

Buffalo Grove Countryside

Wrapping up the mitzvah of tefillin on Super Bowl Sunday in Long Grove

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LONG GROVE — It is a tradition as ancient as the Scriptures that led to its beginning, and may have been as odd-sounding 3,000 years ago as it is today.

“It is a beautiful and, in some ways, strange symbol of our connection to God,” said Rabbi Jeff Pivo of Congregation Beth Judea in Long Grove.

“I’m trying to think of words that will make sense to the general public,” said Norm Kurtz, the congregation’s lay leader.

Both were describing World Wide Wrap XIII, the other Roman-numeraled event that takes place every Super Bowl Sunday — the one in which thousands of conservative Jews around the globe tie small boxes made of leather, with Scriptures written inside them, to their arms and heads using leather straps. Abraham first described what would become the mitzvah of tefillin in the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy — he instructed his people to write Scriptures on their foreheads, bind them to their arms and write them on their gates, with the intention of keeping a close relationship with the Lord.

“It’s to remind us to do God’s commandments, to live pursuant to God’s law, as given to us in the Scriptures,” Kurtz said.

The World Wide Wrap is a program of the Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs; Pivo noted that, because Beth Judea is an egalitarian congregation, both women and men ages 13 and older are welcome to attend. On Sunday, more than 100 worshipers came out, which Kurtz said was about the group’s average.

Tefillin has been a form of prayer since ancient days, in which Jews tie the small boxes around their head and their less-used arm (symbolizing man’s dependence on God); on their arms, worshippers tie the straps in an intricate pattern. Kurtz, who is a past president of the Federation, began the morning with instructions for how to make that pattern.

Of course, Abraham did not prescribe that tefillin take place on the morning of his culture’s greatest sporting event — Kurtz said the World Wide Wrap became associated with the Super Bowl simply because it was an easy day for men’s clubs to remember.

“Most of the people around the world are cognizant of the fact that the Super Bowl is being played on Super Bowl Sunday,” he said. “The day begins in Australia, but by the time Jews in Hawaii are beginning their morning, we’re already watching the game.”

Kurtz said the tefillin tradition had become less popular in recent decades, and the 350 clubs of the Federation began the Wrap in hopes of restoring it.

“So many traditions have been lost over the years,” he said. “We have reinvigorated this practice exponentially.”

“Putting on a symbol on your body is different from talking about a connection to God,” Pivo added. “It’s a great chance for them to experience prayer in a whole different way.”