Shelach 5786 Volume XXXIII Number 33

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

Covenant & Conversation

Our Torah portion ends with one of the great commands of Judaism – tzitzit, the fringes worn on the corners of our garments as a perennial reminder of our identity as Jews and our obligation to keep the Torah's commands: The Lord said to Moses: "Speak to the Israelites; tell them to make fringes on the corners of their garments throughout all the generations. To the fringe, on each corner, they should attach a blue cord. And this shall be your fringe: seeing it, you shall remember all the Lord's commands and keep them. You will not then go astray, following the lusts of your heart or of your eyes. This is to remind you to keep all My commands, to remain holy to your God." (Num. 15:37-40)

So central is this command, that it became the third paragraph of the Shema, the supreme declaration of Jewish faith. I once heard the following commentary from my teacher, Rabbi Dr Nachum Rabinovitch.

He began by pointing out some of the strange features of the command. On the one hand, the Sages said that the command of tzitzit is equal to all the other commands together, as it is said: "Look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them." It is thus of fundamental significance.

On the other hand, it is not absolutely obligatory. It is possible to avoid the command of fringes altogether by never wearing a garment of four or more corners. Maimonides rules: "Even though one is not obligated to acquire a [four-cornered] robe and wrap oneself in it in order to [fulfil the command of] tzitzit, it is not fitting for a pious individual to exempt himself from this command" (Laws of Tzitzit, 3:11). It is important and praiseworthy but not categorical. It is conditional: if you have such a garment, then you must put fringes on it. Why so? Surely it should be obligatory, in the way that tefillin (phylacteries) are.

There is another unusual phenomenon. In the course of time, the custom has evolved to fulfil the command in two quite different ways: the first, in the form of a tallit (robe, shawl) which is worn over our other clothes, specifically while we pray; the second in the form of an undergarment, worn beneath our outer clothing throughout the day.

Not only do we keep the one command in two different ways. We also make different blessings over the two forms. Over the tallit, we say, "who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to wrap ourselves in a fringed garment." Over the undergarment, we say, "who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us concerning the precept of the fringed garment." Why is one command split into two in this way?

Rabbi Rabinovitch gave this answer: there are two kinds of clothing. There are the clothes we wear to project an image. A king, a judge, and a soldier all wear clothing that conceals the individual and instead proclaims a role, an office, a rank. As such, clothes, especially uniforms, can be misleading. A king dressed as a beggar will not (or would not, before television) be recognised as royalty. A beggar dressed as a king may find himself honoured. A policeman dressed as a policeman carries with him a certain authority, an aura of power, even though he may feel nervous and insecure. Clothes disguise. They are like a mask, hiding the person beneath. Such are the clothes we wear in public when we want to create a certain impression.

But there are other clothes we wear when we are alone, that may convey more powerfully than anything else the kind of person we really are: the artist in his studio, the writer at his desk, the gardener tending the roses. They do not dress to create an impression. To the contrary: they dress as they do because of what they are, not because of what they wish to seem.

The two kinds of tzitzit represent these different forms of dress. When we engage in prayer, we sense in our heart how unworthy we may be of the high demands God has made of us. We feel the need to come before God as something more than just ourselves. We cover ourselves in the robe, the tallit, the great symbol of the Jewish people at prayer. We conceal our individuality – in the language of the blessing over the tallit, we "wrap ourselves in a fringed garment." It is as if we were saying to God: I may only be a beggar, but I am wearing a royal robe, the robe of your people Israel who prayed to You throughout the centuries, to whom You showed a special love and took as Your own. The tallit hides the person we are and represents the person we would like to be, because in prayer we ask God to judge us not for what we are, but for what we wish to be.

The deeper symbolism of tzitzit, however, is that it represents the commandments as a whole ("look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord") – and these become part of what and who we are only when

we accept them without coercion, of our own free will. That is why the command of tzitzit is not categorical. We do not have to keep it. We are not obligated to buy a four-cornered garment. When we do so, it is because we choose to do so. We obligate ourselves. That is why opting to wear tzitzit symbolises the free acceptance of all the duties of Jewish life.

This is the most inward, intimate, intensely personal aspect of faith, whereby in our innermost soul we dedicate ourselves to God and His commands. There is nothing public about this. It is not for outer show. It is who we are when we are alone, not trying to impress anyone, not wishing to seem what we are not. This is the command of tzitzit as undergarments, beneath, not on top of, our clothing. Over this we make a different blessing. We do not talk about "wrapping ourselves in a fringed garment" – because this form of fringes is not for outward show. We are not trying to hide ourselves beneath a uniform. Instead, we are expressing our innermost commitment to God's word and call to us. Over this we say the blessing, "who has commanded us concerning the precept of tzitzit" because what matters is not the mask but the reality, not how we wish to appear, but what we really are.

In this striking way tzitzit represent the dual nature of Judaism. On the one hand it is a way of life that is public, communal, shared with others across the world and through the ages. We keep Shabbat, celebrate the festivals, observe the dietary laws and the laws of family purity in a way that has hardly varied for many centuries. That is the public face of Judaism – the tallit we wear, the cloak woven out of the 613 threads, each one a command from God.

But there is also our inner life as people of faith. There are things we can say to God that we can say to no-one else. He knows our thoughts, hopes, fears, better than we know them ourselves. We speak to Him in the privacy of the soul, and He listens. That internal conversation – the opening of our heart to Him who brought us into existence in love – is not for public show. Like the fringed undergarment, it stays hidden. But it is no less real an aspect of Jewish spirituality. The two types of fringed garment represent the two dimensions of the life of faith – the outer persona and the inner person, the image we present to the world and the face we show only to God. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2026 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"Send out men…to explore the Canaanite territory…each one the representative of the tribe of his fathers, each one of them a [tribal] prince… all of them were leaders of the children of Israel." (Numbers 13:2–3) The great and grave transgression of the desert generation was the sin of the scouts, the refusal of all but Joshua and Caleb to attempt the conquest and settlement of the Land of Israel, the desired goal of the Exodus from Egypt. And despite the divine guarantee of success (Exodus 6:6–8), despite the miraculous plagues against Egyptian society and the splitting of the Reed Sea, despite Moses' clear endorsement of the conquest – the ten princes of tribes won the day and convinced the Israelites to remain in the desert.

At this point in Jewish history, the failure of leadership is impossible to comprehend. After all, God's track record on behalf of the newly-freed slave-nation had been impeccably successful! What could possibly have made these tribal princes stop short of achieving the whole point of the Exodus, their arrival upon the sacred soil of their final resting place and the land of their inheritance (menucha venachala)?

I believe that the beginning of the possible reason for the negativism of the ten scouts lies in the manner in which significant appointments were made in early Israelite history. The Talmudic sages pick up on what appears to be a superfluous verb utilized in the account of the appointment of Betzalel as chief architect of the Sanctuary – a verb which is slightly changed between the two almost identical recordings of Betzalel's appointment. Initially the biblical text records (Exodus 31:1–5): "And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 'Behold [or see (singular), re'eh], I have called by name Betzalel.'" And then, in reviewing the appointment four chapters later, the Bible states (Exodus 35:30–35):

"And Moses said to the children of Israel, 'Behold [or see (plural), reu], the Lord has called by name Betzalel.'" The verb "behold" is not really necessary, and the switch from singular to plural from the first account to the second seems to require some explanation.

The Talmud provides a fascinating – and very modern – interpretation (Berakhot 55a). R. Yitzchak, making use of the verb "behold" or "see," takes it to mean the request of consent or approval. From this perspective R. Yitzchak derives from this word that "it is improper to appoint a leader over a congregation unless it is with the consent of the congregation." Hence, God first said "behold," or "see" (re'eh) to Moses, an individual, to obtain his consent to the divine appointment of Betzalel as chief architect of the Sanctuary; Moses then sought the approval of the entire congregation for Betzalel's appointment, using the plural reu. In effect, therefore, biblical appointments require the democratic consent of the people in order for them to be effective.

Fascinatingly enough, as Judaism developed, the democratic method of electing a leader became more and more accepted. The judges who ruled after Joshua were charismatic individuals who were fundamentally chosen by public assent; even the

manner in which a king was appointed seemed to depend upon the vox populi: "When you shall come to the land which the Lord God is giving you and [if] you shall say, 'Place over us a king like all the nations round about,' then you shall surely place upon yourself a king" (Deut. 17:14–15; see the Netziv's commentary emphasizing that "you shall say" means only on the basis of public approval). Maimonides rules that in the absence of a prophet or a Sanhedrin, the king was to be elected by the majority of Israelites (commentaries on Mishna Keritot 1:1), and Jewish communities throughout the Middle Ages were governed by seven good representatives, a city council, who were publicly elected (Ĥoshen Mishpat).

Taking all of this into account, it seems logical to assume that these twelve scouts, each an important personage representing his tribe as its president or prince (nasi), had each been elected by his tribespeople; if the chief architect required public assent, most certainly the president or prince of each tribe required the approbation of the majority of the tribe in order to hold the office of nasi. And it also stands to reason that were the Israelites to conquer and settle the Promised Land, dividing their patrimony in accordance with sectarian tribal needs, the new reality would occasion new elections.

I would suggest that everything I have written so far was understood as well – and even better – by the scouts, princes of their respective tribes. They were certainly honorable men, who – on the conscious level – would deny being influenced by the possibility of their losing office in a situation of new elections. But the subconscious desire to retain a position of honor and power works in insidious and devious ways. The sacred Zohar maintains that it was the (subconscious) fear of new elections which prompted the ten princes to lobby in favor of the status quo of the desert rather than the risks involved in the reality of conquering and settling the Promised Land.

The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin's book Bemidbar: Trials & Tribulations in Times of Transition, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid and available for purchase at bit.ly/RiskinBemidbar.

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"Send for yourself men, and they shall scout the land of Canaan which I am giving to the Children of Israel…" (Bamidbar 8:18-19) The Torah doesn't use extra words. Hashem could have told Moshe only, "they shall scout the Land of Canaan." Why did He need to add the words, "which I am giving to the Children of Israel?" Was there a different Land of Canaan that He didn't give us?

The Ohr HaChaim comments that the spies were to be sent only for the benefit of Moshe, but it was not Hashem's desire that they be sent, because Hashem knew they would not see a land they were able to conquer.

Indeed, the Jews were NOT able to conquer Canaan. The peoples there were too strong for them. That didn't matter, though, because Hashem, as the giver of the gift, was the One Who vanquished those inhabitants (who had taken the land from its previous, indigenous, peoples, by the way) and there was truly no need for the spies to go and check out the land. The purpose of the words, "which I am giving the Children of Israel" was that we should understand it was coming to us completely from the Hand of Hashem, and not through our own efforts.

Yet, there's something else that stands out regarding this verbiage as well. Rashi tells us that behind the scenes, Hashem was thinking, "I've told them the land is good, but they insist they need to send spies. By their lives, I will give them room to err in the words of the spies!" He didn't articulate it to Moshe, or else he would never have sent the meraglim. But, possibly, in order to give Moshe a chance, Hashem hinted it to Moshe, as He has done in other places in the Torah.

According to this comment, the posuk could have been secretly alluding to this fact, that in allowing Moshe to send spies, Hashem was giving the Jews the chance to make a mistake, which we did, and many paid the price with their lives. He even put it right there in the posuk, "which I am giving them," so we would recognize the challenge.

What makes this even more interesting is that the same few words can be interpreted positively, as the Ohr HaChaim wrote, that the Jews wouldn't even have to work to conquer the land, or negatively, that Hashem was setting us up to fail. Why is that so interesting? Because that was precisely the sin of the meraglim.

They saw people dying in droves. They could have seen it has the Hand of Hashem preparing the way for them, or they could have seen it as a negative portent of the land swallowing its inhabitants. They chose to see it in a negative light, and influenced the nation with them. This caused the exile we still suffer from today.

In essence, all the problems we have; all the anti-Semitism, suffering and pain we experience, come from looking for the cloud in every silver lining, and expecting the worst to happen. If we would only trust in Hashem to give us everything He wants to give us, it would make a world of difference, and we'd exist in a different world.

A man had twin sons, one an optimist and one a pessimist. For their birthdays, he gave the pessimist a remote-control car, with all the bells and whistles. The boy was gloomy and morose. "It's probably going to break before the week is out," he mumbled somberly.

The father led his other son outside, to a large pile of manure.

The boy began jumping up and down with excitement. "Oh, thank you Daddy!" he squealed. "I just KNOW there's a pony in here somewhere!" © 2026 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI BEREL WEIN ZT"L

Wein Online

Moshe had a good idea to encourage the Jewish people to appreciate the gift being granted to them in possessing the Land of Israel. With the most positive of intentions he commissions twelve leaders of Israel, in whom he undoubtedly had unquestioned trust in their piety and wisdom, Moshe expects them to return with an enthusiastic assessment of the Land of Israel.

Instead they return with an even-handed cold blooded report about the land and its inhabitants. Like Obama's speech, the negative parts of their report somehow overwhelm the positive statements that they uttered. They eventually back up their report with personal agendas, woeful predictions and demagogic pronouncements. And Moshe is powerless to tell the people to reject the negative report. A mood of wild depression overwhelms Israel and the great march to the promised land is ended permanently for that generation. There was always a predisposition among that generation to prefer to return to Egyptian servitude rather than to forge a new society in a new land and create their own independent state.

The uncomfortable but known past always has strong attraction and requires no special bravery or courage. However, the unknown future no matter how great its possibilities are is always an intimidating sight. This attitude is present in all Jewish and human generations and certainly was not limited to the generation of the Jews in the desert of Sinai. It is the unknown future that always destabilizes present wisdom and judgment. Moshe's assurances of Godly support for Israel fall on unhearing ears.

The question arises as to why Moshe who was able to convince Israel to leave Egypt, march through the desert, accept the yoke of the Torah, reject the Golden Calf, build the Mishkan/tabernacle, etc. was unable to convince them of the importance of the Land of Israel to their physical and spiritual development.

Over the centuries the great commentators to the Torah have dealt with this issue, each in their own way. But the basic underlying assessment of the issue is that there is a hesitation if not even a fear of Jewish independence and self-government among the Jewish people. This is certainly reflected throughout large sections of the Jewish world today. This attitude is always cloaked in theological niceties and pious nostrums as well as an unfounded belief in the Western humanitarian values of much of Europe and America.

But the harsh truth is that most Jews find it easier and more comfortable to live under foreign rule than to have to build their own self-governing society and nation. The exile mentality of the Jewish people, formed already in Egyptian bondage over three millennia ago, remains part of our DNA even today. The Jewish State is spoken of as a place of refuge and escape for persecuted Jews. But a Jewish State is really much more than that. It is a challenge and a work in progress. It should not be viewed as merely a haven for the helpless but rather as a country that must eventually fulfill its role as a light unto the rest of humankind. Again, the Torah of Moshe must convince us of our true role in the world. *© 2008 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com*

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A Minyan of Ten

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Minyan, the presence of ten men, is required for those parts of the prayer service that are deemed *Devarim She-bikdushah* (literally, words of sanctifying). These include *Kaddish*, *Barchu*, *Kedushah*, the repetition of the *Amidah*, and (according to some) the reading of the Torah, the reading of the *Haftarah*, and the priestly blessing. This rule is derived from the verse, "I will be sanctified **among** the children of Israel" ("*Ve-nikdashti be-**toch** Bnei Yisrael*") (*Vayikra* 22:32). How do we know that the number referred to here is specifically ten, neither more nor less?

One way of arriving at ten is through a *gezeirah shavah.* (This is a method of rabbinic exegesis in which a similar word appearing in two different contexts is used to infer that the details of one context apply to the other.) The word "*toch*" ("among") appears in the verse about sanctifying G-d, and in the story of Korach's rebellion. Regarding the latter, the Torah states (*Bamidbar* 16:21), "Separate yourselves from **among** (*mi-**tokh***) this community (*edah*)." However, there the Torah is referring to a group of 250 people. How is it useful for arriving at the number ten?

This involves a bit more exegesis. The word "*edah*," which is used in the story of Korach, is also used in reference to the ten spies who spoke badly of the Land of Israel, as we read (*Bamidbar* 14:27), "How much longer will that wicked community (*edah*) keep muttering against Me?" We see that the definition of a community is ten. Thus, the community within which we sanctify G-d's name must be similar to the spies (not in their sinfulness, of course, but in being free, adult males).

It should be noted that the above is not a combination of one *gezeirah shavah* with another (*toch-toch* and *edah-edah*), which would possibly break a rule of exegesis. Rather, we learn from the case of the spies in Parshat Shelach that the definition of the word "*edah*" is ten everywhere it appears. This includes the verse in Parshat Korach, where the word "*toch*" is associated with

ten (through the word "*edah*"). And a *gezeirah shavah* (*toch-toch*) connects that verse with the verse about sanctifying G-d.

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Gatherer of Wood

At the end of Parashat Sh'lach, The Torah presents us the story of the gatherer of wood. No name or tribe is given to this man, and we will see later that there are other facts of this case that are unstated. There is also a dispute as to when this incident occurred and how this case was adjudicated. Since this incident refers to a major law of the Torah, Shabbat, it is important to understand every nuance of the story.

The Torah states: "The B'nei Yisrael were in the wilderness, and they found a man gathering wood on the day of Shabbat. Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moshe and Aharon and the entire assembly. They placed him in custody, for what should be done to him had not been clarified. Hashem said to Moshe, 'The man shall be put to death; the entire assembly shall pelt him with stones outside of the camp.' The entire assembly removed him to the outside of the camp; they pelted him with stones and he died, as Hashem had commanded Moshe."

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that the Midrash says that the person who went out to gather wood on Shabbat did so "l'sheim shamayim, for the name (sake) of heaven (for a righteous purpose)." There were people among the B'nei Yisrael who were so disappointed that Hashem had punished the people after the sin of the spies, that they believed they were no longer bound by the covenant of the mitzvot. Therefore, he purposefully broke one of the commandments punishable by death to prove to others that the covenant was still relevant. HaAmek Davar explains the purpose of the gatherer's sin slightly differently. He explains that the words, "The B'nei Yisrael were in the wilderness," indicated that there were those among the B'nei Yisrael who believed that the Laws of Shabbat did not apply "in the wilderness," but only after the B'nei Yisrael would enter their promised land. The fact that the manna did not fall on Shabbat was not an indication that all of the Laws of Shabbat were equally applicable. The gatherer of wood wished to prove to the people that all the laws applied now, even while in the wilderness.

HaRav Sorotzkin continues, the observance of Shabbat is of such importance because it demonstrates that one believes in one Divine Being Who created the world. This belief is enough to establish that all other gods could not possibly be real or of any challenge to the One Supreme Being. Those who rebelled in the desert were not seeking other gods, they simply wanted to be free from the difficult burden placed on them by Hashem. HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the observance of Shabbat had a dual purpose: (1) "recognition of our allegiance to Hashem," and (2) understanding that Hashem is the "Master of all our fate and deeds." Observing Shabbat "denotes allegiance to and non-observance of it, deniance (sic) of Hashem being Master over our fate and deeds."

HaRav Sorotzkin brings another proof of the righteous thoughts behind the gatherer's actions. The person is referred to as "Ish, Man." We have previously seen that if a person is called by that name, it is an indication of importance. Earlier in the Torah (Parashat Emor), we found the case of a man who cursed Hashem in anger. The Torah first called him "Ish," but later he was referred to as "HaMikaleil, the Curser," as he had lost his importance by cursing Hashem. In our case (the gatherer), when the decree is handed down with his punishment, the Torah says, "mot yumat haIsh, the Man shall surely die." Since the Torah continues to speak of him as "Ish," it indicates that he did not lose his importance because his actions were for a righteous reason. A further proof was from the daughters of Tzelaphchad, the man associated with this gathering, who argued that their father died not as punishment for rebellion against Hashem, when they wished to claim his inheritance of ancestral land.

There is a difference of opinion as to when this incident took place. The Ramban, HaRav Hirsch, and HaRav Sorotzkin place this incident after the punishment given to the people for believing the negative report of the spies sent into the land. The people were no longer going to enter the land themselves, they would die in the desert, but their children would enter the land and conquer it. But there is a different opinion that this took place on the second Shabbat after receiving the commandment to observe Shabbat. We learn from Rabbinical sources that the mitzvah to observe Shabbat was given together with the manna. This occurred prior to receiving the Torah on Har Sinai. But, the timing is not clear. As we have learned before, the Written Torah was given at Har Sinai along with the Oral Torah, which explained its commandments in greater detail. While the Written Torah only commanded to observe the Shabbat, the Oral Law explained how this was to be accomplished. If the gatherer of wood righteously acted after the manna but before Har Sinai, he may have been attempting to convince others that gathering wood on Shabbat was included in the command to not gather the manna on Shabbat.

Moshe told the people that he needed to consult Hashem for the punishment. This could mean one of two things. If this occurred before Har Sinai, Moshe had not yet received the Oral Law which would have explained which punishment was appropriate or even whether the gatherer was guilty. If this occurred after Har Sinai, there was still a question in Moshe's mind concerning which warning had to be given the gatherer in order to punish him. HaRav Hirsch explains that the term used for gathering the wood was "m'koshesh" which could be

related to “m’kotzeitz, cutting down.” or “m’gosheish, to grope about.” It was unclear in Moshe’s mind whether the forbidden action involved cutting, gathering, or carrying the wood. Moshe had to seek assistance from Hashem to determine for which category of malacha (work) would this man be punished. He also needed to know if those who had warned the man had specified the correct category in their warning.

This section teaches us two things: (1) the importance of Shabbat observance as a sign of our recognition of Hashem’s creation of the world and His control over it, and (2) the warning given to the perpetrator of a sin must match the actual category of the sin, especially in a case involving the death penalty. May this incident enable us to understand the intricacy of Hashem’s Laws.

RABBI YITZCHAK ZWEIG

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

One of the advantages of getting older is that -- if you're paying attention -- you have a unique perspective on life and the way things have changed over the years. Obviously, this includes things like technology, medical advances, or even the acceptability of certain foods (raw fish in the 1950s: insane. Sushi today: yes, please!).

It used to be that religious attire was viewed as unusual, foreign, or even unsettling. As a child growing up in Miami Beach in the mid-1970s there were few places where I could go wearing a yarmulke (skullcap) without someone asking me about the strange "beanie" on my head. Outside of areas with large religious populations (which Miami Beach was not at the time) it was uncommon for people to have familiarity with distinctive Jewish religious clothing such as yarmulkes or tzitzit (tassels or fringes placed on the corners of a four cornered garment).

Increased immigration, globalization, international travel, and the exponential growth of mass media have dramatically expanded public awareness of diverse religious traditions. Today, most people can readily recognize many forms of religious dress and understand that they often reflect cultural identity and religious commitment. In addition, over the past half-century, there has been a marked shift in social mores toward a broader willingness to accommodate individuals and communities that differ from prevailing cultural norms.

However, as a child, I found it difficult to explain to the uninitiated what tzitzit were, why we wear these odd tassels, and what purpose they served. As we shall see, this very special mitzvah (commandment) has deep meanings behind it -- to the point that the Talmud has characterized it as equal to all the other mitzvot in the Torah put together! This obviously requires an explanation. Lucky for us, the source for this mitzvah is in this week's Torah portion: God said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them that they shall make tzitzit on the corners of their garments for all generations, and they shall place a blue thread (techeiles) on the tzitzit of each corner. It shall thus be tzitzit for you, and you shall see it and remember all the commandments of God, and you shall do them, and you shall not scout after your heart and after your eyes, which cause you to stray" (Numbers 15:37-39).

For much of Jewish history, the distinctive blue dye used on one of the strings of the tzitzit, was accessible and an integral component of every set of tzitzit. However, during the centuries following the destruction of the Second Temple, the true identity of the chilazon -- the sea creature from which the dye was produced -- was lost. By the time of the Geonic period, the blue dye had effectively disappeared from Jewish life, leaving Jews throughout the Diaspora wearing only white tzitzit for well over a millennium.

The modern search for the blue dye began in earnest in the late nineteenth century with Rabbi Gershon Henoch Leiner, the Radzyner Rebbe (1839-1891), who undertook extensive research and concluded that the chilazon was a species of cuttlefish (closely related to the squid). He established a production process and persuaded thousands of his followers to wear tzitzit with a blue thread from this dye.

Although his identification was later challenged, his efforts reignited worldwide interest in the subject. In the twentieth century, scholars and rabbinic authorities increasingly focused on the murex trunculus (a sea snail) as the most likely source of the ancient dye. Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, organizations such as Ptil Tekhelet and others helped make this blue dye widely available with their efforts supported by archaeological, historical, and chemical evidence. Today, many observant Jews have elected to begin including this blue thread in their tzitzit, but most still do not. Nonetheless, the tens of thousands of Jews across a broad spectrum wearing tzitzit with the blue thread makes its revival one of the most remarkable restorations of a long-lost biblical practice in modern times.

There are two elements of the above passage in the Torah about tzitzit that I would like to examine. First of all, this paragraph became the third and final part of what is perhaps the most important prayer in the Jewish liturgy and the one that the Torah obligates us to recite twice daily; the shema. The shema is the daily acceptance of the Kingdom of God and a declaration of His absolute unity. What is it about these few sentences regarding tzitzit that encapsulate this and merit the final words of the shema prayer?

The Torah states that the purpose of the mitzvah of tzitzit is to serve as a reminder of all God's commandments. How exactly do tzitzit accomplish this?

The second topic I'd like to examine is the blue thread. We have a fascinating statement in the Talmud (Menachos 43b) regarding the obligation of adding the

blue thread to the tzitzit. "Rabbi Meir used to say: Why was the color blue chosen? What distinguishes it from all other colors? Because the blue thread (on the fringes) resembles the sea, the sea resembles the sky, and the sky resembles the Throne of Glory." Rabbi Meir then quotes two verses that indicate this unique attribute of the color blue. The first appears in the story of the giving of the Torah (Exodus 24:10): "Under His feet was like a sapphire brickwork [...]" and the second verse appears in the mystical vision of Ezekiel (1:26): "Like the appearance of a sapphire stone was the likeness of the Throne." The Talmud is teaching us that the color blue can serve as a visual ladder to raise one's consciousness to the immanence of the Almighty.

But why do we need such a roundabout route to get to the ultimate destination? Why say that the blue fringes remind us of the color of the sea, which reminds us of the sky, which reminds us of the Throne of Glory? Why not simply say that the blue threads remind us of the Throne of Glory?

The shema prayer -- Hear O' Israel Hashem is our God, Hashem is One (Deuteronomy 6:4) -- readily declares the acceptance of Hashem (the ineffable name of the Almighty) as our God and that He has a unique unity: everything is part of the "One."

What Rabbi Meir is explaining is that the blue thread is the ultimate expression of that unity -- it is literally the common "thread" in creation. The fact that the ocean and sky are both blue is an expression of the unity of the entirety of creation as it is all a reflection of the Almighty's Throne of Glory. The color blue is the common theme that brings it all together. We are therefore asked to go step by step to consider how everything in creation is a reflection of the unique unity of the Almighty.

As an aside, while the true source of the design of the Israeli flag is shrouded in the mists of history (Israeli history has no similar Betsy Ross canard), I have often considered that both the pattern and the color of the Israeli flag express exactly this theme. One can consider the bottom blue stripe to correspond to the ocean, the top blue stripe can easily represent the sky, and the blue Star of David in the middle can represent the unity of it all. For those of us who live in a theocentric universe there is no such thing as "coincidence."

In fact, the Israeli flag has become a tribute to the power of the Almighty in this world. This tiny Jewish state is surrounded by some twenty-seven larger Arab states who would like to see Israel obliterated (and have tried no less than five times to accomplish that goal). Yet, Israel has not only survived but flourished and become the greatest military power in the region; it is a true testament to the unique unity and power of the Almighty.

When a person wears tzitzit, it is a constant reminder that all of creation is within the kingdom of the Almighty and that our expression of God's kingship is predicated on us following His commandments. Each one of the tassels has five knots and eight strings -- equaling 13 which, as the sages point out, is the numerical value of the Hebrew word "echad -- one." In addition, there are 39 loops between the five knots, and this is the numerical value of "Hashem echad -- God is One," the very words of the shema.

Thus, the prayer about tzitzit is not merely an appendix to the shema. It is actually a fitting culmination for the shema. After faith and commitment come the practical tools that allow a human being living in the physical world to remain constantly connected to the Almighty. That is why the shema concludes not with an abstract theological statement but with a physical garment, a blue thread, and tzitzit in one's hand. The highest spiritual truths must ultimately be woven into the fabric of daily life.

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Reflections

"Any falsehood in which a bit of truth is not included at the start cannot be maintained in the end." That is Rashi's comment, based on Sotah, 35a, about the report of the spies who returned from reconnoitering Kenaan. They told Moshe Rabbeinu that "we came to the land to which you sent us, and indeed it is flowing with milk and honey" (Bamidbar, 13:27).

But not only was the report of the land's bounty true, so was, at least on the surface, everything else the meraglim reported. Yes, they described the fearsome inhabitants of the land, the "men of stature," and the burials of many of the land's inhabitants. That negativity constituted dibah, evil speech, as the Torah itself says -- as Chazal put it, lashon hara. But where was the untruth, the lie?

Rav Yaakov Moshe Charlop, z"l, in his sefer Mei Marom on Chumash, offers a compelling answer.

The Midrash Tanchuma, brought by Rashi on the words "hechazak hu harafeh" ("Are they strong or weak?") says that Moshe gave the spies a sign: "If they live in open cities [it is a sign that] they are strong, since they rely on their might. And if they live in fortified cities [it is a sign that] they are weak" (ibid, 13:18).

And yet, notes Rav Charlop, the spies reported that "the people who inhabit the land are mighty, and the cities are very greatly fortified" (3:28). A self-contradiction, since if the inhabitants were indeed mighty, as per Moshe's sign, they would not have needed to fortify their cities. And if their cities were fortified, that meant the people were feeble. There, the Mei Marom suggests, lies the lie, an inherent inconsistency. One or the other contention must be false.

Because, the bottom line is that building high walls is a sign not of strength but of weakness.

There is a lesson there not only for warfare but for life.

RABBI MORDECHAI WILLIG

TorahWeb

"Do not explore after your heart and after your eyes after which you stray' (Bamidbar 15:39) -- after your heart refers to heresy, and after your eyes refers to sexual immorality" (Berachos 12b). In order to avoid believing ideas that are antithetical to that which the Torah obligates us to believe, we must limit our thought and place a boundary for it to stop (Rambam,Sefer Hamitzvos Negative Mitzva 47). We may not even contemplate a thought which can cause a person to uproot one of the fundamentals of Torah. If a person thinks about these ideas critically, his limited mind may conclude that heresies are true; he may doubt the existence of Hashem, the truth of prophecy and the Divine source of the Torah (Rambam,Hilchos Avoda Zara 2:3). Such contemplation is prohibited even if no heretical conclusions are reached.

Unfortunately, the prescience of the Rambam has been borne out dramatically in our time. The zeitgeist of post-modernism and non-judgmentalism has corroded the allegiance to basic Jewish beliefs even within the Orthodox Jewish community to the point that nothing is considered sacred and nothing is considered certain. Our youth are particularly vulnerable, more so than in medieval times when the Rashba (1:415) prohibited studying philosophy before the age of twenty five. Too often the beliefs of high school students are weakened by those who subject fundamental beliefs to secular critical thinking. On secular college campuses many graduates of these high schools, including those who learned in Israel, doubt or even deny the fundamentals of faith, exactly as the Rambam warned.

The Rambam (Sefer Hamitzvos ibid) continues: We may not be drawn after pleasures and physical lusts by our thoughts focusing on them constantly. Straying after one's eyes can lead to prohibited sexual activity. Here, too, the thought itself is prohibited, even if no physical violations result. Unfortunately, today's unprecedented availability of sexually arousing material makes this mitzva harder to fulfill. Moreover, the permissive culture we live in dramatically increases the chances that sins of thought, vision and speech will lead to sins of the flesh (Rashi 15:39). Too often, high school students do not observe the laws prohibiting physical contact between boys and girls (See Shulchan Aruch, Even HoEzersiman 21. Also see Igros Moshe Even HoEzer vol. 4 siman 60). In secular college campuses many ostensibly Orthodox Jews succumb to the permissive, and even promiscuous, culture.

The percentage of graduates of Orthodox high schools who attended secular colleges that abandon the basic Torah practices of Shabbos and kashrus is alarmingly high. "Orthodox Assimilation on College Campuses" (a recent work by Drs. Perl and Weinstein) shines light on this terrible and increasing reality. The Rambam's proof text refers to a Jewish man marrying a non-Jewish woman, and intermarriages, sometimes with an insincere and likely invalid conversion, are on the rise in this population.

The Sefer Hachinuch (mitzvah 387) notes that one of the reasons the Torah does not prescribe lashes for one who transgresses the prohibition of "Do not explore.." is that it is impossible for one's sights and thoughts to never go beyond that which is acceptable and therefore there is no clearly defined and detectable boundary which we could use to measure this transgression [See Freedom of Inquiry in Torah Umada Journal Vol. 1,2,3]. Nonetheless, placing a youngster in a spiritually dangerous situation is religiously reckless ("What should that son do and not sin?"Berachos 32a.)

Am Yisrael knew that avoda zara was meaningless and they did it only to allow themselves prohibited sexual relationships publicly (Sanhedrin 63b). Their sexual desires overcame them and they said, let us remove the entire burden of Torah from ourselves, then no one will rebuke us about sexual matters (Rashi). Today as well, heresy, the modern-day version of idolatry, and even the abandonment of all Torah commandments, may be linked to sexual desires prohibited by halacha but permitted and even encouraged by today's decadent society's credo of "do whatever feels good."

Now, more than ever, we must guard our eyes and hearts with the necessary boundaries to distance ourselves from such behavior. Parents must model proper thought and conduct and do their utmost to protect their children as well. The Torah's prohibition and warning of, "Do not explore..", recited twice daily in Shema and reinforced constantly by the mitzva of tzitzis, must govern our decisions for ourselves and our children, "so that you may remember and perform all My commandments and be holy to your Gd" (15:40).