



This is the fourth in a series of articles by **Lazer Raksin** about his work in Mivtza Tefillin. The series will come to an end IY"YH with the coming of Moshiach, at which time Lazer's work will have achieved its purpose. Lazer is back yet again, by popular demand, and this time the title of his article is...

## The Smoking Tefillin

I had lots of successes, Boruch Hashem, which you know about already, but there were these two men who were just tough nuts to crack. These two men refused and refused to put on Tefillin; they just wouldn't hear of it; they got angry at me for persevering. Let me tell you the story.

The first fellow, I'll call him Abe, worked in a place that I would go into every day in the summer. Every day, I would politely inquire of his secretary if Abe was available to put on Tefillin. And every day the secretary would go into his office, and a few seconds later she would come out and say, "Sorry, the boss is busy and has no time for you." Day in and day out, the same question and the same response. I kept asking and he kept refusing.

One day the boss walked out of his office while I was there and I approached him directly, asking if he would like to put on Tefillin. He looked me straight in the eye and snarled: "Don't you get it, every day you come in here and every day I refuse you! When will you learn that no means no?!" I responded simply that he had never told me no, he had only sent me a message through the secretary that he was busy. "Okay," he said, "Now I'm telling you no. Don't ever come here to ask me about Tefillin. If you want to come here to talk business, that's fine." (I deal with his company in my line of business). Well, I had my answer and it was no, so I apologized and left.

One day I met Abe in the place of business of someone who I go to regularly (someone who puts on Tefillin with me regularly). I asked my regular to please approach Abe, and he agreed, saying, "Now that you're on my turf, how about putting on Tefillin?" Abe's response was, "You enjoy putting on Tefillin, well that's good for you, but I'm not interested, and that's final." I couldn't resist sticking my nose in, so I said, "How about if you do it just once, as a favor for me?" Abe turned on his heel and walked out.

One day he walked in to my pizza shop, and he told me that it was bothering him that I had asked him to put on Tefillin as a personal favor and he had refused. So he would do it eventually. But, he continued, he couldn't promise me when. Well, this was an improvement!

A few months later, I approached him, and he was "busy" as usual. A few months later, on that fateful day of 9/11, early in the morning before the famous events took place, I again approached him in his office and asked him if now was a good time for him to put on Tefillin. After all, I reminded him, "You said you would do it as a favor to me." Abe had really had it with me. He stood up behind his desk and in a loud voice demanded, "*I said?* I SAID? I don't like your choice of words." Then he bellowed, "**Who let this guy in?**" I turned and walked out quickly from his office, only to find out ten minutes later that the first plane had just crashed into the towers. Now I gave up hope. I figured he would always associate my face with the 9/11 evil, and he



would never say yes to me.

We'll get back to Abe in a minute. First let me tell you about the second person who was a tough nut to crack. This man (I'll call him Ben) was a son-in-law of Debbie's. If you read my previous articles I'm sure you remember Debbie, the courageous, determined lady who has been helping me throughout my campaign. Now even she told me that I would never get that son-in-law. Her other one I finally got, if you remember. He had said, "I'm not starting up with my mother-in-law." But as for Ben, there was no hope, according to Debbie, since he's very stubborn.

At the time it was winter, and as you know, during the winter I drive down to the Catskills only on Tuesdays. But Tuesday was Ben's day to travel on business, so I hardly got a chance to even try. From time to time, though, I would be going up on other days like Erev Yom Tov, etc. When I would meet up with him, he was very nice, never angry, but he would patiently explain to me that he believes in G-d, but that's about it. G-d yes, mitzvos no. No Tefillin, no, absolutely none whatsoever. I would try to talk to him, to feel him out, to figure out what was behind his attitude since he did believe in G-d, but to no avail. The only thing that Yom Kippur meant to him was overtime, since he would work extra hours and fill in for Jewish employees who didn't want to work. (Unfortunately he didn't work for his in-laws. He was a salesman in some other company.)

On Chol Hamoed Succos I drove up with my lulav and esrog. With Ben in mind, I made sure not to go on a Tuesday. I got to talking with him, but his stubbornness had only increased since our last conversation. We were only talking about Tefillin, so I casually told him to please hold the lulav

and make a bracha with me. And he did just that without thinking too much, and it took only ten seconds.

"See," I told him, "Now how bad was that?" "Well, I don't believe in that," he said again. A broken record. I guess we are all broken records when it comes to our cherished beliefs, whether they make sense or not.

The more I got to talking with him the more I understood that his problem was that he had convinced himself that he believes in G-d, but he doesn't believe in anything that's associated with G-d, like following the commandments. Go figure it out. It didn't make sense to me. My feeling was that because he had put his foot in his mouth, he was afraid to take it out, lest he be labeled a hypocrite. I should have shown him Gershon Schusterman's article in the Pesach issue. A Jew who puts on Tefillin is no hypocrite, no matter what else he does or doesn't do.

When I told Debbie, his mother-in-law, that I had gotten Ben to shake the lulav and make the brocha, she couldn't believe it. I told her to have faith. "You'll see, one day I will get him to put on Tefillin too." All she would say was *Good Luck to you, Lazer!*

So we have two hard nuts to crack, Abe who threw me out of his office, and Ben who believes in G-d, but not in mitzvos.

One day I was invited to a Bris. A baby had been born to Debbie's other son-in-law, the one who did put on Tefillin with me. The Bris was to take place on Friday at 1:30 in the afternoon. They really wanted me to come. Friday afternoon is a hard time for me to leave my regular job, and especially that Friday, as there was a torrential downpour outside. I was torn. I just couldn't decide whether it was worth the





whole effort. Finally, my friend convinced me to go, and he even offered to find me a replacement.

I came to the Bris, and lo and behold, the place was a veritable gold mine! There were non-observant Jews everywhere, Jews who had never put on Tefillin! Was I ever glad I had come! I set up shop in the kitchen and started putting on Tefillin with the guests. Some people had no idea what Tefillin were all about. If you belong to a Reform Temple, a Bar Mitzvah means being called up to the Torah, and that's it. No Tefillin, nothing, not even once. One after another, I got the people to put on Tefillin. If anyone gave me a hard time I alerted Debbie, and she brought them right back to me, already taking off their jackets. You should have seen the smile on Debbie's face. We were having the time of our lives, doing what we were born to do.

Two people earnestly turned me down, explaining, "We're Tuesday people." What, I tried to explain back, Friday it becomes a sin? Please! The hardest thing for me

## **By the time I left that Bris, the Tefillin were too hot to handle, and all the way home, my Tefillin were still smoking**

was to keep track of who had already put on Tefillin. Sorry, I had to explain, there are no doubles. Once a day per customer.

You know who was also at the Bris, don't you? Abe! Caught up in the spirit of the simcha, I approached him cautiously, and asked him very, very politely if he would like to put on Tefillin in honor of the Bris. He gave me a cool one word answer: No. I couldn't let the conversation stop there, so I asked him, "Have you noticed that I haven't bothered you since our last conversation? I left you alone, so how about doing it today?"

His answer froze me in my tracks. I thought I would faint. Very casually, quietly, he sort of gave a little sigh and said, "Alright, Lazer, I'll put on Tefillin today." This was like a dream come true. That Abe should agree to put on Tefillin? It was years that I was asking him! I had been thrown out of his office! I wanted to start dancing but I remembered that it wasn't a wedding, and we don't dance at Brissen. Abe put on Tefillin, and I thanked him, and that was that.

Now that I knew that miracles were happening today, I decided to head straight for my other toughie, Ben. Of course he was there because it was his nephew's Bris. I figured for his nephew's Bris he might make an exception to his philosophical stand against doing mitzvos. I approached him and asked him if he would like to put on Tefillin in honor of the Bris. His response was, "This is not the place

for it." As if I had asked him to play catch with me, on the salad table. "Okay," I said, "Then where is the right place?" I think he got the point that wherever he would say, I might just go there. So Ben told me in a really slow and calm voice, in the tone you use when you are talking with armed criminals or very small children, "This time when I say No, I mean No. The next time you ask I might not answer in such a calm voice." And he walked away.

I knew I had nothing to lose. I didn't see Ben regularly. I only saw him now because of the Bris. Who knew when the next occasion would be? So I decided to go for broke. I walked over to Ben who was standing next to his father-in-law. I did not even look at Ben. I said to the father-in-law (Debbie's husband), "Maybe if you ask Ben to put on Tefillin in honor of the Bris, he will do it." The father-in-law immediately turned to Ben, cool as a cucumber, and gave it to him pointblank: "Ben, please, put on Tefillin with Lazer."

Ben said to his father-in-law, "I'll do it for you. Not for Debbie, and certainly not for Lazer. But for you, I'll do it." I knew I should get right to work, before he changed his mind, but I had to stop and pinch myself a few times just to make sure I wasn't dreaming. I couldn't believe it! Both my tough nuts, cracking at the same time! First Abe and now Ben... what a beautiful day.

I took Ben into a side room, and we put on the Tefillin. I said the Brochos very slowly and he repeated with great respect. All his anger had disappeared. Together we said the Shema in Hebrew and English, so he could understand what he was saying. Debbie happened to glance into the room and she saw Ben with the Tefillin on. With tears in her eyes she took some pictures, as she explained, just to make sure that she was really seeing what she thought she was seeing.

Thank G-d the Mohel came a half hour late. All the other people there weren't too thrilled that he showed up late. But I was delighted, because that gave me the opportunity to get all the men that showed up for the Bris to put on Tefillin. I lost count after twenty five, but one thing I can assure you... by the time I left that Bris, the Tefillin were too hot to handle, and all the way home, my Tefillin were still smoking.

Now the summer is upon us and I move to the Catskill Mountains in the summer, so instead of traveling in every Tuesday, I go out every day and do my Tefillin rounds. I pray that Moshiach comes very quickly because, among other reasons, three hours of Mivtza Tefillin every day can be very tiring, especially since I go straight from there to a job that ends at 9:00 P.M. But until Moshiach comes we all just have to keep on going and putting on Tefillin with Yidden as much as possible. I speak to myself also when I say: Never give up because sooner or later you will get even the most stubborn of them all! Have a great summer! 🍷