

Questions & Answers

Why do Karaites interpret the “tefillin” and “mezuzot” verses as metaphors?

Karaites seek the plain meaning of the text. Sometimes the plain meaning is literal and sometimes it is figurative. The traditional Karaite view is that the “tefillin” and “mezuzot” verses are figurative.

There are four verses that the Rabbanites interpret as requiring *tefillin*: Exodus 13:9; Exodus 13:16; Deuteronomy 6:8, and Deuteronomy 11:18. The word that the rabbinic tradition understands to mean “tefillin” is *totafot*. Interestingly, the word *totafot* is used in the final three of these verses; but the first verse (Exodus 13:9) uses an entirely different word: remembrance (*zicharon*). In truth, we do not know with certainty what *totafot* actually means from a linguistic perspective; but in light of the use of *remembrance* (*zicharon*) instead of *totafot* in the first verse, it is almost a certainty that the verses are not talking at all about *tefillin*. Rather, they are metaphors for keeping certain concepts always on our mind – as a remembrance.

This interpretation is supported by the fact that the “tefillin” verses themselves are filled with metaphors. The first verse (Exodus 13:9), states that the Torah of Adonai “may be in your mouth.” Since the Torah is not literally in our mouths, the verse likely means that the Torah is something that we should constantly speak of or meditate on. Similarly, Deuteronomy 6:8 says that the words that are commanded shall be upon our hearts; and Deuteronomy 11:18 says that the words shall be placed upon our hearts and souls. Here, too, nothing is literally being placed on our hearts and souls.

So far we have shown that these verses are filled with metaphors; but some aspects of the verses can be applied literally. For example, two of the verses state that we should “tie” (Hebrew root: *kashar*) the words we are commanded as a sign upon our hand. *First*, it is unlikely that tying here should be applied literally – given that the rest of the verses are filled with metaphors. *Second*, we have clear examples in the Tanakh where the word “tie” is used as a metaphor – even if it also has a literal meaning. One metaphorical example is Genesis 44:30, where the Torah states that Jacob’s soul is tied up with Benjamin’s soul. Another example is in Proverbs 3:3, which states that kindness and truth shall be tied around our neck. Of course, nothing is literally tied in Genesis 44:30 or Proverbs 3:3.

Karaites have historically interpreted the “mezuzot” verses metaphorically as well. For example, one might literally try to write the words that we are commanded upon the doorposts of our houses, as described in Deuteronomy 6:9 and 11:20; but this would be impractical given the sheer volume of words at issue. There are even examples in the Tanakh where the concept of writing is metaphorical. By way of illustration, Proverbs 3:3, which we reviewed to demonstrate that “tying” can be metaphorical, also establishes that the concept of “writing” can be interpreted non-literally, for it tells us to “write” kindness and truth upon our hearts.

In the end, Karaites determine the plain meaning of the text by reviewing the context of the verses in question and analyzing other similar passages. In these cases, the historical Karaite view is that the “tefillin” and “mezuzot” verses are not intended to be interpreted literally.