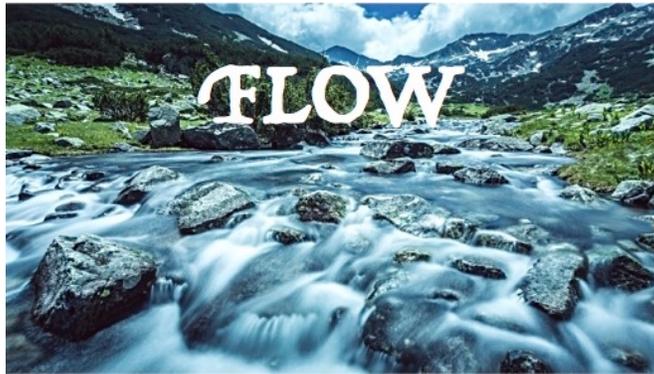


#5 March 7, 2017



You shall have no other Gods before me.

Exodus 20:3

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all you heart and with all your soul and will all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

First Commandment, Part 2

by Jennie Harrop

One of my favorite childhood books was the best-selling 1967 novel *The Chosen* by Chaim Potok, a Jewish-American author and rabbi whose works echoed with marvelous themes of loss and reconciliation, faith and tradition, and shifting cultural expectations. *The Chosen* is set in 1940s New York City, where 15 year olds Reuven and Danny find themselves forever linked when Danny's deadly line drive in a baseball game shatters Reuven's glasses, sending him to the hospital with an injured eye. Danny visits Reuven in the hospital to apologize, and the two boys become friends over time, despite Danny's Hasidic upbringing and Reuven's Modern Orthodox family. Danny's father, a traditional Rebbe whose position as *tzaddik* will pass down to Danny one day, is raising Danny in silence – speaking to him only during religious conversations. When Reuven voices his support of a secular Jewish nation in Palestine, which Danny's family vehemently opposes, Danny's father forbids his son to speak to Reuven or even mention his name. Danny, who longs to study psychology and step free of his Hasidic trappings, walks a painful line between law and tradition, relationship and faith.

Coming-of-age angst aside, what fascinated me the most in my teen years were the traditional Hasidic garments described in Potok's work: the fringed *tzitzit*, the black *halat*, the woolen *tallit*, the long side curls, and the leather *tefillin*. As Potok's 2002 obituary in *The New York Times* pronounced, *The Chosen* was "the first American novel to make the fervent, insular Hasidic world visible to a wide audience." Placed on the arm opposite the heart and on the head, the tefillin are small black leather boxes worn during morning prayers. The boxes contain verses from the Torah, primarily the *shema* – the prayer in Deuteronomy 6 that is the centerpoint of Jewish prayer. Wearing the Scripture on the arm and on the head signifies a submission of the wearer's mind, heart, and actions to God, as well as the God-ordained unity of mind and heart, intellect and emotion.



Jesus reminds us of the importance of this commandment in three of the four Gospels:

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Matthew 22:34-40

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

Mark 12:28-31

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?" He answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" "You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

Luke 10:25-28

When a Jewish man today dons the tefillin to go to morning prayers, he is both exemplifying and potentially undermining what Jesus calls the first and greatest commandment. He is exemplifying the command by placing the shema physically close to his hand and to his head, protecting himself from the world. He is potentially undermining the command by considering his adherence to the command before the command itself. As reformed Christians, we know that Jesus did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill the law. Therefore, as Jesus himself points out in the three of the four Gospels, the law remains, but it is embodied in Jesus himself. We do not need to wear the tefillin to ensure our faith, but in our hearts, we should be calling on Jesus moment by moment in precisely the same way the tefillin carrying the shema points its wearer to God. We do not need a checklist of must-dos and must-wears in order to prove our faith, but we do need to approach the throne again and again each day, seeking the Lord and listening well.

Questions to Consider:

What does it mean to you to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength"?

How do you put on Jesus each day, much as a traditional Jew might put on a tefillin? How will you put him on today?

When others look at you today, how will they see this greatest command in your demeanor, your words, your actions?

In the moments when you forget that you are called to wear this commandment front and center, what would help you to remember? Is it Scripture, praise music, prayer, the nudge of a family member or friend? How can you ensure that you have that level of accountability in your life, urging you ever-closer to Jesus?

The *mezuzah* is another Rabbinic tradition – the words of the shema or a small box containing parchment paper that has the shema written on it, affixed to the doorpost of a home. In more conservative Jewish homes, the mezuzah can be found on every doorway aside from bathrooms and closets. Are there Jesus reminders in your home? What are they, and where are they? How do they help to keep you focused on God and His love?

Videos for Further Reflection:

[Trailer for *The Chosen* by Chaim Potok](#) (2 minutes)

[Lincoln Brewster's "Love the Lord"](#) (3 minutes)