G-d tells us in Leviticus 18:5 to “observe My decrees and My laws, which man shall carry out and by which he shall live.” The Torah here is setting a standard for one to live by G-d’s laws, but not jeopardize one’s life in trying to fulfill them. This limitation is prevalent in many contexts, one of which is where an individual suffers adverse allergic reactions that make it hard to fulfill his or her religious obligations without posing a risk to his or her health. Our sages and leaders struggle to find solutions that accommodate an individual’s health needs while at the same time allow him or her to remain committed to Torah obligations and lifestyle.

An allergic reaction is an overreaction of the body’s immune system. Allergies may result from inhaled materials such as pollen or dust, injected materials such as drugs or venom, ingested materials such as food or drugs, or contacted materials such as metals or plants [1]. Normally, these types of substances are harmless; however, in some people they can create a state of hypersensitivity. Hypersensitivity to dairy products can present a serious problem in those cases where Jewish law does not require the designation of “dairy”. In some cases, hypersensitivity to metals can cause health side effects that result from the Jewish practices of adorning tefillin and head coverings.

Halacha forbids the eating of milk and meat together. The origin of this prohibition can be traced to three sources in the Torah, Exodus 23:19, Exodus 34:26, and Deuteronomy 14:21, where it is written “Don’t boil a kid in its mother’s milk.” The Shulchan Aruch (Yoreh Deah, Hilchot Basar Vechalav, 77:1) explains that this statement prohibits not only cooking, but also eating and deriving benefit from, a meat and milk mixture. In addition, an individual must abstain from eating dairy foods for a certain period of time, according to one’s custom, after eating meat because the meaty foods tend to leave a flavor and stick to the mouth (Turei Zahav, Yoreh Deah, Hilchot Basar Vechalav, 79:1). Jewish law treats the separation of meat and dairy as a very strict prohibition. Orthodox Jewish families have separate utensils and dishes for meat and dairy to avoid the possibility of contact between the two. Only pareve foods, foods that are neither dairy nor meat, need not be separated.

People who are allergic to milk, or have specific IgE antibodies to milk [2], need to eat meat or non-dairy foods, otherwise they will undergo severe anaphylaxis due to an IgE antibody response. This IgE antibody response is classified as a type I allergic reaction, involving mast cells, which are immune cells that release toxic agents and cytokines when an allergen binds to them. These toxic agents cause more immune cells to leave the blood and fight the allergen leading to inflammation. They also cause smooth muscle to contract leading to coughing and wheezing, and mucus to be secreted, while cytokines stimulate a further immune response [1].

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There have been incidents where young children have eaten foods marked pareve, or non-dairy [2,3], assumed these foods were safe to eat, and then have gone into anaphylactic shock. Subsequently, these foods were analyzed and shown to contain traces amounts of dairy. At first glance, one would assume that eating these foods with meat would be a violation of the halacha, however, this is not the case. The Shulchan Aruch describes a case where a small amount of meat falls into a vat of milk and vice versa. In such a situation, the Shulchan Aruch explains, one should give the food to a non-Jew to taste. If the taste remains the same despite the small amount of meat or milk, depending on the scenario, then the food retains its kosher status (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah, Hilchot Basar Vechalav, 92:1-2). Rav Moshe Iserlis,
in his commentary on the Shulchan Aruch, wrote that we do not rely on the opinion of a gentile, rather, if the meat or milk that fell in the dish is a sixtieth or less of the rest of the food’s volume, then the food is kosher and if more than a sixtieth fell in, it is not kosher. Therefore, an item may still be considered pareve or meat even if it contains 3 to 4 parts per million of dairy particles, enough to cause a severe allergic reaction [4]. This would explain why those children underwent anaphylactic shock even though the foods they were eating were not marked as dairy.

One area where this problem is prevalent is in the packaging of food. Packing food does not constitute cooking, as there is no heat. Therefore, dairy as well as pareve foods can be packaged using the same packing equipment. The equipment needs only to be cleaned [5]. The problem with packing equipment is that particles from dairy products build up on the equipment and, even though the equipment is cleaned before being used for pareve items, the insignificant amount of dairy particles remaining on the equipment, though negligible according to halacha, are potentially dangerous for people allergic to dairy [5]. 0.1 to 7.5% of children are allergic to dairy [3]. Rabbinc organizations, like the Orthodox Union (OU), have addressed this issue and have started to identify products that have potential to stimulate an allergic reaction by marking them (OU)D, meaning dairy, instead of the traditional (OU)D.E., signifying that cleansed dairy equipment was used [4].

Allergic reactions can also interfere with the commandment to adorn tefillin, two black leather boxes that contain parchment. The Torah commands men to, “bind them [tefillin] as a sign upon your arm and let them be ornaments between your eyes” (Devarim 6:8). As such, men wear tefillin on their arm and forehead during the morning prayers, except on the Sabbath and holidays. Tefillin contain leather straps to hold them in place on the head and on the arm. Allergic contact dermatitis, skin inflammation upon direct contact with an allergen [6], has occurred on the left arm and on the neck of men when performing the mitzvah of tefillin.

Contact dermatitis can result from exposure to many items, such as makeup, perfumes, fabrics, plants, antibiotics, metals, and essentially anything else skin may touch [6]. The condition can have symptoms ranging from just itching and inflammation (hotness, redness, swelling, and fluid [1]), to skin lesions that have blisters and may ooze, crust, and become scaly. It is considered a type IV allergic reaction in which symptoms do not develop until 1-3 days after initial allergenic contact, which is unlike a type I allergic reaction where a response is immediate [1]. Contact dermatitis as a result of tefillin is caused by potassium dichromate [7], a metal antifungal agent in which the leather straps are dipped to make them last ten years instead of eight [8]. It is not unusual to develop allergic contact dermatitis from exposure to metals and it is also more common for men to be sensitive to chromate than women.

As of 2005, only eight men are known to have developed contact dermatitis from wearing tefillin [7-9]. The allergy to tefillin is proposed to be more uncommon because of the short time period in which the tefillin are worn, usually less than an hour a day [9]. The amount of time is relevant because in a type IV hypersensitivity reaction a lot more allergen must be present to stimulate a response. Therefore, many chromate ions would need to penetrate into the skin and then be processed by immune cells [1]. There are three halachic solutions for these few men who are allergic to their tefillin. The first solution is to buy tefillin made without chromium, like vegetable tanned leather tefillin [7]. The second alternative is to smear oil on the inside of the leather strap. This solution, which is supported by Rav Yakov Meir Stern, is suitable as oil is not a chazitza, a halachically forbidden barrier, between the skin and tefillin [8]. Another option is to do as one man did, and keep putting on the tefillin despite the blisters and crustsing [7].

A third area in which allergic reactions and halacha interface is regards to the custom of wearing a head covering, either a kippa for males or a tichel for married women. In Shir Hashirim (2:14 and 4:1), a woman’s voice and hair are praised. The gemara thus assumes that a woman’s voice and hair are provocative and must, therefore, not be heard or seen by a man who is not that woman’s husband (Brachot 24a). As a result, Jewish tradition is that in public a married woman covers her hair.

A kippa, on the other hand, is the head covering adorned by Orthodox Jewish men. Men cover their heads for a different reason than women, namely to show that G-d is above them (Kiddushin 31a). Originally called a sudra in the Talmud, the kippa was to be worn only by those who feared G-d (Kiddushin 29a) and on occasions where more respect for G-d was necessary, such as at court decisions (Shabbos 10a), religious ceremonies (Kiddushin 8a), and grace after meals (Brachot 51a) [10]. Rav Huna the son of Rav Yehoshua, however, would not walk four amos, a distance of between 6 and 8 feet, without a head covering (Shabbos 118b). Rav Yosef Karo argued in Beit Yosef O.C. 8 that head coverings are mandatory for all men, all the time, while Rav Shlomo Lorua and the Vilna Gaon argued that kippot are not always mandatory [10]. Today there are many Italian and Moroccan Jews who do not have the custom of wearing a
kipa, and Rav Moshe Feinstein allowed American Jews to take off their kippot for work only (Igrot Moshe O.C. 4:2), so as not to jeopardize their ability to earn a living [10].

Those Jews with the custom of covering their head might possibly experience an allergic reaction. Pseudo alopecia areata is the term given to Jewish religious patients who have a hair loss that is similar to those individuals with alopecia areata. Alopecia areata either is an inherited disease or is an autoimmune disease and causes round patches of hair loss [6]. Pseudo alopecia areata is different, in that the hair loss only occurs in the area where hair pins/clips that keep a tichel or kippa on the head are placed and lesions develop on the irritated skin [11]. The lesions result partially from the sharp-ended metal pin holders and partially from the type IV allergic reaction to the metal clips, just as with tefillin. However a kipa or a tichel, unlike tefillin, are worn most of the time so it is more common for people to get pseudo alopecia areata than for men who wear tefillin to get contact dermatitis. It is also more common for men than women to develop pseudo alopecia areata. Women have more options as to where to place a clip and they also have more hair so the clip is not always in direct contact with their skin [11].

A clinical study was performed by Yosefy et al. [11] on 37 Orthodox Jewish patients with pseudo alopecia areata. Patients were tested with pharmacological methods, irritants, immune inhibitors, cyclosporin A, immune enhancers, and others. These methods normally work to help regrow hair 10-30% of the time [11], however, they did not work on these religious patients. Non-pharmacological methods, such as changing the clip to a non-metal one or using a larger, less sharp, clip facilitated hair regrowth [11]. So the best solution to covering one’s head despite having this kind of allergy is just to change the clip. An alternate solution is to take advantage of Rav Moshe Feinstein’s leniency regarding the requirement to wear a kippa.

Religious Jews have always made their faith their number one priority. Sometimes, however, Judaism can create situations in which following the commandments strictly can lead to adverse health effects. As a result, the rabbis throughout history have formulated solutions that accommodate both the need to observe the religion and to preserve one’s health.

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