

# Torah scroll, *mezuzah*, *tefilin*

*a.k.a sta"m*

In response to a listener's questions on the *kashruth* of *tefilin*, we're going to do a "deep dive" into the topic, based on the Mishne Torah, Laws of Tefilin and Mezuzah and Sefer Torah (<https://mechon-mamre.org/i/2301n.htm>). We'll look at two aspects:

- what are the requirements for each of these items
- do modern-day versions satisfy those requirements

The term encompassing all three is **sta"m**.

## Requirements

### Text

**Tefilin** ("phylacteries") contain four *parshioth* (1:1):

- "qadesh li" (Ex 13:2) קדש לי
- "wehaya ki yeviakha" (Ex 13:11) והיה כי יביאך
- "shema" (Deut 6:4) שמע
- "wehaya im shamo`a" (Deut 11:13) והיה אם שמוע

These are encased in leather and called "*tefilin*", and placed upon the head and the arm. If even one letter is incorrect, the *tefilin* are invalid.

There are two text issues which disqualify *tefilin*: they must be written in ink, and they must be written on the *qelef* (קֶלֶף).

"Ink" is composed of carbon black (e.g. candle soot, etc.), pine sap, a bit of honey: mixed thoroughly and pressed into wafers and dried. When it's to be used, the ink is mixed with water infused with oak-gall etc. (e.g. tannin), and then it may be used for writing. This is the kind of ink which is preferable for all *sta"m* because it can be erased; but if one used oak-gall water mixed with iron sulphate (which when mixed give a black color) and cannot be erased, it is still kosher. Use of inks of other colors, or gold leaf, invalidates the writing.

**Mezuzah**: the two *parshioth* (1:2):

- "shema" (Deut 6:4)
- "wehaya im shamo`a" (Deut 11:13)

if even one letter is incorrect, the *mezuzah* is invalid.

**Torah** scroll: as with the others, if even one letter is incorrect, it renders the scroll invalid.

### The parchment

(1:6) The three kinds of animal skin (parchment) are "*gawil* (גָּוִיל)", "*qelef*", and "*dukhsustos* (דּוּחְסוּסוֹט)".

First, remove the hair from the skin (usually with quicklime). Then the skin is salted (soaked in salt water) and then covered in flour (oat-flour slush). Then it's treated with oak-gall or similar. Once this is done, the skin is called "*gawil*". Prior to the tanning process, it is called "*maSah* (מצה)".

(1:7) If the skin was first split in two (a thin part which is next to the hair, and a thick part which is next to the flesh), and the parts were then processed by tanning as above, the thin part is "*dukhsustos*" and the thick part is "*qelef*" (in modern pronunciation, "*q:laʔ*").

(1:8) The received tradition from Sinai is that a *sefer torah* is written on *gawil* on the hair side, *tefilin* on *qelef* on the flesh side, and *mezuzah* on *dukhsustos* on the hair side. If one wrote on *qelef* on the hair side, or on *gawil* or *dukhsustos* on the flesh side, the item is invalid. Despite the tradition for torah scrolls that they be writing on *gawil*, one may also write them on *qelef*. Similarly, a *mezuzah* may be written on *qelef* or *gawil*, but *dukhsustos* is preferable.

(1:10) The skin used *must* be from a kosher land-animal species, though not necessarily slaughtered in a kosher manner.

(1:11) The parchment used for torah scrolls or *tefilin*, must have been processed by a Jew, for the purpose of writing them (e.g. a Gentile may not process the skins). That used for a *mezuzah* need not be.

(1:12) Another received tradition from Sinai is that both torah scrolls and *mezuzoth* must be written on scribed lines (on the parchment), while *tefilin* need not be.

(1:13) *sta"m* which were written by a heretic must be destroyed by burning. If they were written by a Gentile, or a Jew who (purposefully) disobeys some *mitsvot*, a slave, a woman, or a minor, they are invalid and should be set aside in a *geniza*.

(1:14) *sta"m* which were written on non-kosher species' skins, or on skins which weren't processed as above, or on skins which weren't processed for the purpose, are invalid.

(1:15) The person writing must have proper intent while writing. If when writing any of God's holy names he did not have proper intent, the *sta"m* is invalid.

(1:19) *sta"m* may only be written in "Assyrian script" (the usual Hebrew square letters).

## Other requirements

There are eight requirements of *tefilin* concerning the physical build (must be square, head must have four compartments separated for the *parshioth*, the order of placement of the *parshioth* within the *tefila*, etc.)

There are twenty requirements of a *sefer torah*, having to do with spacing of the letters, how the individual parchments are attached to each other, and many other issues, which if not fulfilled invalidate it. Among other things, the relative size of the letters is important (large vs. small letters) as is the use of oddly shaped letters (upside down nun etc), and letter "tags". However, if the scribe wasn't careful with those, it doesn't render the scroll invalid.

On the other hand, as stated above, if even one letter is missing (or added, or changed), the scroll is invalid. Likewise, if he changed the spacing (e.g. an "open" *parasha* made "closed", or the layout of the "*shira*"), or wrote the "*qri*" instead of "*ktav*", he invalidated the scroll.

## Sta"m commonly available today

If you look at a properly prepared Torah scroll from the Temanim, you'll see it looks like leather. That's because it is. If you look at a typical scroll outside the Temani tradition, you'll see it has a pale color. That's because it has *not* been tanned as per Rambam (and the Talmud). Instead, the current process is (based on Tosafot's opinion it's a superior process):

1. drying the skin with salt on the flesh side
2. soaking in water to soften it
3. soaking in lime to remove the hair
4. soaking in water and scraping to remove membranes
5. soaking in concentrated lime several days
6. rinsing thoroughly with water and then drying thoroughly
7. scraping the flesh side until "q:laf" is achieved

Note that nowhere in this process is the skin tanned. In addition, the skins are initially processed with salt, usually at the point of slaughter, by Gentiles; and therefore they are already invalid for sta"m.

In addition, because of scribal errors, the commonly used "*dukhsustos*" is from the *flesh side* and "*q:laf*" is from the *skin side*, precisely the opposite of what Rambam tells us.

Furthermore, they now use "*q:laf mashuaH*", which is their "*q:laf*" which has a liquid spread over it to make it smoother. If the parchment had been kosher (which it isn't), it would be invalidated by this process.

## Conclusion

Sadly, it is clear that with few exceptions, modern sta"m is mostly invalid. I say that with a heavy heart, because it is something which *could* easily be rectified. As a result, I do not accept *aliyoth*, because the scrolls are not kosher and saying a blessing on them would be ברכה לבטלה and forbidden. I recommend acquiring sta"m only from sources which properly process the skins and follow the *halakha*, for instance "Nosach Teiman" (<https://nosachteiman.co.il/>) - but even there, you must be careful what you choose.