, however, we are not worried about ejaculation
כמא דפסקינן לעיל, ולא קי"ל כמאן [during sleep] as semen would not forbid a person

² R. Tam's position is brought down as authoritative by R. Avraham bar Natan Even ha-Yarhi in *Sefer ha-Manhig* (*Tefillin*) as well.

דאמר תפילין צריכין גוף נקי כאלישע from wearing tefillin, as we stated earlier. However, we
בעל כנפים, שלא ניתנה תורה למלאכי do not follow the position of the person who said that
השרת, שנא' וזאת תורת האדם (ש"ב tefillin require a clean body like Elisha with the wings,
ז יט): since the Torah was not given to the ministering
angels, as it says (2 Sam. 7:19): "this is the Torah of
man."

This is the understanding of R. Hananel as well (Shabbat 130):

ואין הלכה... כרבי ינאי שאמר תפילין The Halakha does not follow... Rabbi Yanai, who said
צריכין גוף נקי כאלישע בעל כנפים that *tefillin* require a *guf naqi* like Elisha with the
ומפרשי רבנן כי לא אמר רבי ינאי wings, but the Rabbis interpreted R. Yanai and said that
אלא בשעת הגזרה וסמך דהוא עריק he was only referring to the time of persecution, and
ועבדי ליה נס. they support this with the account of [Elisha] running
away and a miracle occurring on his behalf.

According to R. Hananel, we simply don't follow R. Yanai's position, although he is open to accepting the reinterpreted R. Yanai as described in the previous model.

Model 3 – Flatulence

The Babylonian Talmud offers its own clarification of the concept, *guf naqi*, in the lines immediately following the quote from R. Yanai:

מאי היא? אביי אמר: "שלא יפיח What does this mean? Abaye said: "Not to flatulate
בהן." רבא אמר: "שלא יישן בהן." with them on." Rava said: "Not to sleep with them on."

Assuming one were to accept both answers, i.e. that it is forbidden to flatulate with *tefillin* on or to sleep with them on, this does not seem like an impossible task. Is Elisha with the wings really the only person who was able to accomplish this? The answer that the vast majority of authorities who follow this model give is "no." In other words, everyone should wear *tefillin*; it is only a warning to be careful while wearing them.

These rishonim further claim that R. Yanai was speaking about people who wear their tefillin all day, but certainly for people who wear them only during prayer there should be nothing at all to worry about. Below are some examples of Rishonim who make this point.³

R. Moshe of Coucy (*Sefer Mitzvot ha-Gadol*, Positive Commandments, 3)

זהו באדם שמניחן כל היום כולו This refers to a person who wears *tefillin* all day, as is
כמצותן פן ישכחם עליו ויעשה בהם the mitzvah, lest he forget he is wearing them and he
דבר שאינו הגון, אבל בשעת תפילה act inappropriately. During prayer, however, there isn't
אין לך רשע שלא יהא ראוי לתפילין, a person wicked enough that he can't be trust with
tefillin.

Rashba (Glosses on Tractate Shabbat 49a)

³ See also the treatment of R. Bahya ben Asher (Kad ha-Qemah, "Tefillin"), who surveys more than one model for understanding R. Yanai.

וכיון שביד האדם לקיים מצוה זו אין לאחד מישראל שימנע מזה על המחשבה שהזכרתי למעלה, כי כל אדם ראוי להניח תפילין כל זמן שהוא בריא וגופו טהור מן החולי והמדוה, ואין צריך עכ"פ שיהיה לו גוף נקי כאלישע בעל כנפים, הוא שטועין בו הרבה בני אדם מהמון ישראל גם קצת מן היודעים שחושבין שאין כל אדם ראוי למצות תפילין אלא א"כ הגיע למדרגת אלישע בעל כנפים שנעשה לו נס ושיהיה לו גוף נקי כמוהו. וזו היא הסבה שהמצוה הזאת מרופה בידם ולא יחזיקו בה, ולא ידעו ולא יבינו כי אין המאמר הזה אמור אלא בשעת השמד שאם המניח תפילין הוא כדאי ובטוח על עצמו שיעשה לו נס כאלישע בעל כנפים יש לו להניח תפילין בשעת שמד ואם לאו אין לו להניחם מפני הסכנה, אבל שאר כל המון ישראל שלא בשעת הסכנה חייבים להניח, וכל ישראל ראויים לכך כי כל העדה כלם קדושים, או יהיה ביאור המאמר לענין הנחתן כל היום כלו וזהו לשון גוף נקי שאם יש לו גוף נקי כאלישע ונוהר בהם הזהירות הראוי חייב להניח' כל היו' כלו כמו שהי' עושה אלישע, אבל אם אין לו גוף נקי כמוהו די לו להניחן בשעות ידועות, ואין צריך לומר הגדולים שהם חייבין במצות תפילין ושהיא מצוה מוטלת עליהם, כי גם הקטנים צריכין להניחן כדי לחנכן במצות. וכן אמרו במסכת סוכה (פ"ג דף מ) קטן היודע לשמור תפילין אביו לוקח לו תפילין:

פירוש צריכין גוף נקי היודע ליזהר
שלא יפיח בהן כלומר שיזהר לסלקם
בשעה שצריך להפיח, וכן פירש רש"י
ז"ל, וכן פירשו גם בתוספות.

The term 'they require a *guf naqi*' refers to someone who knows how to avoid flatulence while wearing them, meaning that he knows to remove them when he feels the need to flatulate – that is Rashi's explanation, and it is Tosafot's as well.

Rosh (Hilkhhot Qetanot, Tefillin)

לומר לא שיהא צריך כאלישע בעל
כנפים אלא שיכול ליזהר משינה
ומהפחה כמוהו. דכיון דאירע לו נס
בתפילין מסתמא היה שומרן בטרהה.
והאידנא שאין רגילין להניחן אלא
בשעת תפלה בקל יכול אדם ליזהר
באותה שעה.

This does not mean that he must be like Elisha with the wings, but rather that he can avoid flatulence and falling asleep like him. For since a miracle occurred for him because of his *tefillin*, it seems reasonable to assume that he guarded their purity. Nowadays, since we only wear them during prayer, it is easy for a person to be careful during that space of time.

R. Joshua ibn Shu'ib (*Derashot, Va-ethanan*)

ויש מקילין במצוה זאת משום ההיא
דרבי ינאי דאמר תפילין צריכין גוף נקי
כאלישע בעל כנפים, ואומרם [כי] מי
הוא נקי [גוף] כמוהו. וזה אינו [כן] כי
בפירוש אמרו מאי טעמא או למאי
הלכתא, ואמרו שלא יפיח בהם ושלא
יישן בהם, ואם הוא יכול ליזהר מן
השינה וההפחה כל אדם ראוי להם.
וכן פירש רש"י זכרונו לברכה ובאותן
הזמנים שהיו מניחין אותן כל היום היו
אומרין (זה) שצריך גוף נקי כאלישע
לכל היום, אבל בזמן קריאת שמע כל
אדם יכול ליזהר משינה והפחה.

There are those who are lenient with this mitzvah because of what R. Yanai said, that tefillin requires a *guf naqi* like Elisha with the wings. They say: "Who could be pure like him?" But this is not correct, because [the Talmud] explicitly asks what is the reason or what is the halakhic import of this statement, and it answers, to avoid flatulating or sleeping while wearing them. So any man who can avoid sleep or flatulence should wear them. This was also Rashi's interpretation. It was back in the period when they would wear them all day that they said that tefillin requires a *guf naqi* like Elisha of the wings, but just while reciting the Shema, every person can be careful to avoid sleep and flatulence!

R. Avraham Zakut (*Sefer ha-Yukhsin, Seder Amoraim*, "Elisha")

והגאונים ז"ל כתבו שאינו הלכה כי לא
ניתנה תורה למלאכי השרת, אבל
האחרונים כתבו שהוא הלכה ויכול
אדם בשעת תפילה להעמיד עצמו,
The Geonim wrote that the halakha does not follow [R.
Yanai], since the Torah was not given to the
ministering angels. However, later authorities wrote
that it is halakha, and that a person can remain under
control during prayer.

Summary: What does the Elisha Phrase Mean, Halakhically Speaking?

In short, if R. Yanai's statement was meant to warn regular Jews not to risk their lives by wearing tefillin, it is irrelevant to the question of cleanliness. If it was meant to limit tefillin only to exceedingly pious individuals, like Elisha, the Geonim already decided that his is not the halakha and we do not follow this position. If all it means is that people wearing tefillin need to be careful not to flatulate or sleep while wearing it, that is considered halakha, but is also considered easy to follow unless one has a stomach ailment.

The only people who might have trouble with it are people who wear them all day, and for this reason R. Yanai suggests that only very pious people should wear them all day, but everyone should wear them during prayer, since there is nothing to worry about for the average person. This is the halakha as we have inherited it.⁴

⁴ See, for example, *Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥaim* 38:1, where R. Joseph Karo says that people with stomach ailments should not wear *tefillin*. Presumably the average person with such an ailment can avoid flatulence during prayer.