There are many colorful customs and practices in the Orthodox world that set this community apart from the rest of the world. The modest dress-codes, learning Torah indoors for large spans of time, and praying with phylacteries, Tefillin, to name a few, are customs and religious laws, halachot, which characterize Orthodox Judaism; but are there risks associated with this law-abidance? Indeed, some of these practices can cause different forms of skin rashes, and vitamin deficiencies, yet on the other hand can also provide protection from some severe diseases, such as skin cancer.

The biblical directive, “You shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes” (Deuteronomy 6:8) refers to the daily obligation of men placing Tefillin on their arm and forehead. This custom is practiced every morning aside from Shabbos and on Jewish holidays. The Tefillin are made up of two black leather boxes containing scrolls of parchment, which are inscribed with four passages from the Torah, including the Shema, the prayer in which Jews announce their unwavering faith in G-d. Although this practice is beautiful, there may also be health risks involved. There are various case reports on Orthodox Jewish men who had eczematous flare-ups that started on their left forearms, the Tefillin site that eventually spread to both forearms, hips and legs [1-2]. The biopsy results of the patients’ infected tissue, pointed to perivascular lymphocytic dermatitis, an inflammatory skin infection. After testing for allergen-sensitivity, one of these patients was shown to be allergic to potassium dichromate, which is, in fact, a key ingredient in the preparation of the leather Tefillin straps. Potassium dichromate is used during the leather-tanning process to preserve the Tefillin’s leather straps [3]. Although people are allergic to potassium dichromate, the “Tefillin allergy” is not too common because most people wear Tefillin for less than an hour at a time, so an allergic reaction does not have sufficient time to erupt [4]. In general, doctors are not mindful of religious customs when making a diagnosis, but according to Dr. Akiva Tratner, a doctor and researcher in Bellison Hospital, “… These customs should be considered as potential causes of skin ailments” as they could point to the source of the irritation. As for solutions to this poignant issue, some Rabbanic leaders have authorized those allergic to the offending chemical in Tefillin to smear kosher oil onto the inside of the leather straps so there is no direct contact between the leather and skin [3]. Additionally, there are some Tefillin on the market that are made without potassium dichromate.

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In addition to the “Tefillin allergy”, there is also an ailment that affects those who dedicate a large portion of their days to learning Torah and davening, Yiddish for praying. Dubbed “Davener’sDermatosis”, this skin rash is characterized by lesions of brown pigmentation that are distributed throughout bony parts of the body. In one study it was found that a group of thirteen men, all of whom were full-time Orthodox Jewish Talmud students, had hyperpigmentation on their lower spines, on top of the lower thoracic and upper lumbar vertebrae. Upon biopsy and analysis, the lesions were found to be non-cancerous and had resulted from prolonged exposure to friction, heat, rubbing, or scratching. Based on the students’ common background, the researchers focused on unveiling a common cause for the lesions. All of the students were Talmudic scholars who had been learning for eight hours a day for about the past eight years. Furthermore, as is typical of Talmudic students, they had sat in large study halls reading from texts of scripture and Talmud accompanied by heated discussions, all whilst constantly rocking back-and-forth [5]. The reason for their “shuckeling”, Yiddish for “rocking back-and-forth”, is not exactly known, but Rabbi Yehuda Ha’Levi of 12th century Spain explained that it was common for many people to share one volume of Torah or Talmud and they would take turns reading from the source and then sit back, thus leading to a repeated back-and-forth motion. This became a habitual part of studying, even when more books became available and sharing...
The Jewish faith is filled with an abundance of laws and customs, all of which add to the cultural richness of the religion. Although some of these practices, when practiced in extremes, can have harmful consequences, such as skin lesions and vitamin deficiencies, supplements can be taken to make up for Vitamin D deficiencies, and alternate leather can be used for Tefillin, so in essence, there are no obstructions to leading a complete orthodox lifestyle. Even furthermore, research demonstrates that dressing modestly can prevent skin cancer, since the skin, which would ordinarily be exposed to the vicious UV rays, is hidden away.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
I would like to express my greatest appreciation to Dr. Babich for encouraging me to author this article, as well as generously providing research material. The patience and kindness that he shows to each of his students is something I’d like to emulate and will never forget. I’d also like to thank my entire family for constantly encouraging me to reach for the stars and never give up.

REFERENCES


