

**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

TALMUDIC METHODOLOGY

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SHIUR #23: SIRTUT

The gemara in *Menachot* (32b) states that there is a *Halakha Le-Moshe Mi-Sinai* requiring *sirtut* for a *mezuzah*, but not for *tefillin*. In general, *sirtut* refers to lines or grooves that are etched into the parchment to facilitate the straight and un-crooked writing of the *mezuzah*. However, several *halakhot* indicate that the practice of *sirtut* may constitute more than simply a technical device to assist neat writing.

Chief among these indications is a *gemara* in *Gittin* (6b) that requires *sirtut* for 3 or 4 words from *Tanakh* that are written in ANY context. Why does the *gemara* in *Menachot* (32b) attribute the *sirtut* requirement for *mezuzah* to *Halakha Le-Moshe Mi-Sinai*, while the *gemara* in *Gittin* assumes it applies to any 3-4 words of *Tanakh*? How could *Tefillin* NOT require *sirtut* if ANY 3-4 words require *sirtut*? Finally, the *gemara* in *Megilla* derives *sirtut* for *Megillat Esther* from a comparison to *Mezuzah* (some claim a comparison to a *sefer Torah*). Why does the *gemara* introduce an external comparison to derive *sirtut* for *Megilla* when ANY 3-4 words require *sirtut* according to the *gemara* in *Gittin*?

Evidently, the *gemara* in *Gittin* deduces a BASIC requirement of *sirtut* for ANY 3-4 words to ensure neat penmanship. As Rabbeinu Tam comments, for this purpose, a one line groove at the top of the page is sufficient. Some disagree and require lines along the two vertical margins, and some even demand an additional boundary toward the bottom of the page; regardless, neat writing can be assured with basic boundaries. This basic *sirtut* does not require a source. However, the more comprehensive *sirtut* – engraving EACH AND EVERY LINE

of a *mezuzah*, *Megillat Esther*, and possibly a *sefer Torah* – is more than just a technical manner of improving writing and requires sources and *gezeira shaveh*. What is the function of this comprehensive “every-line” *sirtut*?

One approach suggests that *sirtut* may be necessary to upgrade the text from a fragment of text to a *sefer* (book). The *gemara* in *Megilla* notes that *Megillat Esther* possesses a hybrid identity. It is referred to as a “*sefer*,” a formal book (*Megillat Esther* 9:32), and is also designated as an *iggeret*, a letter (9:29). The *gemara* concludes that certain parts of the *Megilla*’s construction should be formalized like a book, while others can remain informal like a letter. The Ramban comments that ONE aspect that formalizes the *Megilla* as a *sefer* is the line-by-line *sirtut*. In other words, according to the Rambam, the linear *sirtut* converts the text from a document into a book.

Similar sentiments stem from a comment of Rashi in *Sota* (17b), which similarly disqualifies a *sota* text written without *sirtut* because it fails the “*sefer*” test. When describing the ceremony of writing and then erasing a *sota* text, the Torah employs the same term of “*sefer*” (*Bamidbar* 5:23). According to Rashi, this formalizes the text of *sota*, and ONE requirement of this formalization is the line-by-line *sirtut*.

This may also explain the absence of *sirtut* from two objects that would logically require *sirtut*. First, several *Rishonim* (chief among them Tosafot) maintain that a *sefer Torah* does not require line-by-line *sirtut*, although it obviously requires the outline *sirtut*, similar to any 3-4 words of *Tanakh*. One way of assessing this riddle is to assume that *sirtut* upgrades a text into a *sefer*. In order to formalize fragments of Torah into actual books, line-by-line *sirtut* is required. Such is the case with *mezuzah*, *sota* texts, and *Megillat Esther*. A complete *Sefer Torah*, however, is the PARAGDIM of a *sefer* and does not require the *sirtut* upgrade to confer that status.

The exception of *tefillin* may be similarly understood. The aforementioned *gemara* in *Menachot* attributes the difference between *mezuzah*, which requires a *sirtut*, to *tefillin*, which does not, to a *Halakha Le-Moshe Mi-Sinai*. It is possible that a *mezuzah* requires the halakhic status of a “*sefer*” and that status must be finalized through *sirtut*. *Tefillin* texts – as they are encased in housing and

covered, are not considered a *sefer*, but rather text fragments incorporated into something larger. Absent this status of *sefer*, they do not require *sirtut*. This, in fact, may be the opinion of the Rambam, who asserts that *tefillin* do not require *sirtut* because the *parasha* texts are concealed, “*mechupin*” (*Hilkhos Tefillin* 1:12). He may have been referring to the fact that the enclosing of these texts within boxes of *tefillin* eliminates their status as *sefer* and thereby exempts them from *sirtut*.

A different approach to line-by-line *sirtut* may emerge from an interesting comment of one of the *Geonim*. Several later *Rishonim* cite the earlier Gaon Rabbenu Matatya, who claimed that while engraving the *sirtut*, the author must have intentions to convey requisite *kedusha* to the page, *kavana li-shma*. Although the Tur rules against this position, it highlights an interesting option – perhaps the line-by-line *sirtut* is part of the formal writing process of the *mezuzah* and certain select documents. The process of writing these documents entails not merely applying texts but rather carving or outlining margins and adding text. Just as the actual writing must be performed *li-shma*, with proper intentions, to instill *kedusha*, the *sirtut* must be performed *li-shma* as well, since it is PART of that writing process. Text within discernible boundaries is superior text and certain halakhic texts require this higher form of writing.

This concept would also explain a very interesting query of R. Akiva Eiger (1:50) about adding *sirtut* AFTER the actual text has been written. Presumably, if the *sirtut* merely confers the independent “*sefer*” factor, it may be added AFTER the text has been applied. However, if the creation of line-by-line margins is PART of the halakhic act of writing certain texts, it may not be inserted AFTER the text has been written.

Finally, this view of *sirtut* may also explain the absence of this requirement for *tefillin* texts. As the Rambam notes, the *tefillin* texts are inserted into the houses of *tefillin*. Their ultimate *kedusha* only emerges at a later stage, well after the WRITING. In contrast, *mezuzah* and *sefer Torah* receive their final *kedusha* from the act of writing the text. Hence, this act of writing must be a DELUXE act, which includes adding *sirtut*. Since the ultimate *kedusha* of *tefillin* is delayed until they are inserted into the houses, the act of writing can be accomplished without the added dimension of *sirtut*. In fact, the Rambam cites the *sirtut* rules in the

same halakha (*Tefillin* 1:12) that he cites several other laws governing the act of writing. Thus, it appears as if *sirtut*- when necessary – is an element of the act of writing.