WEEKLY TESHUVAH INSIGHTS FROM THE MAHARSHAM OF BREZHAN

THE MAHARSHAM PROJECT



שו״ת מהרש״ם

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The Whole Tanach on a Watch Chain

All twenty-four books of Tanach, photographed small enough to hang from a watch chain. It was a wonder of the new age. It also brought a sha'alah to the Maharsham's desk.



THE QUESTION

Picture a small case, a medallion, hanging from a man's watch chain. Inside it is all of Tanach. Not a few pesukim. All of it, every word, in *ksav ashuri*, exactly according to the *mesorah*. Look through the tiny lens, and the letters appear.

Photography was still new, and this was one of its marvels. The Maharsham even spells out the foreign word in Hebrew letters: a "medallion," מעדיליאן.

Now think about the man wearing it. He has it on him all day, every day. What does he do when he has to go somewhere one may not bring sefarim, like the restroom? And may it lie under his pillow at a time when sefarim may not be in the room uncovered?

Rav Shalom Tzvi Goldbaum, the Rav of Janowiec in Russian Poland, sent this question to the Maharsham. Is the case itself enough of a cover, or must the man first tuck it into a pocket sewn into his clothes? It sounds like a small question. The answer says a great deal about how we treat holy words.

A TANACH YOU READ THROUGH A LENS

Tiny photographs were new in the Maharsham's lifetime. John Benjamin Dancer, in England, made the first microphotographs in 1851, but you needed a microscope to see them. In 1857 René Dagron, in France, mounted them on a small, powerful lens. His "photomicroscopic jewelry" was a hit: by 1862, his workshop was turning out twelve thousand pieces a day. The medallion in this letter was the same idea, put to work for a sefer.



The Maharsham is referring to something like this: the opening of Bereishis, seen through a tiny lens. (Hashem's Name is blurred here.)

THE MAHARSHAM'S ANALYSIS

> *Two things have to be settled. First, does the case really cover the words? Second, do words made by a camera, not written by hand, deserve the same respect? Keep your eye on the second question.*

1. A Rav's Hat, and a Sefer in His Pocket

The Maharsham opens with a story about the Radbaz. Someone once asked the Radbaz whether you may walk into a restroom with papers of divrei Torah on you. He answered from his own life: "I have done this myself, in practice."

Sometimes people would stop him in the street and hand him a written sha'alah. He'd tuck it into his hat and keep walking, restroom included. "And I am not concerned about it," he wrote. He also carried a small sefer in his pocket at all times, with hints to the 613 mitzvos, so it would be ready the moment he came out. That went in with him too.

His reasoning was simple. Even tefillin may be brought into a restroom, as long as they're wrapped in a garment and held in your hand. Other sefarim are less holy than tefillin. So they can surely come in, and a pocket wraps them well.

But the Radbaz drew a line for himself. In principle, he said, even sefarim in ksav ashuri would be fine. In practice, he only did it with writing in other languages.

Other poskim want more. The Tashbetz says that tefillin and papers with Hashem's Names need a kis b'soch kis, and people used to buy leather cases for exactly this.

So a pocket can work, at least by the Radbaz. How many layers you need is another matter. And the medallion doesn't fit neatly into either picture.

2. A Cover You Can See Through

The medallion is a closed case with a glass face. The words are shut in tight, yet anyone can look through the lens and read them. So are they covered or not?

Rav Goldbaum had looked for an answer in the laws of tumah under one roof. It sounds a world away from a watch chain, but a Mishnah there deals with a related question: does glass block?

The Mishnah (Ohalos 6:5) speaks of something tamei lodged between the ceiling beams, with a layer as thin as a garlic peel underneath it. If it "can be seen" from inside, the house is tamei. The Rambam says "seen" means the layer is see-through, like glass. So in that halacha, glass does not separate. The Kesef Mishneh reads the Mishnah differently, and by his reading, glass does separate.

What does that mean for sefarim? By the Kesef Mishneh, the glass face would count as a cover. By the Rambam, it may not, even though glass is enough to let you say Shema facing filth behind it (Berachos 25b). The Maharsham leaves it open: "The matter still needs further study," he writes. So he won't rely on the Kesef Mishneh's reading to permit it.

3. Who Wrote These Letters?

Now the second question. All of this, the Maharsham points out, is about sefarim written by hand. No one ever wrote the letters of this copy. A camera made them.

Start with printing. The Rokeach says outright that printing isn't "writing" (though on Shabbos it is still forbidden). But the Rambam, in a teshuvah, forbade bringing letters *embroidered* into cloth, the parshah of tzitzis, into a restroom. Nobody wrote those with a pen either. It was still disrespect. So whether print counts as "writing" is one question. Whether you may treat the words with disrespect is a different one. And on that, the Maharsham suggests, even the Rokeach would likely agree: not in a place like that.

A photograph goes a step further. Nobody forms the letters, not even with a press. The Maharsham describes the whole process. A glass plate, coated with something like a skin of gelatin and kept out of the sun, faces the page through lenses and a folding bellows. A few minutes in the sunlight, a bath of chemicals, and the image is on the glass. From there it's copied onto coated paper, by the hundreds and the thousands.

So one could argue, he says, that a photograph isn't a person's act at all. The halacha calls this *koach kocho*: the person only started it, and something else did the work. The Maharsham compares it to something a monkey did, and cites the Gemara (Menachos 7a), where something that falls back into a vessel by itself counts as if a monkey put it there. It isn't counted as the person's doing. All the more so, the Maharsham adds, if a non-Jew made it.

Then the Maharsham says it makes no difference. Grant every one of those points, he says. These are still the words of Tanach, and you still may not treat them with disrespect.

> ומ"מ אין להקל דאכתי איכא בזיון כתבי קדש
>
> *"Even so, we may not permit it, because there is still disrespect to holy writings." (the Maharsham's words)*

4. Back to the Watch Chain

One thing works in the medallion's favor. The Tanach is already inside a case, with only one side showing, through glass. On that alone, there'd be room to permit it. But the Rambam's reading of the Mishnah suggests glass doesn't separate. With that still open, the Maharsham won't rely on the case by itself.

THE P'SAK

The medallion alone isn't enough. Before he takes it into a restroom, or keeps it under his pillow at such a time, he must put it into a pocket of his clothing, or something like it.

A SECOND QUESTION IN THE SAME LETTER

Rav Goldbaum also asked a kitchen question. A liver is so full of blood that salting can't draw it all out, so it's roasted over a fire, and the blood drips away. Rav Goldbaum knew the later poskim's discussion of roasting liver on paper, but he wasn't sure about burning straw.

The Maharsham permits it. You may salt meat on straw, since the blood drains through it the way it drains through a vessel with holes (Yoreh De'ah 69:16), so you may surely roast a liver on it. The straw burns out under the liver right away, and the fire around it and the heat of the oven finish the roasting. Either way, the blood has room to drain. Is a straw fire a real fire? If you see the liver is roasted, it worked. Even a parah adumah burned with straw is kosher (Parah 4:3).

ABOUT THE QUESTIONER

Rav Shalom Tzvi Goldbaum was the author of the sefer *Birkas Shalom*. A postcard he wrote in 1900, sold at auction in 2022, shows him as Av Beis Din of Glusk, near Lublin, writing in a tiny, beautiful hand. In it he asks the historian Shaul Pinchas Rabinowitz to send him his book on the life of the Yaavetz, because, he writes, he is related to him. He also wrote to the Maharsham about watch chains another time (III:369): may a man go out on Shabbos, where there's no eruv, wearing a watch on a gold or silver chain?

WHY IT MATTERS

A brand-new invention reaches a rav in a small town. The Maharsham takes it seriously. He lays out how a camera works, plate by plate, and only then asks what the halacha actually cares about.

The answer he finds is worth holding on to. Whether something counts as "writing" is a technical question, and it can matter for many things. Respect is a different question. The words of Tanach deserve it however they got onto the page: by quill, by press, or by sunlight on a glass plate. A man who carries them carries Tanach.

KEY TERMS

Ksav ashuri · כתב אשורי The square Hebrew letters of a sefer Torah, tefillin and mezuzos.

Tumah · טומאה Ritual impurity; the tumah of a dead body can spread through a house under one roof.

Koach kocho · כח כחו "The force of his force": a result a person sets in motion, but that something else carries out.

COMING NEXT WEEK



The Rav Goes to the Pharmacy. *Chicks hatched in a machine, said to live only about three months: are they kosher? A non-Jew's butter factory to kasher, and the dye that makes butter look better. Oil shipped across the ocean from America, and a chemist's word on what's inside it. Twice, the Maharsham turned to the pharmacist himself before he answered.*

SOURCES

SOURCE	WHAT IT SAYS	WHAT IT DOES HERE
שו"ת רדב"ז ח"ג תקי"ג	Papers in his hat and a small sefer in his pocket may go into a restroom; in practice, only for other languages.	A pocket can be a covering.
מלבושי יו"ט על הלבוש ס"מ, בשם תשב"ץ	Tefillin and papers with Hashem's Names need a kis b'soch kis.	Others want more than one cover.
פיהמ"ש לרמב"ם אהלות ו:ה; כסף משנה טומאת מת כ"ד; תוי"ט שם	Whether a see-through layer like glass separates.	Is the medallion's glass a cover?
ברכות כה ע"ב	Shema may be said facing filth behind glass.	Glass covers for that halacha (our reference; the Maharsham states the rule without citing it).
רוקח ר"פ; אור זרוע תקס"ג	Printing, and pressed or carved letters, aren't "writing."	Maybe printed Tanach has less kedushah.
תשו' הרמב"ם (מג"א מ"ה סק"ב); גט פשוט קכ"ה סקט"ו	Embroidered letters may not enter a restroom; printed letters have kedushah.	Disrespect applies anyway.
מנחות ז ע"א; עירובין לה ע"א	A result that happens on its own, and indirect force.	A photograph is barely a person's act.
יו"ד ס"ט:ט"ז; פרה ד:ג	Salting meat on straw; the parah burned with straw.	Roasting liver over straw is permitted.

SOURCE TEXT. Shu"t Maharsham, chelek III, siman 357, to Rav Shalom Tzvi Goldbaum, Av Beis Din of Janowiec in Russian Poland, author of *Birkas Shalom* (as the heading of the letter names him). The letter is not dated. The 1900 postcard is Winners Auctions, Auction 133 Part II, item 470 (January 2022). The dates for Dancer and Dagron are from the Wikipedia article "Stanhope (optical bijou)," checked 4 Nov 2026.



WHO WAS THE MAHARSHAM?

Rabbi Shalom Mordechai HaKohen Schwadron, ben HaRav Moshe (1835–1911), served as the Rav of Brezhan in Galicia for thirty years, from 1881 until his passing. He is best known for his Shu"t Maharsham, thousands of teshuvos on every area of halachah, and his Da'as Torah commentary on Shulchan Aruch. He was regarded as one of the foremost poskim of his generation, and his piskei halachah are cited to this day.

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