

TEFILLIN: TWO BLACK SNAKES

Yakov Azriel

“And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be frontlets between your eyes.”
(Deuteronomy 6:8)

There are snakes and there are snakes.

Eden’s serpent, for example,
An anaconda emblazoned in flashy red, jungle green and peacock blue,
Was a master of speech
Who despite his lisp,
Knew how to entice and beguile his prey.

But each morning when I pray,
I find a gentle black snake wound seven times around my forearm;
Her tail weaves delicately three times around my finger
As her head rests on my biceps
And nestles against my heart.
Her mate, who crowns my head,
Has no double tongue, but a double tail.
This pair of domesticated snakes, venomless and with no fangs,
Tame and faithful to each other,
Barely squeeze
And scarcely seem reptile;
They snuggle up to me like puppies,
Nudging and pushing me towards the heavens.

My two pets sleep each night in a velvet bag;
After I waken them each morning
In silence they request I be their spokesman
And thank Him who fashioned us three
For enabling us to slide out of bed
And stand upright before Him.

Farmers value black snakes
That eat mice and rats which infest their granaries and barns;
Does the snake on my head devour impure thoughts,
The snake on my arm swallow shameful deeds?

In India, fakirs play flutes
To hypnotize cobras and make them dance.
But my two black snakes
In silence sing,
And as I sway
To their soundless music
In the morning dance of prayer,
Eden's serpent,
Deafened,
Slithers away.