

Compassionate Tefillin

Approved on May 5, 2026 by a vote of 22-0-1. Voting in favor: Rabbis Aaron Alexander, Adam Baldachin, Pamela Barmash, Emily Barton, Chaya Bender, Suzanne Brody, Nate Crane, Aviva Fellman, David J. Fine, Joshua Heller, Amy Levin, Daniel S. Nevins, Matthew Nover, Joel Pitkowsky, Marcelo Polakoff, Avram Reisner, Karen Reiss Medwed, Rachel Safman, Robert Scheinberg, Miriam T. Spitzer, Stewart Vogel, and Raysh Weiss. Voting Against: None. Abstaining: Rabbi Micah Peltz.

שאלה (Question)

Does wrapping synthetic (non-leather) tefillin fulfill the mitzvah of tefillin (for those who do not want to use animal products)?

תשובה (Response)

I. Introduction

The question presented is well matched to our Movement's philosophy of tradition and change.² In fact, the question could only arise for someone who struggles to balance these very values in which we pride ourselves. The petitioner is committed to tefillin as a halakhic obligation, or else they could simply cease the practice. We may also presume, though it is not stated explicitly, that the petitioner is committed to avoiding the use of animal products for reasons of moral conscience — a conscience that calls them to change their practice. The latter ethical commitment should be taken as seriously as the former halakhic one. Further, as I will argue in this teshuvah, the ethical commitment to avoid participating in animal cruelty is itself a halakhic commitment.

First, I consider the obligation to wrap tefillin, as well as why and how tefillin are made from leather. Next, I will examine the obligation to minimize *tza'ar ba'alai hayim* ("the suffering of animals"), making as strong an argument as possible for its application to the petitioner's question.³ I consider both plant- and animal-based alternatives to leather. The plant-based example does not fulfill the mitzvah of tefillin. The animal-based example is promising and

^{1*} *The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. Individual rabbis, however, are authorized to interpret and apply halakhah for their communities.*

² I am full of gratitude for Rabbi Pamela Barmash for her formal mentorship as part of the first cohort of the Fellowship in Prophetic Halakhah on the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, as well her generous informal mentorship, her comments on drafts on this teshuvah, and her all-around *menschlichkeit*. Thank you to my primary respondents on the first draft, Rabbi Chaya Bender and Rabbi Avram Reisner, and to all of the Committee members who lent their brilliant wisdom and knowledge. Thank you also to members of the CJLS Ritual Subcommittee who read an earlier draft and provided immensely helpful guidance: Rabbi Joshua Heller, Rabbi Emily Barton, Rabbi Joel Pitkowsky, Rabbi Rob Scheinberg, and Norman Kahn.

³ My teacher Rabbi Mordechai Schwartz taught me that in answering requests for leniency, it's always easier to say "No" than to say "Yes," so I am approaching this teshuvah trying to say "Yes."

worthy of further consideration as technology develops. In the meantime, there are alternatives that may offer the petitioner a way forward that honors their profound commitments to halakhah, a personal prayer life, and compassion for animals.

II. Why Leather?

Our clearly established halakhah is that tefillin *klaf* (parchment), *retzuot* (straps), and *batim* (boxes) must be constructed from the hide of a kosher animal.⁴ The animal must be of a kosher species but need not have been ritually slaughtered or ever suitable for eating.

A. Leather *Klaf* is *Halakhah Le'Moshe Mi'Sinai*

We learn from the early Talmudic-era Tractate Sefer Torah that parchment must be made from the skins of ritually clean animals, sewn together with their sinews and tied together with their hair. This requirement has the status of *halakhah le'Moshe mi'Sinai*, “a law given to Moshe at Sinai”:

אין כותבין ספר תורה לא על עורות בהמה טמאה ולא על עורות חיה טמאה ולא תופרין אותן בגידין ולא כורכין בשערן. הלכה למשה מסיני (אלא) שיהא כותבין על עורות בהמה טהורה ועל עורות חיה טהורה ותופרין בגידין טהורים וכורכין בשערות טהורים ...

It is not permitted to write a scroll of the Torah on skins of ritually unclean cattle or on skins of ritually unclean wild animals, nor may they be sewn with [their] sinews or [the parchment rolls of tefillin] be wound with their hair. It is an oral prescription delivered to Moses at Sinai that [these] shall be written on the skins of ritually clean cattle, or on skins of ritually clean wild animals, that they shall be sewn together with ritually clean sinews, [that the tefillin rolls] shall be wound with ritually clean hair.... (Sefer Torah 1:1)⁵

Rambam also lists תפילין על קלף (“tefillin on *klaf*”) as *halakhah le'Moshe mi'Sinai* in his Introduction to the Mishnah.⁶

But what does it mean that a law is given this special designation, *halakhah le'Moshe mi'Sinai*?

First, these laws are timeless and undisputed. According to Rambam, they have always been unanimously accepted by the Sages: They “have no disagreement about them in any way ... among the sages at any time, from the days of Moshe and until Rav Ashi.”⁷ The Sages never investigated them or brought proofs about them as is the usual way of rabbinic debate.⁸ They were simply accepted as true Torah from Sinai.

⁴ Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayyim 32:12 (parchment), Oraḥ Ḥayyim 33:3 (straps), Oraḥ Ḥayyim 32:37 (boxes).

⁵ Tractate Sefer Torah 1:1, trans. *The William Davidson Talmud* (Araha Cohen; London: Soncino Press, 1965) (emphasis added).

⁶ Rambam, *Introduction to the Mishnah* 8:28 (trans. Rabbi Francis Nataf, 2017).

⁷ Rambam, *Introduction to the Mishnah* 8:13 (trans. Rabbi Francis Nataf, 2017).

וזה עיקר יש לך לעמוד על סודו. והוא שהפירושים המקובלים מפי משה אין מחלוקת בהם בשום פנים שהרי מאז ועד עתה לא מצאנו מחלוקת נפלה בזמן מן הזמנים מימות משה ועד רב אשי בין החכמים

⁸ Rambam, *Introduction to the Mishnah* 8:25 (trans. Rabbi Francis Nataf, 2017).

Second, these laws have always existed separately from the Written Torah. They are “not hinted at or alluded to in Scripture and not deducible from the Biblical text by means of one of the authoritative canons of interpretation.”⁹

We might interpret this as a category of “last resort” to be used when there is no other way to explain the origin of a certain law.¹⁰ But do not hear “last resort” as a lower level catch-all, for these laws are rather afforded an elevated designation in the rabbinic system. According to former Israeli Supreme Court Justice Menachem Elon, the category is applied in order to give additional emphasis to these laws: “Laws classified as *halakhah le’Moshe mi-Sinai*, on the other hand, either have no source in Scripture, or their connection with Scripture is weak and tenuous; and since they are unanimously accepted, their authority is emphasized”¹¹

In a famous aggadah in the Talmud Menachot 29b, Moses goes up to heaven and finds God placing crowns on the letters of the Torah. He asks God: Why are you delaying the giving of the Torah in order to add these crowns? God responds: “There will be a man who will live many generations from now, whose name is Akiva, son of Joseph, who will deduce myriads of laws from every jot and tittle of every letter.” Moses asked to see Rabbi Akiva, so God time-travels him forward to Rabbi Akiva’s study hall, but Moses does not understand what they are studying. When Rabbi Akiva’s students ask for a source, he answers that it is a *halakhah le’Moshe mi’Sinai*, a “law given to Moses at Sinai. Then Moses was at ease.”¹² Because Rabbi Akiva’s interpretive methods were so foreign and strange, Moshe found comfort in knowing that their basis was in the Torah that he would receive at Sinai.

Returning to the question at hand: Based on the strong authority of *halakhah le’Moshe mi’Sinai*, the *klaf* for tefillin must be made from the hides of kosher animals.

B. *Neveilot* and *Tereifot* Are Permitted

According to the early Talmudic-era Tractate Tefillin, parchment for tefillin may be made from animals that are *neveilot* (not ritually slaughtered and not fit for eating) or *tereifot* (sick and not fit for eating).

אין כותבין תפילין לא על עורות בהמה טמאה ולא על עורות חיה טמאה אבל כותבין על עורות נבלות
וטרפות....

It is not permitted to write [the four scrolls of] tefillin on skins of ritually unclean [non-kosher domestic animals] or on skins of ritually unclean wild animals. It is permitted, however, to write them on skins of *nebeloth* [not ritually slaughtered so as to be unfit for eating] and *tereifoth* [sick in a way that makes them unfit for eating].... (Tefillin 1:1)¹³

⁹ Rambam, *Introduction to the Mishnah* 8:22 (quoted in Menachem Elon, *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles (Ha-Mishpat Ha-Ivri)* (trans. Bernard Auerbach and Melvin J. Sykes; JPS 1994), p.205).

על כן כל דבר שאין לו רמז במקרא ואינו נקשר בו ואי אפשר להוציאו בדרך מדרכי הסברא עליו לבדו נאמר הלכה למשה מסיני.

¹⁰ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Heavenly Torah: As Refracted through the Generations* (ed. trans. Rabbi Gordon Tucker, Leonard Levin; London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p.558 n.17.

¹¹ Menachem Elon, *Jewish Law: History, Sources, Principles (Ha-Mishpat Ha-Ivri)* (trans. Bernard Auerbach and Melvin J. Sykes; JPS 1994), p.205.

¹² *Id.* p.206.

¹³ Tractate Tefillin 1:1, trans. *The William Davidson Talmud* (Araha Cohen; London: Soncino Press, 1965) (transliteration preserved from original text). Thank you to Rabbi Matthew Nover for suggestions in this section.

The Talmud brings a beautiful midrash further defending the use of *neveilot* and *tereifot*. They are recast — not as discarded or lowly, but instead as having had the honor of being killed by God:

וְזוֹ שְׂאִילָה שְׂאֵל בְּתוֹסֵי אֶחָד אֶת רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ הַגֵּרָסִי: מִיָּיִן שְׂאִין כּוֹתְבִין תְּפִילִין עַל עוֹר בְּהֵמָה טְמֵאָה? דְּכַתִּיב: "לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה תּוֹרַת ה' בְּפִיךָ" — מִדְּבַר הַמּוֹתֵר בְּפִיךָ. אֲלֵא מַעֲתָה, עַל גְּבֵי עוֹר נְבִלוֹת וּטְרֵפוֹת אֵל יִכְתְּבוּ! אָמַר לוֹ: אֲמַשׁוּל לָךְ מִשָּׁל, הָא לְמָה הַדְּבַר דּוֹמָה — לְשָׁנֵי בְּנֵי אָדָם שְׂנֵתְחִיבוּ הַרְיָגָה לְמַלְכוּת. אֶחָד הָרָגוּ מֶלֶךְ וְאֶחָד הָרָגוּ אִיסְפָּקְלוֹטוֹר, אֵיזָה מֵהֵן מְשׁוּבָּח — הַגּוֹי אוֹמֵר זֶה שְׂהָרָגוּ מֶלֶךְ. אֲלֵא מַעֲתָה יֵאָכְלוּ! אָמַר לִיה: הַתּוֹרָה אָמְרָה "לֹא תֹאכְלוּ כָל נְבִלָה", וְאֵת אֶמְרַת יֵאָכְלוּ! אָמַר לִיה: קַאלוֹס.

And this question was asked by a Boethusian to Rabbi Yehoshua HaGarsi: From where [is it derived] that one may not write phylacteries on the hide of a non-kosher animal?

[He said to him, it is] as it is written: “So that God’s Torah will be in your mouth.” [The Rabbis derived that one may write the passages only on] an item that is permitted [to be placed] in one’s mouth, [i.e., eaten].

[He said to him:] If [that is] so, on the skin of *neveilot* and *tereifot* [coming from kosher animals,] one [should] not write [phylacteries, as they may not be eaten.]

He said to him: I will tell you a parable. To what is this similar? To two people who were sentenced to death by the king. One was killed [by the] king [himself], and one was killed [by an] executioner [*ispaklitor*]. Which one is [superior]? You [must] say: [The one] that [the] king [himself] killed. [Therefore, an animal that died at the hands of Heaven and not by a human action is superior. He said to him: If so,] then [the *neveilot* and *tereifot*] should be eaten, [as they were killed by the king]. He said to him: The Torah said: “Do not eat any *neveila*” [Deuteronomy 14:20] and you say they should be eaten? [A Torah decree determines that they may not be eaten, but that does not mean they are inferior. The Boethusian] said to him: Well put [*kalos*]. (b. Shabbat 108a)¹⁴

By permitting tefillin from *neveilot* and *tereifot*, our tradition insists on some sacred use for all animals that God created.¹⁵

C. Leather *Retzuot* (Straps) and *Batim* (Boxes)

We have established that the *klaf* (parchment) must be made of leather from a kosher animal according to *halakhah le’Moshe mi’Sinai*. Tractate Tefilin and the Shulhan Arukh extend this requirement to the *retzuot* (straps) and *batim* (boxes). And like the parchment, the straps and boxes may also be made from *neveilot* or *tereifot*.

The leather may be bought from anywhere (a leniency that will become relevant in the below discussion of alternative tefillin), but must be processed for the specific purpose of performing the mitzvah of tefillin:

רצועות תפילין לוקחין מכל מקום רשב"ג אומר כל עור שנעשה בו מלאכה אסור:

¹⁴ b. Shabbat 108a, based on translation from *Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noé Edition* (Koren: Jerusalem, 2016).

¹⁵ Thank you to Rabbi Amy Levin for this framing.

Straps of *tefillin* may be bought anywhere. R. Simeon b. Gamaliel says: Any skin that had been used [for a secular] purpose is forbidden [to be used for the straps of *tefillin* because they were not prepared specifically for that purpose]. (Tefillin 1:7)¹⁶

עור הרצועה צריך שיהיה מעור בהמה חיה ועוף הטהורים וצריך שיהיה מעובד לשמו רצועה בין מעור בין מקלף כשרות

The leather [that's used] for the straps must be from skin of a kosher domesticated animal, wild animal, or bird. And they must be processed for the sake of the mitzvah. Straps, whether they come from the skin or from parchment, are valid.... (Orah Hayyim 33:3)¹⁷

The Shulhan Arukh permits tefillin casings to be made from the skin of an animal fetus, an alternative that still maintains the core requirement of animal skin:

עור הבתים צריך להיות מעור בהמה חיה ועוף הטהורים אפילו מנבלה או טרפה שלהם ורשאי לעשו' מקלף או מעור שליל: הגה וכן הרצועות יכול לעשותן מקלף ועור שליל [מרדכי דף צ"ד] צריך שיהיה מעובד לשמו היכא דאפשר:

The leather of the casings needs to be from the leather of a kosher domesticated animal, a wild animal or a bird, even from their carcasses or those unfit for eating. And it's permitted to make them from the skin or the leather of a fetus. *Rema: and so too the straps are able to be made from the skin and leather of a fetus.* And it needs to be processed for the sake [of tefillin] whenever possible. (Orah Hayyim 32:37)¹⁸

About the tefillin as a whole — including *klaf* (parchment), *retzuot* (straps), and *batim* (boxes) — the Talmud in Shabbat 28b confirms that all must be made from a kosher animal. Rav Yosef teaches that only the skin of a kosher animal is suitable for *me'lekhet shamayim* (heavenly service). The Talmud understands this teaching to be connected to Shemot 13:9, which says that tefillin remind us that God's teaching should be in our mouth.

וְהָיָה לָךְ לְאוֹת עַל-יָדְךָ וּלְזִכָּרוֹן בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה תּוֹרַת יְקוּהָ בְּפִיךָ כִּי בְיַד תִּזְקֶה הוֹצֵאתָ יְקוּהָ מִמִּצְרָיִם:

“And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead—in order that GOD’s Teaching may be in your mouth—that with a mighty hand GOD freed you from Egypt. (Shemot 13:9)¹⁹

Distinguishing between kosher and non-kosher animals makes spiritual sense here: A teaching that should be in our mouth, after all, must be kosher.

But Rav Yosef’s drash does not on its own explain why tefillin could not be made from synthetic or plant-based material. As my colleague, Dr. Toby Schonfeld points out, plants are also kosher.²⁰ Still, it is clear that the rabbis are operating under the assumption that tefillin are only made from animal skin.

¹⁶ Tractate Tefillin 1:7, trans. *The William Davidson Talmud* (Araha Cohen; London: Soncino Press, 1965).

¹⁷ Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim 33:3, trans. Sefaria Community Translation, accessed May 2025.

¹⁸ Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim 32:37, trans. Sefaria Community Translation, accessed May 2025.

¹⁹ Shemot 13:9, trans. *The JPS Tanakh: Gender-Sensitive Edition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2023).

²⁰ Email from Dr. Toby Schonfeld, November 5, 2025.

As discussed above, the requirement to make tefillin from leather is well established, afforded the status of *halakhah le'Moshe mi'Sinai*. Of the options for animal skin, only the skin of a kosher animal is suitable for the *me'lekhet shamayim* to which the tefillin are called. Binding us to the words of Torah so that they will be taught from our mouth, tefillin must be made from material that is fit for eating. At the same time, kosher animals that died as *neveilot* or *tereifot* are still qualified for such service (Tractate Tefillin), since they died by the hand of God (Shabbat 28b).

Our classical texts make clear that tefillin must be made from leather. Not answered is what to do if our moral commitments make leather unavailable.

III. Our Obligation to Minimize Suffering²¹

יודע צדיק נפש בהמתו ורחמי רשעים אכזרי:

A righteous person knows the needs of their animal; but the compassion of the wicked is cruelty. (Proverbs 12:10)

A. Compassion Like Moshe

Compassion for the suffering of animals is epitomized by the biblical figure that we look to as our ethical exemplar, *Moshe Rabbeinu*. We sing in our liturgy that Moshe was our greatest prophet: לא קם בישׂראל כְּמֹשֶׁה עוֹד, נְבִיא וּמְבִיט אֶת־תְּמוֹנָתוֹ (“There never arose in Israel another like Moshe, a prophet who beheld [God’s] image.”).²² Our Torah teaches that Moses spoke directly to God “face to face” and “mouth to mouth.”²³ Our rabbis describe his visions as if through a “clear looking glass” בְּאַסְפֵּקְלָרְיָא הַמְּאִירָה whereas other prophets’ looking glasses are obscured.²⁴

Why did God choose Moshe to be the one to lead the Israelites out of slavery, to be our greatest prophet, the one who would see through the clear glass? We learn in a midrash in *Shemot Rabbah* that on the way to the burning bush, there was a momentous incident with Moshe and a runaway sheep:

וְאִם מֹשֶׁה לֹא בָחַנוּ הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּחַ הוּא אֲלֵא בְּצֵאן, אָמְרוּ רַבּוֹתֵינוּ, כְּשֶׁהָיָה מֹשֶׁה רֹבֵינוּ עָלֵינוּ הַשְּׁלוֹם רוּעָה צֹאנוּ שֶׁל יִתְרוֹ בְּמִדְבָּר, בָּרַח מִמֶּנּוּ גְדִי, וְרָץ אַחֲרָיו עַד שֶׁהִגִּיעַ לַחֲסִית, כִּינֹן שֶׁהִגִּיעַ לַחֲסִית, נִזְדַּמְנָה לוֹ בְּרִכָּה שֶׁל מַיִם, וְעָמַד הַגְּדִי לִשְׁתוֹת, כִּינֹן שֶׁהִגִּיעַ מֹשֶׁה אֶצְלוֹ, אָמַר: אֲנִי לֹא הָיִיתִי יוֹדֵעַ שֶׁרָץ הָיִיתָ מִפְּנֵי צָמָא, עָיַף אַתָּה! הִרְכִּיבוּ עַל פְּתָפוֹ וְהָיָה מְהֵלָּה. אָמַר הַקְּדוּשׁ בְּרוּחַ הוּא, יֵשׁ לָהּ רַחֲמִים לְנֶהֱגַ צֹאנוּ שֶׁל בְּשָׂר וְדָם כִּדְּחִיָּה אַתָּה תִּרְעָה צֹאנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, הָיִי: וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רוּעָה.

²¹ This section includes materials originally submitted to Rabbi Daniel Nevins as part of his 2021 course “Contemporary Responsa” at the Jewish Theological Seminary. I am deeply grateful for his helpful comments and guidance on that paper, as well as other suggestions of my colleagues in the course. Rabbi Nevins has been one of my most important teachers of halakhah from my years at JTS to the present. I have previously studied and taught on this topic at Congregation Beit Simchat Torah (NY, New York) and Congregation Beth El of Montgomery County (Bethesda, Maryland). My original research included sources from Louis A. Berman, *Vegetarianism & the Jewish Tradition* (New York: Ktav, 1982).

²² *Yigdal* liturgy, based on b. Yevamot 49b, based on Bemidbar 12:7-8. Thank you to Rabbi Daniel Nevins for this source.

²³ E.g., Shemot 33:11 (“פְּנִיִם אֶל־פְּנִיִם”); Bemidbar 12:8 (“פֶּה אֶל־פֶּה אֶדְבָּר־בוֹ”).

²⁴ b. Yevamot 49b: (“וְאִרְאָה אֶת ה', כְּדַתְנִיָּא: כָּל הַנְּבִיאִים נִסְתַּכְלוּ בְּאַסְפֵּקְלָרְיָא שְׂאִינָה מְאִירָה, מֹשֶׁה רֹבֵינוּ נִסְתַּכַּל בְּאַסְפֵּקְלָרְיָא.”). הַמְּאִירָה.

God only tested Moshe based on an encounter with a sheep. Our teachers have said: Once, while Moses our Teacher was tending [his father-in-law] Yitro's sheep in the desert, a lamb ran away. Moses ran after it until it reached a small, shaded place. [Then] the lamb came across a pool and began to drink. As Moses approached the lamb, he said, "I did not know you ran away because you were thirsty. You must be exhausted!" He then put the lamb on his shoulders and walked back.

The Holy One said, "Since you tend the sheep with such compassion — by your life, I swear that you shall be the shepherd of My sheep, Israel." And Moshe was the shepherd [of Israel]. (Shemot Rabbah 2:2)

It was Moshe's compassion as a shepherd, his ability to sense the lamb's exhaustion and thirst, and his instinct to carry the lamb on his own shoulders back to the flock, that finally qualified him in God's eyes to be the shepherd for God's own people.²⁵ Like Moshe, we are also obligated to show compassion for animal suffering, *tza'ar ba'alei hayim*, as the principle is called in rabbinic literature.

B. *De'oraita* Authority

The Talmud even potentially affords *tza'ar ba'alei hayim* the highest halakhic status of *de'oraita* authority. *De'oraita* laws are found in or derived directly from the Torah. *De'rabbanan* laws might be related to values from the Torah, but their authority comes from later rabbinic enactment. In a debate of the Tannaim in Bava Metzia 32a-33a, the Rabbis consider many questions surrounding the mitzvah to help unload the burden of a working animal, including its status as *d'oraita* or *de'rabbanan*. This mitzvah is from Shemot 23:5: "When you see the donkey of your enemy lying under its burden and would refrain from raising it, you must nevertheless help raise it."²⁶ The case is whether one is required to help another person unload or load their working animal without remuneration. The values at stake are preventing monetary loss and preventing the suffering of the animal. Rava teaches that preventing *tza'ar ba'alei hayim* is *de'oraita*: מְדַבְּרֵי שְׁנֵיהֶם נִלְמַד צַעַר בְּעַלֵּי חַיִּים דְּאוֹרַיִתָא ("according to both parties [to the Tannaitic debate] the suffering of animals is *de'oraita*").

Other examples of the workings of this halakhic principle: The Rambam requires that on Shabbat, one must remove the load from a working animal: מְשֻׁמֵּם צַעַר בְּעַלֵּי חַיִּים ("on account of the [requirement to minimize] the suffering of animals").²⁷ The Shulḥan Arukh requires one to go down into a canal to bring pillows and quilts to place beneath an animal who has fallen.²⁸

There is a rich foundation of Biblical law that centers compassion for animals and concern with minimizing their suffering, including laws on how to care for working animals (including helping others to care for their working animals) and how to capture wild animals. Even though the rabbis had a more agrarian or "business-like" relationship to animals than most of us do today (with our beloved pets who live in our homes and sleep in our beds), it is clear that the rabbis were deeply concerned for their welfare.²⁹

²⁵ As Rabbi Pamela Barmash noted in a personal email, the profession of shepherd also assumes that the animals will eventually be eaten (April 18, 2025).

²⁶ Shemot 23:5, trans. *The JPS Tanakh: Gender-Sensitive Edition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2023).

²⁷ Mishneh Torah, *Hilkhot Shabbat*, 21:5.

²⁸ Shulḥan Arukh, O.H. 305:18.

²⁹ Thank you to Rabbi Pamela Barmash for noting our changing relationship with animals throughout history.

C. Working Animals

The laws concerning use of working animals in agriculture include the prohibition on plowing with an ox together with a donkey.

לא־תִּקְרָשׁ בְּשׂוֹר־וּבְחֹמֶר יִקְדּוּ:

You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together.³⁰

Ibn Ezra explains that the reasoning is out of compassion: והשם חמל על כל מעשיו כי אין כה החמור ככה (“God shows mercy to all of God’s creatures, for a donkey is not so powerful as an ox”).³¹ Similarly, the prohibition on muzzling an ox while it is threshing protects the ox from the cruelty of working in proximity to food without being able to eat.

לא־תִּתְחַסֵּם שׂוֹר בְּדִישׁוֹ:

You shall not muzzle an ox while it is threshing.³²

In the context of an extended discussion in the Talmud about the type of work that may be done during Ḥol ha-Moed, we learn that one is required to provide grooming and medical care to animals:

רב יהודה שרי למישקל טופריה לתמרא דריחיא.... רבא שרא לסרוקי סוסיא, ולמיבני אקרפיטא, ולמיבני איצטבא. רבא שרא למישקל דמא לבהמה בחולא דמועדא. אמר ליה אבני, תנאי דמסייע לד: מקיזין דם לבהמה, ואין מונעין רפואה לבהמה בחולו של מועד.

Rav Yehuda permits [one] to trim the hooves of the donkey [that turns] a mill.... Rava permitted [one] to groom a horse, to build a trough, and to build a bench [on the intermediate days of a Festival]. Rava [also] permitted [one] to let the blood of an animal [for medical purposes] on the intermediate days of a Festival. Abaye said to him: [A *baraita*] is taught that supports you: One may let blood from an animal, and one [does] not withhold [any] medical treatment from an animal on the intermediate days of a Festival.³³

According to the Shulḥan Arukh, כל צרכי בהמה מותר לעשו' בחול המועד, “All the needs of an animal are permitted to be done on Ḥol ha-Moed,” even medical needs that involve labor, and even grooming for aesthetic reasons.³⁴

Animal welfare sometimes arises in an unexpected context. In a discussion in the Talmud about how we recite blessings over food (ideally, without an interruption between blessing and eating), the rabbis consider whether feeding one’s own animals counts as such an interruption. We learn that not only may one make a verbal request that food be prepared for their animals; one is in fact prohibited from eating before feeding their animals.

³⁰ Devarim 22:10, trans. *The JPS Tanakh: Gender-Sensitive Edition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2023).

³¹ Ibn Ezra on Devarim 22:10. Rabbi Daniel Nevins notes in a comment to the author: “There is no consensus on this as the reason—it could be to prevent cross-species intercourse. Still valid to mention this explanation though.”

³² Devarim 25:4, trans. *The JPS Tanakh: Gender-Sensitive Edition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2023).

³³ b. Moed Katan 10b, trans. *Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noé Edition* (Koren: Jerusalem, 2016).

³⁴ Shulḥan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayyim 536:1, trans. Sefaria Community, accessed May 2025.

וְרַב שֵׁשֶׁת אָמַר: אֲפִילוּ "גִבִּיל לְתוֹרִי" נִמְי אִינוּ צָרִיךְ לְבָרֵךְ, דְּאָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר רַב: אֲסוּר לְאָדָם שְׂיֵאכֹל קוֹדֵם שְׂיִתֵן מֵאֶכֶל לְבְהֵמָתוֹ, שְׂנֹאָמַר: "וְנָתַתִּי עֵשֶׂב בְּצִדְךָ לְבְהֵמָתְךָ" וְהִדַּר "וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ".

And Rav Sheshet said: Even if [he said]: Mix for the oxen, he need not recite a blessing [a second time, as that is also considered to be for the purpose of the blessing], as Rav Yehuda said [that] Rav said: One is prohibited from eating before feeding his animals, as it is stated: “And I will give grass in your fields for your animals” [first] and [only] then: “And you shall eat and be satisfied” (Deuteronomy 11:15). [In the verse, preparation of food for one’s cattle precedes preparation of his own food. Consequently, it is considered part of the preparation for one’s own meal.] (b. Berakhot 40a)³⁵

The Torah teaches that not only must we care for our own animals, but we must also help others take care of their animals:

לֹא-תִרְאֶה אֶת-חֲמוֹר אָחִיךָ אוֹ שׁוֹרוֹ נִפְלִים בַּדֶּרֶךְ וְהִתְעַלְמָתָּ מֵהֶם הֲקִים תְּקִים עִמּוֹ:

If you see your fellow Israelite’s donkey or ox fallen on the road, do not ignore it; you must raise it together. (Devarim 22:4)³⁶

D. Wild Animals

Our obligation of care and compassion even extends to wild animals whom we hunt for food. We are prohibited from capturing a mother bird together with her young:

כִּי יִקְרָא קוֹן-צִפּוֹר לְפָנֶיךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ בְּכָל-עֵץ אוֹ עַל-הָאָרֶץ אֶפְרָחִים אוֹ בִּיצִים וְהָאִם רֹכֶצֶת עֲלֵהָאֶפְרָחִים אוֹ עַל-הַבִּיצִים לֹא-תִקַּח הָאִם עִם-הַבָּנִים: שְׁלַח תְּשַׁלַּח אֶת-הָאִם וְאֶת-הַבָּנִים תִּקַּח-לָךְ לְמַעַן יֵטֵב לָךְ וְהָאִרְכַּת יָמִים:

If, along the road, you chance upon a bird’s nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young. Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life. (Devarim 22:6-7)³⁷

Here the Torah makes an explicit connection between the protection of the mother bird (who presumably can produce more fledglings) and our own future. We perform this *mitzvah* “that you may fare well and have a long life.” This theme is deserving of expanded treatment in the context of environmental sustainability related to our treatment of animals.

E. Animals as Food

Eating animals is also certainly relevant to this conversation. The complex and important surrounding questions are deserving of their own treatment, which is an ongoing project of this author.³⁸ But no conversation about limiting cruelty to animals would be complete without considering how our eating animals causes suffering. This Committee has a long history of such discussion.

For example, in 2000, this Committee unanimously approved a teshuvah by Rabbis Elliot Dorff and Joel Roth that prohibits meat that has been shackled and hoisted (although it is unclear

³⁵ b. Berakhot 40a, trans. *Koren Talmud Bavli, The Noé Edition* (Koren: Jerusalem, 2016).

³⁶ Devarim 22:4, trans. *The JPS Tanakh: Gender-Sensitive Edition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2023).

³⁷ Devarim 22:6-8, trans. *The JPS Tanakh: Gender-Sensitive Edition* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2023).

³⁸ I am working on a related-but-separate project, “On the Permissibility of Eating Animals.”

to what extent kosher slaughterhouses have responded to their important recommendations).³⁹ That teshuvah also relied on the halakhic principle of minimizing *tza'ar ba'alei hayim*.⁴⁰ In 2007, this Committee also approved a teshuvah by Rabbi Pamela Barmash limiting the trade in or consumption of veal, also on grounds of *tza'ar ba'alei hayim* and *achzariyut* (cruelty towards animals).⁴¹

Rabbi Daniel Nevins concludes in his 2017 *teshuvah* on cultured (lab-grown) meat that an alternative to slaughtered meat would be preferable for multiple reasons, including: the potential to eliminate animal suffering, the benefits to human health (avoiding antibiotics and contaminants), the protection of the environment from the pollution of the factory farming industry, and the ecological and nutritional benefits that could result from using that land for plant agriculture. He writes:

If cultured meat fulfills the promises of being less cruel to animals, less destructive to the environment, and more healthful to consume, then it will be not only acceptable, but even preferable to eating conventional pastured meat.⁴²

He cites significant technological advances in meat alternatives, including some “cultured meat” that is produced in a lab using stem cells.⁴³ The alternatives-to-meat industry is booming — including everything from traditional veggie burgers to Beyond Meat and early research in cultured meat.⁴⁴ As discussed further below in the context of synthetic tefillin, there is reason to be hopeful that an alternatives-to-leather industry could follow suit.

Avoiding animal suffering is a Jewish value and a halakhic obligation. Yet there is a live question as to how that obligation is balanced against other obligations. As Rabbi Joshua Cahan explains:

The question central to all rabbinic discussions of *tza'ar ba'alei hayim* is not whether the principle exists or even what it means, but rather how we are to weigh and balance the different values—each one compelling—that come into conflict. Animal welfare, on the one hand, is balanced against, on the one hand, ritual laws such as *hilkhot Shabbat*: for example, how should one act when the action needed to relieve an animal’s pain constitutes a violation of Shabbat? On the other hand, concern for animal welfare is also balanced against very practical concerns such as financial loss: what if one’s income

³⁹ Rabbis Elliot N. Dorff and Joel Roth, “Shackling and Hoisting,” (YD 6.2000).

https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19912000/dorffroth_shackling.pdf

⁴⁰ *Id.* (citing b. Shabbat 128b; b. Bava Metzia 32a-32b; M.T. Laws of Murder and Guarding Life 13:13; S.A. Hoshen Mishpat 272:9 (gloss); “Animals, Cruelty to,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 3:5-7).

⁴¹ Rabbi Pamela Barmash, “Veal Calves,” (*Even ha-Ezer* 5:14 (gloss)) (citing additional sources on *tza'ar ba'alei hayim* and *achzariyut* toward animals), <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/Veal%20teshuvahfinal%2Bpic%20%20NB%20%20Job%20%201.pdf>

⁴² Rabbi Daniel Nevins, “The Kashrut of Cultured Meat,” (YD 81.2017), https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/cjls/kashrut_of_cultured_meat_responsum_final_version_march_2018.pdf, p.30.

⁴³ *Id.*, pp.1-2.

⁴⁴ See “The New Menu at Eleven Madison Park Will Be Meatless,” May 3, 2021, *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/03/dining/eleven-madison-park-vegan-menu.html>, last accessed March 29, 2026; “Israel carving out key role in alternative protein market, report says,” May 3, 2021, *The Times of Israel*, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-carving-out-key-role-in-alternative-protein-market-report-says/>, last accessed March 29, 2026.

depends on causing pain to animals? *Tza•ar ba•alei hayim* is a value that was considered to be of great import, and yet was often trumped by other, more pressing concerns.⁴⁵

Although as ever, values must be weighed against other values, there is enormous potential to fulfill our traditional, sacred obligation to minimize the suffering of animals by choosing alternatives to leather.

IV. Compassionate Tefillin

Given that tefillin are made from leather, and given our obligation to minimize animal suffering, are there alternatives to buying new, traditional, leather tefillin?

A. Note on Terminology

There is no consensus as to what constitutes a “compassionate” stance on tefillin. Some refuse to purchase new leather products but are comfortable wearing leather that would otherwise be discarded. Others object to wearing animal products or supporting the use of animals in any way. On the opposite side of the spectrum, some are much more comfortable wearing leather, as long as the animal was *shechted* for meat, believing the leather to be a morally neutral by-product of a kosher meat industry that seeks to minimize suffering.

Three categories of tefillin are considered in this teshuvah: 1) synthetic tefillin; 2) tefillin made from hides of animals that died as *neveilot* or *tereifot*, unrelated to their use in tefillin; and 3) repaired traditional tefillin that would otherwise be buried in the genizah. The first will be newly considered in this section. The second and third categories are already halakhically acceptable.

B. Synthetic Tefillin

Petitioner has asked the Committee about synthetic tefillin. I consider two types: The first is an example of plant-based synthetic tefillin currently in production. The second is theoretical, technology-pending: animal-based tefillin made from lab-grown leather derived from animal cells. The halakhic standard to apply is *halakhah le’Moshe mi’Sinai* requiring that tefillin *klaf* be made from the hides of kosher animals, as well as other authoritative rabbinic law requiring the same of *retzuot* and *batim*.

a. Plant-Based Leather

A company called Shaddai Elementals manufactures tefillin that are made of paper *klaf*, wooden *batim*, and plant-derived synthetic leather *retzuot*.⁴⁶ The paper *klaf* is halakhically dubious. Putting aside that they offer both handwritten and printed options, recall Tractate Sefer Torah: It is *halakhah le’Moshe mi’Sinai* that parchment for sacred texts be made from the skins

⁴⁵ Rabbi Joshua Cahan, “*Tza•ar Ba•alei Hayim* in the Marketplace of Values,” *Conservative Judaism*, Rabbinical Assembly, Volume 65, Number 4, Summer 2014, pp.30-48, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/557461>, pp.30-31.

⁴⁶ “KAVAKNOT Vegan Tefillin,” <https://www.vegan-tefillin.com/shop/p/kavaknot-vegan-tefillin>, last accessed March 29, 2026.

of kosher animals.⁴⁷ Rambam also lists תפילין על קלף (“tefillin on *klaf*”) as *halakhah le’Moshe mi’Sinai* in his Introduction to the Mishnah.⁴⁸ Tefillin made with paper parchment cannot fulfill the mitzvah of tefillin.

The *batim* are made from wood, a material that might feel leather-like but is not leather. They ground the *batim* in traditional practice by staining the wood with oak gall ink, the same ink used for writing Torah scrolls, but this symbolic connection is insufficient. The straps are made from grape plants, what they call “100% plant-based vegan leather derived from upcycled grape skins from Italian vineyards.”⁴⁹ Again, however idyllic the imagery (and I do not intend any sarcasm here), our tradition requires that tefillin straps be made from animal skin, not grape skin.

Owner Devon Lantry works in the marketing division of Terra Biological, a company that produces vitamins and supplements.⁵⁰ Lantry defends the permissibility of “vegan tefillin” based on an argument that the context has changed. In the rabbinic period, leather was “the highest quality, longest-lasting material of its kind. Leather and parchment communicated importance, intention, and respect.”⁵¹ He implies that this is no longer the case today, an arguable assumption. Next, Lantry paints the spiritual picture of what it might have meant to use material from “a living, breathing creature [which further] elevated its holiness.... Specifically, a creature that lived alongside Jewish people, sustaining whole families with the massive strength to plow fields and the sustenance of meat and milk necessary for survival....It communicated soul. It was a creation of God. It had life and sustained the lives of people.”

He argues that today, by contrast, hides come to us as a “mass-manufactured commodity moving through different processing plants, warehouses and businesses before becoming a standardized product and reaching an end-consumer.”⁵² Without that connection to “life” and “soul,” leather lacks the meaning it once had. To sanctify the new, plant-based straps to be like their leather forebears, Lantry devised a ritual that he rightly calls “unique”:

[T]efillin straps are buried in wilderness for three days while the Tefillin craftsman undergoes a three-day fast. They are then unearthed amidst recitation of Bereshit and Tefilah and symbolically passed hand to hand, dor le dor, to children of the next generation. Fruit, songs and dance celebrate the mitzvah of tefillin before they are tied to batim and sent to their next home. While vegan Klaf is placed within Batim, each Tefillin box is blessed with the recipient’s specific intentions, Hebrew name, the 72 holy names and tefilot.⁵³

⁴⁷ Tractate Sefer Torah 1:1, trans. *The William Davidson Talmud* (Araha Cohen; London: Soncino Press, 1965) (emphasis added).

⁴⁸ Rambam, *Introduction to the Mishnah* 8:28 (trans. Rabbi Francis Nataf, 2017).

⁴⁹ “KAVAKNOT Vegan Tefillin,” <https://www.vegan-tefillin.com/shop/p/kavaknot-vegan-tefillin>, last accessed March 29, 2026.

⁵⁰ “Vegan Tefillin, Mezuzot, and Someday a Vegan Torah,” <https://www.sdjewishworld.com/2024/08/07/vegan-tefillin-mezuzot-and-someday-a-vegan-torah/>, last accessed March 29, 2026.

⁵¹ “Are Vegan Tefillin and Vegan Mezuzah Scrolls Kosher? (Spoiler: YES!),” <https://www.vegan-tefillin.com/mishnagas/vegan-tefillin-kosher>, last accessed March 29, 2026.

⁵² *Id.*

⁵³ “KAVAKNOT Vegan Tefillin,” <https://www.vegan-tefillin.com/shop/p/kavaknot-vegan-tefillin>, last accessed March 29, 2026.

Even if we are persuaded that the cultural meaning of leather has changed over thousands of years, the ritual solution offered by Shaddai Elementals to sanctify their “vegan tefillin” has no basis in halakhah. It certainly does not have enough basis in tradition to override *halakhah le’Moshe mi’Sinai*. Therefore, wrapping synthetic, plant-based tefillin would not fulfill the mitzvah of tefillin. It would be accordingly inappropriate to recite the traditional tefillin blessings or to hold these tefillin out to be kosher tefillin.

Perhaps the tefillin by Shaddai Elementals belong less in the realm of halakhah and more in the tradition of Jewish amulets. My colleague Rabbi Chaya Bender has an impressive body of research on the topic and a creative, compelling framing which I encourage her to publish in her own right. Although synthetic tefillin made from plant-based material does not fulfill the mitzvah of tefillin, Rabbi Bender argues convincingly that they might be used “*zekher la-mitzvah*” (in remembrance of or in tribute to the mitzvah). She writes: “Halakhah provides precedents for symbolic actions performed *zekher la-mitzvah*, a remembrance of a commandment, when literal fulfillment is impossible.”⁵⁴

After all, she points out that we have various rituals that are justified in rabbinic law as *zekher la’mikdash*: shaking lulav, leaving a section of one’s wall unplastered, counting the Omer, and breaking a glass at a wedding. “These examples demonstrate an accepted halakhic category: symbolic continuity of mitzvah consciousness when direct observance is prevented.” Amulets are permitted by the Shulchan Arukh, even using the name of God, as long as they do not resemble pagan practices,⁵⁵ and Rabbi Bender adds, as long as they are “done reverently and with faith rather than magical intent.” For a person who cannot wrap traditional leather tefillin for ethical reasons, she advises to “wear a small written object not just as a substitute but as a *zekher la-mitzvah*.”

Based on Rabbi Bender’s framing, the ritual items made by Shaddai Elementals would be more appropriately worn as Jewish amulets rather than to fulfill the mitzvah of tefillin. But before they could be permitted as amulets, steps would need to be taken to avoid confusion. In their current presentation, they too closely resemble traditional tefillin.

b. Lab-Grown Leather

Lab-grown leather offers the most novel and exciting direction in compassionate tefillin. If the technology currently exists as researchers claim,⁵⁶ we will one day be able to grow leather from the cells of a kosher animal that retains properties of the original animal. In theory, this leather could be indistinguishable on a cellular level from the leather used to make traditional tefillin, and it would preserve a connection between this new leather and its living animal origins.

Are we there yet? Industry marketing is certainly messaging that we are. According to Lab-Grown Leather Ltd.:

⁵⁴ Email from Rabbi Chaya Bender, November 30, 2025.

⁵⁵ Yoreh De’ah 179:12 (permitting amulets for healing, even with God’s name inside); Orach Chayim 301:25 (permitting going out on Shabbat wearing an amulet).

⁵⁶ See, e.g., “Revolutionizing material: The rise of bio leather as eco-friendly and sustainable approach,” *International Journal of Research in Agronomy* (2024), available at: <https://www.agronomyjournals.com/archives/2024.v7.i11.B.1954> (last accessed March 29, 2026).

What sets the material apart is not just its origin story, but its authenticity. This is not a synthetic imitation or a plant-based substitute. It is real leather, grown cell-by-cell, designed for traceability, repairability and long-term use.⁵⁷

They explain the process of turning cells into collagen, then creating the dermis that will be “100% Leather.”⁵⁸ The promises are tantalizing, as they even tease the idea of “T.rex leather” and the Jurassic Park score plays in the back of our minds:

Reconstructing Ancient Biology — Using fossilised amino acid fragments preserved in Tyrannosaurus rex remains, The Organoid Company computationally reconstructed a collagen sequence inspired by T. rex biology. This DNA sequence was designed, validated and then introduced ... into living cells, creating a stable cellular system capable of producing the target collagen.⁵⁹

According to a peer-reviewed article published in the *International Journal of Research in Agronomy*:

One of the most cutting-edge bio-leather technologies is lab-grown leather. With the use of tissue engineering, animal leather may be grown in a lab without endangering any animals. Leading companies in this sector are VitroLabs and Gelatex, which cultivate collagen-based tissues that mimic the characteristics of animal leather. ... [and] has the same strength and durability as conventional leather since it is molecularly identical to it.⁶⁰

So far, it is unclear whether these new materials are yet “molecularly *identical*” to conventional leather or only “*resemble*[] the cellular structure of animal leather.”⁶¹ We need to ask: *Is resemblance enough?*

In his teshuvah on lab-grown meat, Rabbi Danny Nevins finds that the resultant cultured meat does not necessarily resemble its source animal:

The field of epigenetics has demonstrated that environmental factors play an enormous role in gene expression; viruses may alter an organism’s DNA over the course of one generation. The cellular modifications at play with cultured meat are prodigious, with transformations between stem and differentiated states changing the structure of the units. Indeed, cells altered in a lab environment may not be recognizable to the original animal’s immune system. We must remain cognizant of this reality when considering whether subsequent generations of cells should be assigned the halakhic attributes of the first cells taken from a live specimen.⁶²

⁵⁷ “From Fossil to Fashion: Lab-Grown Leather Reaches a Milestone with T. rex Leather,” <https://lab-grown-leather.com/2026/01/12/from-fossil-to-fashion-lab-grown-leather-reaches-a-milestone-with-t-rex-leather/> (last accessed March 29, 2026).

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ “Revolutionizing material: The rise of bio leather as eco-friendly and sustainable approach,” *International Journal of Research in Agronomy* (2024), available at: <https://www.agronomyjournals.com/archives/2024.v7.i11.B.1954> (last accessed March 29, 2026), p.125 (emphasis added).

⁶¹ *Id.* p.124 (emphasis added).

⁶² Rabbi Daniel Nevins, “The Kashrut of Cultured Meat,” (YD 81.2017), https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/cjls/kashrut_of_cultured_meat_responsum_final_version_march_2018.pdf, p.3.

For Rabbi Nevins, the determining factor is not resemblance, but whether the resultant meat retains the identity of its source animal. Despite the subsequent cellular modification, lab-grown meat “cells, harvested from a living animal, derive their species identity from that animal.”⁶³ This finding is based on the halakhic principle, “what comes from the pure is pure” (טהור—טהור מן הירצא).⁶⁴

Applying this same analysis to the question of lab-grown leather: If grown from a source animal that is a kosher species, the resultant lab-grown leather would also retain the identity of that kosher species.⁶⁵ In other words, leather grown in a lab from cow cells would still be classified as cow leather, a permissible material for kosher tefillin.

But, as warned in the *Agronomy* article, there is further need to be patient and cautious, because all types of bio-leather are relatively inaccessible due to expense:

[S]ince this technology is still in its infancy ... Bio-leather, particularly lab-grown and microbial versions, can be expensive to manufacture due to the high expenses of biotechnology, infrastructure, and raw materials. Lab-grown leather, for example, necessitates specialized equipment, energy, and scientific skill, resulting in higher production costs. ... Until production methods are streamlined and economies of scale are realized, cost will continue to be a substantial barrier to widespread adoption.⁶⁶

So unfortunately, the most exciting option is also the least accessible. It will take time before animal-derived synthetic leather will be widely available enough to be used to make tefillin. Options made from plants and fungi are more popular and further developed. Still, lab-grown “bio-leather” offers enormous promise for a halakhically permissible alternative that could avoid the *tza'ar ba'alei hayim* and environmental impact of the leather industry.

Both types of synthetic leather are distinct from the kosher animal skins that are required by *halakhah le'Moshe mi'Sinai*. While the plant-based example is not able to fulfill the mitzvah of tefillin, the animal-based example is promising. If technology advances to the point that animal-derived synthetic leather can be made from the cells of a kosher species, then we have the potential for kosher, animal-derived synthetic tefillin.

One who chooses to wrap plant-based synthetic tefillin may not recite the traditional tefillin blessings or to hold these tefillin out to be kosher tefillin. Still, as in any situation where one misses the opportunity to fulfill a mitzvah, it would be meritorious still to express the *kavannah* of the mitzvah — in this case, perhaps to bind oneself to God and mitzvot.⁶⁷

⁶³ *Id.* p.15.

⁶⁴ *Id.* p.29.

⁶⁵ Thank you to Rabbi Danny Nevins for his teshuvah and applied analysis to lab-grown leather.

⁶⁶ *Id.* pp.125-126.

⁶⁷ Thank you to Rabbi Emily Barton for this suggestion.

C. Tefillin Made from *Neveilot* or *Tereifot*

Lovingly called by some “the grandfather of the Jewish vegan movement,”⁶⁸ Dr. Richard Schwartz advocates for the use of leather from animals who have died a natural death.⁶⁹ He writes that although, “it is not profitable for the animal industry to raise an animal just to meet these humane standards [of a cruelty-free life], it is possible that animal sanctuaries might be willing to donate or sell at a reasonable price animals of kosher species after their natural deaths.”⁷⁰ He further reports that since the *klaf* and *batim* may be obtained from stillborn calves, “some Jewish vegans have resorted to buying used straps and fastening them to new boxes made from stillborn calves.” His approach is to do the best we can with the options available now, since “it is currently impossible to lead a life completely free of using animal products.”⁷¹

Applying Dr. Schwartz’s idea to use leather from animals who have died a natural death are Rabbi Juan Mejía and Yonathan Reches, who run The Kedusha Project based in Oklahoma City.⁷² From their website:

The Kedusha Project is a collective of hide workers and scribes centered in Oklahoma. We are on a mission to open the gates of ritual to the historical Jewish ‘other’ by aligning the sacred crafts of tefillin and parchment with the mitzvot of gender liberation, animal dignity, and economic equity.⁷³

I do not have any first-hand experience with their organization or their tefillin-making craft except through their generous email correspondence. They are not certified in STa”M, nor as they report, “do we have any interest in pursuing certification.” “Certification for sofrut is a relatively recent innovation, and in our view it diminishes rather than enhances the practice.”⁷⁴ Their rabbinic oversight comes from Rabbi Juan Mejía and from their *mara d’atra*, Rabbi Abby Jacobson, who are both Rabbinical Assembly colleagues. They have learned from sofrut Jen Taylor Friedman and Rabbi Linda Motzkin.

Yonathan Reches is a hide worker and scribe with a background in materials science and civil engineering who designs and constructs the tefillin. I asked him to share more about why and how they produce their tefillin. He shared: His impressive answer in full:

... I do not know why Gd ordained that our holiest ritual objects must be made from dead animals, but I have found tremendous meaning in committing to making these objects in a way that challenges and even indicts humankind's casual exploitation of livestock. In our work, we do everything possible to give animals the dignity that our species took from them in their lives and deaths. ...

⁶⁸ “The Grandfather of the Jewish Vegan Movement! Richard Schwartz Interviewed by Shmuly Yanklowitz,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dr9yytoPCO4>.

⁶⁹ As discussed in Section II, the *klaf* (parchment), *retzuot* (straps), and *batim* (boxes) of tefillin may be made from animals that are *neveilot* (not ritually slaughtered and not fit for eating) or *tereifot* (sick and not fit for eating).

⁷⁰ Richard H. Schwartz, *Judaism and Vegetarianism* (New York: Lantern Books, 2001). Thank you to Rabbi Emily Barton for this source.

⁷¹ Schwartz, pp.203-204.

⁷² Thank you also to Rabbi Pamela Barmash for making the introduction to Rabbi Mejía.

⁷³ “About - The Kedusha Project,” <https://www.thekedushaproject.org/about>, last accessed March 29, 2026.

⁷⁴ Email from Yonathan Reches to Rabbi Deborah Megdal, September 8, 2025.

After we skin a carcass, we donate the meat to a local wildlife sanctuary that feeds it to predators rehabilitating from injury or illness. If Gd had not commanded that kedusha be made from hide, the sanctuary would have needed to buy more frozen chickens from Walmart to feed these predators. More animals would have been killed. In short, בשבילי נברא העולם. There is a reason for every mitzvah, and I feel that we are making our own slow progress in revealing the purpose behind the use of animals for kedusha.⁷⁵

The absence of kosher STa”M certification is of course a serious practical barrier. I would advise anyone interested in purchasing to investigate the kashrut further. Their tefillin are for sale online, though they are not reasonably accessible due to supply limitations and cost.⁷⁶ New sets take six months of lead time and are currently priced at \$5,000. “Discounted” sets, which have small aesthetic defects that do not affect kashrut, take three months of lead time and are priced at \$1,800. Although the availability and cost of tefillin can vary widely, these tefillin are more expensive and less available than most.

Perhaps an increase in demand would allow the Kedusha Project to expand their operations and lower cost, but it would be a stretch to argue that these tefillin are themselves the solution to the ethical issue brought before the Committee. The Project is an example of an organization attempting to balance the need for kosher tefillin with the ethical treatment of animals. Those who can should support projects like this one that try to produce halakhically acceptable tefillin in ways that minimize animal suffering.

There are, for example, scribes who use hides from local hunters or farmers. I joined a fascinating presentation by Rabbi Linda Motzkin, who works with local deer hunters to source the hides that she makes into parchment.⁷⁷ According to an interview she gave with *Hadassah Magazine*, her idea arose out of necessity. As a Reform female rabbi, she expected that the usual religious suppliers would likely refuse to sell to her, so she “decided to source deer hides from nearby Adirondack hunters and stretched many of the smelly skins in her own garage.”⁷⁸ Shoshana Gugenheim Kedem runs Or Hadash, an effort she describes as:

a Jewish and contemporary art in(ter)vention into the normative practice of parchment making that envisions redirecting the supply chain away from the industrial animal agriculture complex and toward shepherds, farmers and the land they tend. The work disrupts the current model of parchment making for Hebrew scribes by incorporating concern for higher animal welfare, regenerative farming, and slow craft practices into the production of parchment and, by doing so, centering regeneration—for humans, animals, lands, and community....⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Email from Yonathan Reches to Rabbi Deborah Megdal, January 29, 2025 (small edits to correct typographical errors).

⁷⁶ “Shop - The Kedusha Project,” <https://www.thekedushaproject.org/shop>, last accessed March 29, 2026.

⁷⁷ “Making Torah, Baking Bread, Building Community,” <https://breadandtorah.org/>, last accessed March 29, 2026.

⁷⁸ “Prepping Adirondack Deerskins for DIY Torah Scroll Project,” <https://www.hadassahmagazine.org/2020/05/12/preparing-parchment-adirondack-deerskin-diy-torah-scroll/>, last accessed March 29, 2026.

⁷⁹ “Shoshana Gugenheim Kedem,” <https://www.shoshanagugenheim.com/>, last accessed March 29, 2026.

As far as I know, neither Rabbi Motzkin nor Or Hadash sell tefillin, though I expect that they or others with similarly inspired scribal practices would be open to sourcing skins for tefillin. There is certainly potential for expansion of the practice of making tefillin from *neveilot* or *tereifot*.

D. Repaired Tefillin

Finally: We should work harder to repair old tefillin before replacing them.⁸⁰ There are plenty of used tefillin sitting in the dusty boxes of synagogue storage rooms. I have at least 30 pairs of donated tefillin in my office that are in varying states of disrepair — sweet, old sets that belonged to lots of grandfathers (some who clearly used them, some who clearly did not). I cannot bear to bury them. Instead, I use them to teach children and lend them out to curious adults.

My abundance of riches aside, we have a practical challenge to access. Repairing tefillin is costly small-scale, and there are very limited sources for obtaining repaired tefillin. There are tefillin *gemachim* and other communal second-hand sources for religious items⁸¹ — but the average Conservative Jew could not easily acquire a set. Another practical challenge: To the extent that new leather is sometimes needed for the repair process, some might find themselves in a “six of one, half dozen of the other” type of situation.⁸²

Yet I remain hopeful that with more resources and organization around repairing used sets, many of those from my box (and every other rabbi’s box of old tefillin) could be repaired and used.

V. The Case of One Who Will Not or Cannot Wear Leather

I respectfully acknowledge that for those who are uncomfortable, unwilling, or unable to wear animal-derived leather on their bodies, my guidance to use tefillin made from *neveilot/tereifot* or to repair used tefillin will not satisfy.⁸³ For some, synthetic tefillin made from the cells of a kosher animal might one day provide a halakhic, sustainable, and accessible option. But for others, whose moral commitment means that they will not wear anything animal-derived, the lab-grown “bio-leather” will not satisfy (even if it were available today). Plant-based synthetic tefillin is not permitted. So what options do they have?

⁸⁰ On a personal note: As someone who does not purchase leather for ethical reasons related to animal suffering, I am fortunate that I received my own set of leather tefillin as a gift from my father when I was a teenager. Like all tefillin, they are in need of regular checking and upkeep. Should they ever be in need of replacement, I plan to find a set of used tefillin to repair.

⁸¹ My colleague, Rabbi Chaya Bender, shared that she received her tefillin from a women’s tefillin gemach in New York City. There, women repaired used tefillin for use by other women. See <https://alexandracasser.com/> (organizes a women’s tefillin gemach) (last accessed March 29, 2026); “The Women’s Tefillin Gemach,” <https://jewishschool.com/the-womens-tefillin-gemach-having-a-community-somewhere-that-supports-you-is-vital-to-making-any-new-practice-sustainable-29337> (last accessed March 29, 2026); “Tefillin for Women, by Women,” <https://forward.com/news/156814/tefillin-for-women-by-women/> (last accessed March 29, 2026).

⁸² Thank you to Rabbi Barry Leff for making this point.

⁸³ Thank you to members of the CJLS Ritual Subcommittee who read an earlier draft and provided helpful guidance in general and on this case in particular: Rabbi Joshua Heller, Rabbi Emily Barton, Rabbi Joel Pitkowsky, Rabbi Rob Scheinberg, and Norman Kahn.

We can distinguish between someone who *will not* wear leather tefillin, who might identify as a “conscientious objector,” from someone who *cannot* because they are truly unable due to severe mental anguish or repulsion. While I respect the “will nots” or “conscientious objectors,” those who currently wrap using synthetic tefillin are missing the opportunity to fulfill the mitzvah of tefillin. They are nonetheless deserving respect for their dual moral commitments — to the words of Torah and to minimizing animal suffering.⁸⁴ None of us can say that we fulfill every mitzvah without reproach.

For the “cannots,” we have a well-established halakhic principle that leniencies may be taken when someone’s physical or mental health is in danger.⁸⁵ According to Rambam:

חולי מעים וכל מי שלא יכול לשמר את נקביו אלא בצער פטור מן התפילין.

A person with stomach problems and anyone who can contain his excretory functions only with difficulty are exempt from the obligation to wear tefillin.⁸⁶

Similarly, someone who cannot use leather tefillin in order to avoid a significant threat to their mental health may be exempted from the mitzvah of tefillin upon consultation with their rabbi.

Alternatively, those who cannot wear leather due to severe mental anguish or repulsion may be exempted from the mitzvah of tefillin under the rubric of “one under duress is exempted by the Torah” (אנוס רחמנא פטריה).⁸⁷ The Talmud considers the case of a man who has a dispute in court and wishes to postpone the trial to allow him time to collect more evidence. The other party does not believe that he will show up to the later court date. So the man vows that if he fails to appear, all of his evidence collected so far would be void. Sure enough, due to circumstances beyond his control, he fails to appear. Rava rules to be lenient: “He is a victim of circumstances beyond his control and [the *halakha* is that] the Merciful One exempted a victim of circumstances beyond his control [from responsibility for his actions]. ...”⁸⁸ Like the person who is physically or spiritually ill, the person whose mental anguish torments to the point of duress may qualify for an exemption (again, upon consultation with their rabbi).

Not only do we have an obligation to be compassionate to animals; we have an obligation to be compassionate to each other in how we each navigate our serious, spiritual obligation to wrap our bodies with the word of God.

⁸⁴ Thank you to Rabbi Aaron Alexander.

⁸⁵ Thank you to Rabbi Stewart Vogel for this suggestion.

⁸⁶ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Tefillin* 4:14 (trans. Eliyahu Touger, Moznaim Publishing, 1986-2007). Thank you to Rabbi Avram Reisner for this suggestion.

⁸⁷ Thank you to Rabbi Danny Nevins for this source and application.

⁸⁸ b. *Nedarim* 27a, trans. Koren Talmud Bavli, *The Noé Edition* (Koren: Jerusalem, 2016).

פסקי דין (Rulings):⁸⁹

1. *Plant-derived synthetic tefillin do not fulfill the mitzvah of tefillin.*
2. Those who feel that they are unable or unwilling to don tefillin might consider this alternative: Certain ritual items may be permitted “*zekher la-mitzvah*” if clearly worn as an amulet that does not cause confusion with traditional, kosher tefillin. Those who use plant-based synthetic tefillin or other ritual items *zekher la-mitzvah* should not recite the tefillin blessings.
3. *Animal-derived synthetic tefillin is potentially permitted, but we first need a real model to consider.* If technology advances to the point that animal-derived synthetic leather can be made from the cells of a kosher species, then we have the potential for kosher, animal-derived synthetic tefillin. Animal-derived leather may not satisfy some who object to using animal products in any form.
4. *Compassionate, kosher alternatives to synthetic tefillin include:* tefillin made from hides of kosher animals that died as *neveilot* or *tereifot*, and repaired traditional tefillin (assuming in both cases that the tefillin are made from leather and kosher).

⁸⁹ Related issues that are beyond the scope of this teshuvah but which certainly intersect with the question of using leather include: eating meat; eating other food derived from animals, such as dairy and eggs (given the abhorrent treatment of animals that is common in those industries); wearing garments made from animal skins; and buying products that were tested on animals.

Because there are many overlapping issues surrounding parchment for Torah Scrolls and parchment for tefillin, some conclusions on tefillin might rightly apply to Torah scrolls as well, but I limit this teshuvah to the question presented. As Rabbi Pamela Barmash noted in a personal email regarding the recommendation to refurbish used tefillin (April 18, 2025): “The same would be true for our Torah scrolls -- there are so many readily available on the market -- yet congregations and donors want a fresh new scroll, whose scribe they can meet and who can help them fill in a few letters so as to have a greater sense of fulfilling a mitzvah.”