

Tefillin and *mezuzos* are integral components of every Jew's life, but sometimes we fail to give these crucial *mitzvos* the attention they are due.

Why are *tefillin* and *mezuzos* so costly, and how can a person make sure he is buying items that are truly kosher?

What does it take to become a qualified *sofer*?

And why has it become so difficult to find new *mezuzos* for purchase?

For the inside scoop, we turned to Rabbi Reuvain Mendlowitz, a highly skilled *magiah* and expert on all matters pertaining to *safrus*.

Letter of the Law

A Behind-the-Scenes Peek into the World of Safrus

BY DOVID SUSSMAN

A few months ago, a family member in America asked me for what seemed like a fairly prosaic favor: He needed a few *mezuzos*, and he asked if I could procure some in Eretz Yisroel at a reasonable price. In ordinary times, this would have been a fairly simple matter — but I soon discovered that these are not ordinary times, and the matter was far from simple.

As soon as the request came my way, I blithely picked up the phone to call Rabbi Reuvain Mendlowitz, a local expert on *safrus* who has many connections for the purchase of *sifrei Torah*, *tefillin*, and *mezuzos*. As soon as I outlined my request, Rabbi Mendlowitz informed me that he did not have any *mezuzos* in stock. This was somewhat unusual, but I was even

more surprised to learn that this was a sign of a much more sweeping issue: a global shortage of *mezuzos* and other *safrus* articles, which had been going on for a while. Is this another of the seemingly endless array of repercussions of the Covid pandemic? Does it have something to do with the economic turmoil that is holding the world in its grip? Or is there some other explanation for this phenomenon?

With his intimate knowledge of the field, Rabbi Mendlowitz has about 10 different hypotheses to explain the waning supply of *mezuzos*. But before we addressed that issue, I took the opportunity to solicit some general information on the world of *safrus*, and I discovered that almost nothing about the field is as simple as it may seem.

More Than a Proofreader

Rabbi Reuvain Mendlowitz is a man who has his finger on the pulse of the world of *safrus*. While he is trained as a *magiah* (a job title that translates only loosely as “proofreader,” but is a specialty requiring abundant knowledge and proficiency), he also fields a steady stream of calls from people seeking *tefillin* and *mezuzos* for purchase and is closely acquainted with the market. He has also amassed extensive knowledge of the *halachos* pertaining to this area, and he serves on multiple *botei horaah* where *shailos* on these subjects are fielded.

Sitting at a table laden with all the trappings of his trade — a *sefer Torah*, a few *mezuzos* undergoing inspection, and a set of *tefillin*, along with various other paraphernalia — Rabbi Mendlowitz briefly outlined his background.

“I became involved in the field of *safrus* incidentally,” he revealed. “While I was in *kollel*, I was going through the *Mishnah Berurah* with a *chaburah* during *bein hasedorim*, and when we reached *siman* 32, which discusses the laws of *safrus*, I found myself fascinated by it. We learned it intently, and I began studying the *halachos* with other *chavrusos* as well. Over time, my involvement in the field snowballed, and the turning point was when I met Rav Mordechai Friedlander, the expert on *safrus* who was Rav Elyashiv’s *talmid muvhak* in that area and who served as the *rov* of the Yerushalayim branch of Mishmeres Stam. I was close to him for 13 years, until his passing, and I gained a copious amount of knowledge from that connection.”

Rabbi Mendlowitz, who holds *semicha* from Rav Friedlander, currently serves on two *botei horaah* dealing with *safrus* and delivers *shiurim* on the topic in many venues. He is the author of *Inside STAM*, a comprehensive buyer’s guide for the purchase of *safrus* articles of any kind, which was released over 10 years ago and has since been followed by a Hebrew edition. He holds certification as a *magiah*, a professional

who has been trained to inspect *sifrei Torah*, *tefillin*, and *mezuzos* and to identify any defects or disqualifications.

“Actually,” he admitted, “I was certified as a *sofer* first, but I barely had a chance to write much before I trained as a *magiah*. After that, I was kept too busy checking other people’s *tefillin* and *mezuzos* to write my own.” The standard procedure at the time, he explained, was for any potential *magiah* to receive certification first as a *sofer*, although this may no longer be the case. “Personally, I think it is a good policy,” he added. “You can understand the difference as follows: A *sofer* has to know how to produce something; he has to be trained in the technique and know how to go about doing his job. A *magiah*, on the other hand, is like a mechanic or a detective; his responsibility is to locate problems and determine whether they can be corrected. In a certain sense, it is an extremely difficult and involved task, and it requires more expertise. The preliminary knowledge of the *sofer* is definitely valuable for producing a better *magiah*.”

He also noted that serving as both a *magiah* and a broker presents an ethical conundrum. “When a *magiah* who doubles as a broker checks someone’s *mezuzos*, there can be a conflict of interest,” he explained. “If he tells them that the *mezuzos* are *posul*, then he has the opportunity to make a profit by selling them other *mezuzos* as a replacement.” He added that some *rabbanim* recommend that a *magiah* avoid this problem by refraining from informing a client that he sells *mezuzos* as well. “If he finds that a *mezuzah* is *posul*, he can simply inform the customer and send him on his way. Even if the customer asks where to get a new one, he can refer him to someone else who is reliable. Only if the customer asks directly if he also sells *mezuzos* should he answer that he does.” This is not the standard practice, but the wisdom of this approach is undeniable.



Sticker Shock

A potential buyer’s first reaction to the cost of *tefillin* and *mezuzos* can sometimes be pure sticker shock. Even before the spike in prices triggered by the shortage of *stam* articles, a *mezuzah* of high quality used to fetch between \$110 and \$125, while an excellent set of *parshiyos* for *tefillin* could run for anywhere from \$700 to \$1,000. But while some customers might have balked at these prices, Rabbi Mendlowitz feels they are actually quite reasonable.

“People severely underestimate the amount of time, effort, energy, training, and physical exertion that goes into the production of a *mezuzah* or *tefillin*,” he said. “If you take these factors into account, you will realize that these items are not really expensive at all. A *sofer* earns less per hour than people in most other professions, even though the work is extremely intense. *Safrus* is physically taxing on many parts of the body — the knees, the back, the eyes, the neck, the elbows, and so forth — and the mental concentration can also be very draining. Some *sofrim* reach the point at which they are unable to continue their work due to the grueling nature of the job. And it becomes even more difficult — and less profitable — when you consider the fact that a *sofer* might lose hours of work — or even a few days, in the case of *tefillin* — if he discovers an error that cannot be repaired and that invalidates something he has just produced.”

He also stressed the importance of putting the cost of these items in perspective. “If you amortize the cost of *tefillin* or *mezuzos* over all the days that they are in use, you will realize that the price is actually negligible,” he pointed out. “For instance, even if someone spends a couple of thousand dollars on a pair of *tefillin*, he will be wearing them for decades, and they require minimal maintenance. The annual cost of the *tefillin* therefore comes out to a very small sum. People spend more money on their couches and their suits than on their *tefillin*! When you think about it like that, the cost of these items will certainly seem less imposing, and even completely justifiable.”

Quality Assurance

Putting these arguments aside, however, it remains undeniable that the average consumer has little way of gauging the quality of a *safrus* article. To the layman, the many intricate details of the laws of *safrus* are essentially a closed book. How can the typical buyer be sure that he is getting his money's worth? More to the point, how can he know that he is buying a *mezuzah* or *tefillin* that is truly kosher and meets his standards?

Rabbi Mendlowitz acknowledged that it is difficult to be absolutely certain about this, but he offered a few handy tips that should steer every potential purchaser in the right direction. "Any *sofer* with integrity," he said, "will inspect his work on his own and will also have it examined by a qualified *magiah* before allowing it to be sold. If the item is purchased from a broker, then it is the broker's responsibility to ensure that it is checked both by computer and manually before it is offered for sale. Skipping either of those steps before selling the item would be a serious breach of protocol. For the buyer, the first and most important thing to do is to make sure that both the *sofer* and the *magiah* are certified.

"Of course," he continued, "this isn't a foolproof system. It is always possible that a *sofer* or *magiah* might exist who never received formal certification but is better at the job than someone who is officially recognized by an organization. A certificate isn't an ironclad guarantee that every *mezuzah* produced by a *sofer* is up to par. For the most part, however, if you want to be sure that you are making a wise purchase, you should seek both a *sofer* and a *magiah* with certifications that are up to date."

Up to date? Indeed, these certifications expire after three years, at which point the recipients are required to repeat the two tests — written and oral — that were necessary for them to earn the certificates in the first place. This system has been put in place to ensure that the professionals retain the crucial knowledge of the complex *halachos* that are the backbone of their work.

"It is a serious misconception that a person knows what he is doing simply because he has spent years in the business," Rabbi Mendlowitz stressed. "If he doesn't review the *halachos* regularly, he could easily make major mistakes. Constant *chazarah* is indispensable; without it, a *sofer* could lose the expertise that he worked so hard to acquire." In fact, he added, Rav Mordechai Friedlander related that he once administered an oral test to a *sofer* whose knowledge of the *halachos* was impeccable; he had mastered the *halachos* to a greater degree than anyone else whom the *rov* had ever tested. Three years later, the man returned to repeat the test and renew his certification, and he failed miserably. "He spent those years working day and night in the field, but he never opened a *sefer* to review the *halachos*," Rabbi Mendlowitz said gravely, "and this was the result."

While it might have been difficult to find a competent *magiah* in years past, there has been something of a renaissance in the field in recent years. Many new *magihim* are being trained and new certification programs have opened, and Rabbi Mendlowitz hopes that the influx of new talent will improve the situation in the market in general. In addition, some organizations have tweaked the system for renewing certification by requiring candidates to appear once a year for an oral review of the *halachos*, in addition to retaking the regular tests every three years. Naturally, anything that can be done to ensure the caliber of these professionals can only be beneficial to the public.

Rabbi Mendlowitz also revealed that there is an exciting new development in the works that may revolutionize the market for *safrus* articles. "While a buyer's best bet today is to make sure that the *sofer* and *magiah* are certified, I am involved in STAMP, an organization still in the beginning stages whose goal is to provide the closest possible thing to a *hechsher* on individual *mezuzos*, *parshiyos*, and the like. While it's impossible to have a seal attesting that a *mezuzah* on the shelf in a store is actually kosher at any given moment, this organization will certify that the *sofer* and *magiah* who worked on the item were both certified by the organization itself, that the *klaf* and the ink used in its production were approved, and that it was checked by a computer as well. The organization also plans on supervising the production of *battim*, the *giddim* used for sewing *tefillin* and *sifrei Torah*, and much more." This innovation seems poised to add a new layer of regulation and security to a market that sorely lacks oversight and standardization.

Being a Savvy Buyer

Beyond checking a *sofer's* certification, is there anything else a buyer can do to evaluate a potential seller? Rabbi Mendlowitz confirmed that there is. "Whether you are buying these articles from a *sofer* or a broker," he said, "it is always important to ask them for the name of the *rov* to whom they ask their *shailos*. If the seller doesn't have a name to give you as soon as you ask the question, that is even worse than a red flag; it's a sign that you should turn around and run the other way!"

The point, he explained, isn't for the buyer to evaluate the proficiency of the *rov* in question. "If someone from Denver calls a *sofer* in Meah Shearim and gets the name of a *rov* he has never heard of, that isn't going to give him any individualized information," Rabbi Mendlowitz said. "However, what is important is that the *sofer* has a name to give him in the first place. Every qualified *sofer* asks *shailos* all the time; if someone can't identify the *rov* to whom he presents his questions, he must be doing something wrong."

Another way to assess a potential seller is to try to engage him in discussion about the *halachos* pertaining to his work. "If you are about to make a purchase," Rabbi Mendlowitz suggested, "it might be a good idea to spend an hour or so researching some of the *halachos*; there are some very good *seforim* available today that deal with these topics in a clear and accessible fashion. Once you

have done that, you can go to the seller and ask him some questions based on what you have learned. For instance, you might ask a broker if the *sofer* who wrote the *mezuzos* was *makpid* to write on *klaf avodas yad*. If he responds that he isn't sure or he simply doesn't seem to know what you are talking about, then you can be sure that he himself doesn't have enough of an education, even if he is a veteran of the business."

One of the greatest obstacles facing consumers in this area, Rabbi Mendlowitz confirmed, is the lack of clarity as to how to know when they can rely upon a seller's knowledge. "Then again, what do we expect?" he asked rhetorically. "The average layman, or even *yungerman* in *kollel*, has almost no knowledge of these *halachos* himself; how is he supposed to gauge the reliability of another person who may or may not have that knowledge?"

"At the very least, though, one can make use of the tips I listed: making sure the *sofer* and the *magiah* are certified, inquiring if the *sofer* or vendor has a *rov* to whom he asks his *shailos*, and trying to discuss the *halachos* with him. Of course, you can also do a little research about where other people who are known to be meticulous buy their *mezuzos* and *tefillin*, as is the case with any other *mitzvah*, such as a *lulav* and *esrog* or *matzos*. None of these strategies are absolutely foolproof, but they can certainly be helpful."

Regular Checkups

Purchasing kosher *tefillin* and *mezuzos* is actually only the first step. Even if these items are flawless when they are bought, some effort is required to ensure they stay that way. There is a well-known *halacha* that requires *mezuzos* to be inspected twice in seven years, and while some people tend to be a bit lax in this regard, Rabbi Mendlowitz emphasized the importance of keeping up with the required inspections. Moreover, he added that while it is widely believed that the *parshiyos* of *tefillin* should never be checked at all, this is a serious misconception.

"In fact, someone just called me a short time ago and told me that he wasn't sure if he should have his *tefillin* checked, and he wanted me to convince him to go ahead with it. I told him that I could persuade him in 30 seconds," Rabbi Mendlowitz said. "Here is a simple argument: If you took 100 pairs of *tefillin* that were written a century ago and inspected them all, how many would turn out to be kosher? Either none of them, or, at the most, just one! After 100 years, the writing will fade in almost every set of *tefillin* in the world, but we can never know exactly when it will happen. In the case of our 100 pairs of century-old *tefillin*, some of them might have faded 90 years ago, some might have faded 40 years ago, and some might have faded 18 years ago, but one thing is for sure — the writing will fade."

By the same token, Rabbi Mendlowitz added, we can know with certainty that almost every pair of *tefillin* in existence today will suffer the same fate at some point over the next century: The writing on the *parshiyos* will fade to the point that the *tefillin* become *posul*. If anything, he added, the situation with contemporary *tefillin* is even worse. Thus, the proverbial handwriting is on the wall — not just on the parchment — from the very beginning: *Tefillin* (and *mezuzos*) are bound to fade, and if one wants to keep them in good order, they should be checked at regular intervals. In the case of *mezuzos*, the *halacha* mandates having them examined twice in seven years; as for *tefillin*, Rabbi Mendlowitz recommends having them inspected about once every 10 or 15 years.

"If you know that your *tefillin* are going to fade," Rabbi Mendlowitz pointed out, "why not take preemptive action? Why should you wait until you are no longer in this world, and someone checks your *tefillin* before giving them to a grandchild and discovers that they are no longer kosher, when you can have them checked now and possibly refresh the writing before they become completely *posul*?"



Where Have All the Mezuzos Gone?

Of course, to fulfill the *mitzvos* of *tefillin* and *mezuzah*, one must be able to acquire these items, which brings us to the next question:

What is the reason for the global shortage of *stam* articles?

"I have numerous theories to explain this phenomenon," Rabbi Mendlowitz said, "but I will condense them into two overall points. First, the shortage of *mezuzos* is partly a result of a shortage of *sofrim*. Twenty to thirty years ago, almost any *yungerman* in Israel who needed *parnossah* would become a *sofer*. This was certainly true in the *chassidish* community, but it was the case in the *Litvish* world as well. The economic opportunities for the *chareidi* community in Eretz Yisroel were limited, and *safrus* was a natural choice of occupation for any man struggling to support his family on a *kollel* stipend. Today, however, there is a wide range of options for anyone who wants to improve his financial situation, and there is nothing steering our *yungeleit* in the direction of the field of *safrus*, so it's only natural that there are fewer *sofrim* in the field.

"Another factor is the steep rise in demand for *sifrei Torah*, which has a lot to do with the unprecedented prosperity enjoyed by *Klal Yisroel* today," he continued. "For one thing, we have more wealthy people than ever before, and for another thing, the habits of the wealthy class have changed as well. Twenty years ago, only a small percentage of the *frum* upper class commissioned their own *sifrei Torah*, but today, about 90% of our *gvirim* are having *sifrei Torah* written for themselves.

"It's possible that Covid may have a hand in this trend as well," Rabbi Mendlowitz added. "A lot of people probably realized that it was a good thing to have *sifrei Torah* in their homes, and there are also many *sifrei Torah* being written in memory of people who passed away during the pandemic. What that means is that many *sofrim* who would otherwise be writing *mezuzos* are now receiving offers to write *sifrei Torah*. Only a few years ago, it would be unheard of for a novice in the field to be hired to write a *sefer Torah*, but today the average beginner is receiving a dozen offers. And who can blame the *sofrim* for taking these jobs? Be-

ing hired to write a *sefer Torah* means that you have guaranteed income for a long stretch of time, whereas you would have to find a different buyer for every *mezuzah* you write."

Of course, along with the shrinking supply of *mezuzos* comes the ever-increasing demand, which is another of the factors contributing to the shortage. "*Boruch Hashem, Klal Yisroel* has been enjoying exponential growth," Rabbi Mendlowitz mused. "Just think about it: Years ago, the *frum* community was small, and everyone knew everyone else. Today, our community has ballooned; there are far more religious people than ever before, and that means that there are many more people who need *mezuzos* for their homes. But at the same time, the volume of *sofrim* in the field isn't keeping up with our population growth."

The shortage, he added, is felt most severely in the market for *mezuzos*; the *tefillin* market hasn't been hit quite as hard. "That's because anyone who is capable of writing *tefillin* still has a significant incentive to do it," he explained. "*Tefillin* are the most lucrative products for a *sofer*, even more so than *sifrei Torah*, because it takes a much higher level of expertise to write *tefillin* and therefore they command higher prices. The difference between a *sofer* who writes *mezuzos* and one who writes *tefillin* is like the difference between a general practitioner and a specialist; writing *tefillin* is a much more specialized task. It is also a riskier job; a *sofer* can sometimes work for two or three days on a *parshah* and then find a defect that renders it unusable. And as is the case in any other field, the higher the risk, the higher the reward."

So perhaps we can breathe a sigh of relief with the assurance that there will still be *tefillin* available for our *bar mitzvah* boys, but what about all the people who cannot obtain *mezuzos* to place on their doors? Unfortunately, there are no easy answers to this question. "You can't imagine how many people have said to me, 'I can't find any *mezuzos*; what am I supposed to do?'" Rabbi Mendlowitz revealed. "I have had people tell me that they called seven or eight brokers and came up empty-handed. I wish I had a solution for them, but there are no magic answers to this question."



Getting the Placement Right

But even if a person manages to find *mezuzos* and ensure that they are up to his *halachic* standards, that is still only half the battle. The *halachos* governing the placement of *mezuzos* — which rooms and doorways require *mezuzos*, where a *mezuzah* should be placed in a doorway, and so forth — are highly complex, and the potential for *shailos* to arise in this area is endless. It is all too possible for a person to spend a fortune acquiring *mezuzos* of the highest quality, only to fail to fulfill the *mitzvah* because they were not placed correctly in his home.

“The average new house in America today has at least 20 to 25 *mezuzos*, with many having well over 35, and some houses can have as many as 70 or 80!” Rabbi Mendlowitz said. “Even in a typical home with about 35 *mezuzos*, there are bound to be about 10 or 20 doorways that are subject to a real *halachic shailah*. There are all sorts of issues that need to be clarified in a typical house, including which areas require a *mezuzah*, where the *mezuzah* should be placed in the doorway, and whether it should be on the right or the left side. In fact, there are endless *shailos* that can be asked about the *halachic* definition of the direction of a doorway, which determines the side where the *mezuzah* belongs.

“In many houses, the main floor contains a series of rooms with doorways leading from one to the next, and the homeowner must consult a *rov* to determine whether the doorway is considered an entrance to one side or the other. For instance, is the door between the kitchen and the dining room considered an entrance to the kitchen or an entrance to the dining room? What about a door between a living room and a den? There are many possible scenarios and permutations of these questions, which can be very complicated. In some homes, the family will enter the home through one door on *Shabbos* and a different door during the week, which means that the flow of traffic changes with regard to the various rooms. In some families, the husband, the wife, and the children all come into the home through different entrances, and this is also a factor that might need to be weighed.

“Then there is the issue of high doorways, which is subject to another major debate among the *poskim*. I was once walking in the street in Lakewood, and I saw a *mezuzah* placed in the wrong spot in a high doorway,” Rabbi Mendlowitz revealed. “There is actually a dispute about this *halacha*; some *poskim* rule that the *mezuzah* should be installed on the upper third of the doorpost, while others say that it should be placed at shoulder height. However, this homeowner did not follow either of the opinions; he placed the *mezuzah* at the midpoint of the door, and he was certainly incorrect to position it there. It is unfortunate, but he may not have been in fulfillment of the *mitzvah d’oraisa* of *mezuzah*.”

Fortunately, the solution to this problem is relatively simple. “I would strongly advise anyone moving into a new home — or even someone who has never done this in their existing home — to have a knowledgeable *rov* evaluate all the doorways in the home regarding the *chiyuv* of *mezuzah*,” Rabbi Mendlowitz said. “This can be done by having the *rov* walk through the home, or by showing him the blueprints, the pictures, or even a video tour of the house. I recently received a video walkthrough of a home from someone in America, and I was able to see all the doorways clearly and guide him regarding the placement of *mezuzos*. But I can’t emphasize enough how many different areas of an ordinary home are prone to *shailos*: backyards, patios, garages, boiler rooms, storage rooms, and so forth. It’s really crucial to run these things by a qualified *rov* to make sure you are properly adhering to the dictates of *halacha*.

“I actually have a dream of setting up a tourist attraction showcasing many different possible *shailos* in *hilchos mezuzah*,” Rabbi Mendlowitz commented. “It would look like an IKEA showroom, but each display would be constructed with a scenario involving a different *shailah*, and the visitors would be able to learn about the *halachos* of *mezuzah* through a hands-on experience. It would cost a fortune and take an enormous amount of time to set up, though, so it will probably never happen,” he added wryly.

For the time being, then, we will all have to manage without a *mezuzah* wonderland to visit on *Chol Hamoed*. But that should not stop us from learning a bit more about these critical *halachos* and becoming educated consumers with the capacity to make wise choices. As is the case with many areas of *halacha*, there is much more to *tefillin* and *mezuzos*, two basic and ubiquitous facets of Torah observance, than meets the eye. Fortunately, there are exciting new developments in the *safros* world to make it easier for us to make educated purchases, and with a little bit of research and knowledge, we can be armed with the information we need to be wise consumers.



The Sukkos Angle

With *Sukkos* just around the corner, it seemed only natural to question Rabbi Mendlowitz about whether the *halachos* of *mezuzah* have any bearing on the use of a *sukkah*. Do these temporary structures require *mezuzos*? And even if they don’t, there must surely be some fascinating *halachic* questions that might arise with respect to the holiday of *Sukkos*.

On a practical level, Rabbi Mendlowitz reassured me, a *sukkah* does not require a *mezuzah*. On the other hand, there are issues relevant to a *sukkah* that are subject to lengthy discussion among the *poskim*. “If you want to give a good *shiur* on *Chol Hamoed Sukkos* pertaining to *hilchos mezuzah*, you can probably spend an hour and a half talking about rooms with retractable ceilings that are converted into *sukkos* for *Yom Tov*,” he said. “According to some *poskim*, it might be necessary to move the *mezuzah* to the opposite side of the doorpost in such a room. Around the year, the door is considered an entrance into the room, but when the room becomes a *sukkah*, the door might be redefined as an entrance from the *sukkah* into the home, which would switch the direction of the doorway.

“Furthermore, even if there is no need to move the *mezuzah*, there is another *shailah* as to whether it is necessary to take it down and reinstall it after the roof is put back in place. Since the room is essentially ‘rebuilt’ at that time, it might become a situation of *taaseh v’lo min ha’asui* — where the doorway becomes subject to the *mitzvah* with the *mezuzah* already attached to it. In practice, most contemporary *poskim* rule leniently on both of these questions, but it still makes for a fascinating discussion.”

Another *shailah*, he added, pertains to a *sukkah* built at the front door to a home and that must be traversed before one can enter the home. “This may be a relatively uncommon scenario,” he said, “but if it happens, it can become a serious *shailah* as to whether the *sukkah* is considered a *beis shaar* — an entranceway leading into the house — in which case it might be required to have a *mezuzah* for that reason.”