

Parshat Sh'lach Lecha

Badge of Royalty.

Do a few simple woollen threads have the capability to remind a person of God and the Jewish way of life?

We have few passages in the Torah which are as familiar to us as Parshat Tzitzit. We recite it daily in the Shema. We all know what it is about. Yes, that was my impression too, until I began to like at this rather curious parsha, and I suddenly realised just how puzzling, both in style and content, this parsha is. Pick up a Chumash and see how you respond to the following questions:

CHAVRUTA

Read Bamidbar 15:37-41 (The "third paragraph" of the Shema) Now compare it to the other place in which the law of Tzitzit is recorded in the Torah: Devarim 22:12

- If you read either text, would you know what to do regarding making Tzitzit?
- Which parsha gives more information?
- Our parsha in Bamidbar; is it there to give technical directives? If not, then what is its motive?

1. Note the change from the grammatical 3rd person in passuk 38, to the grammatical 2nd person in pesukim 39-41.

- Why does the parsha shift from one to the other?
- What does this imply as to the difference between passuk 38 and pesukim 39-41?

2. The word "Tzitzit" is used 3 times in the Parsha. (It only appears one other time in Tanach; see the passuk brought by Rashi.) Is its meaning identical each time it is used in our parsha? - See

- Rashi in passuk 28 "VeAsu leham Tzitzit"
- Ibn Ezra on the same passuk and on 15:39 "HaPirush Hasheni"
- Rashbam on passuk 38 and 39.

- What is the meaning of the word "Tzitzit" according to Rashi and Ibn Ezra?
- What is the difference between the word "Tzitzit" in passuk 38 and 39 according to Rashbam?
- What does Ibn Ezra tell us regarding the wearing of a tallit during prayer?

3. The conclusion of the parsha uses the phrase "Ani Hashem Elokeichem" twice, once at the beginning and once at the end of the passuk. Why? Why is this an appropriate conclusion to this parsha?

- Why is there a need for Yetziat Mitzrayim to be mentioned here?

4. Passuk 39 : In what way are the Tzitzit meant to serve as a reminder for all God's mitzvot? See -

- Rashi (D"H Uzechartem),
- Sephorno (D"H Ure'item Otto),
- Rashbam (D"H p'til tchelet).
- iv. See also the Ramban on Bereshit 9:12 regarding the "sign of the covenant" i.e. the rainbow. The Ramban talks about the significance of

symbolic reminders. See the section there which begins: "V'im tevakesh ma ta'am ba'keshet"

4b. What is the difference between the "zechira" of passuk 39 and the "zechira" of passuk 40?

SHIUR:

If Parshat Tzitzit is designed to outline and explain the details of the Mitzva of Tzitzit it certainly chooses a cryptic way in which to do it. The text alone is severely deficient as a practical "How to" guide to the precise format and method of the mitzva. Is it to attach fringes to the corner of ones clothes, or is it to attach specifically the blue "p'til tchelet"? Halakhically, do Tzitzit apply to all types clothing? Devarim 22:12 tells us to "make tassels/fringes on the FOUR corners of the garment with which you cover yourselves" but this detail is missing in Bamidbar!

Then there are the textual difficulties that we have mentioned above: The word "tzitzit" is vague. Furthermore, the parsha begins by talking about Am Yisrael (3rd person) and then switches suddenly to address B'nei Yisrael directly (2nd person.)

All these textual difficulties. What message do they behold?

STRUCTURE AND THEME

Let us begin with the change of grammatical form. We shall study this point in the hope that it will help us to formulate a clearer understanding of the Parsha. Nechama Leibowitz discusses the problem in the following way:

"...the actual obligation to wear Tzitzit is derived from Devarim 22:12 ... The purpose of the passage in our sidra is not to announce the precept but to explain its underlying intention and aim.... and the passage should read as follows:

Speak to the children of Israel; say to them: WHEN they make tzitzit and put on the blue thread in accordance with the instruction of Devarim 22:12, THEN "say to them": This should be Tzitzit for you. look at it and remember the mitzvot of God"

In other words, passuk 38 describes the mitzva (hence it is in the 3rd person). Passuk 39-41 which is addressed directly to the Israelites, gives the central message or rationale behind the mitzva. This arrangement certainly does explain the grammatical difficulty, but it does much more. If this approach is correct, we have adjusted and reframed the focus of the parsha. Rather than being a passage aimed at teaching the technicalities of Halakha, the entire thrust of this passage should now be viewed within the realm of philosophy, or Ta'amei Hamitzvot. Rather than the Halakhic instruction to perform the mitzva of Tzitzit, we are now given the motivation that underscores the mitzva.

THE WORD "TZITZIT"

Of course, we should move now to the actual meaning of the term "Tzitzit." Reading it as a simple noun meaning "fringes" or a collection of fringes becomes problematic in our parsha because of the following sentence:

"They shall make Tzitzit on the corner of their clothes and attach a t'chelt thread to the Tzitzit of the corner. And they shall be for you as Tzitzit!"

What is the meaning of the line: "And they shall be for you as Tzitzit"?
What does it add?

The mepharshim dig deep in their pursuit of a range of meanings within this rare word. Since the word "Tzitzit" barely appears outside this parsha, it is not an easy job. Nonetheless both Rashbam and the Bechor Shor point to the fact that within our parsha, there is a dual usage of the word Tzitzit. Maybe, each mention of Tzitzit has its own singular meaning.

To this end, the mepharshim identify two meanings, two Biblical precedents:

1. Threads - as in "the locks of my head" (Yehezkel 8:3)
2. A visual connotation - as in the passuk in Shir Hashirim (2:9) where we see the lover "looking through (me-tzitz) the lattice"

This dual meaning within a single word now assists us with the understanding of our pesukim. They now read:

"They shall make **threads** on the corner of their clothes and attach a t'chelet thread to the threads of the corner. And they shall be for you as a **visual symbol**"

This notion of the Tzitzit as a visual stimulus is quite evident from the passuk itself: "Look at it and remember the mitzvot of Hashem and do them." The passuk explicitly informs us that the visual symbol of the Tzitzit - or more precisely, the T'chelet - will boost our commitment to mitzvot. How so?

1. THE COLOUR OF THE SHECHINA

The Gemara in Masechet Menachot (43b) teaches the famous explanation:

"Rabbi Meir would ask: What makes T'chelet different from other colours? - T'chelet is similar in colour to the sea, and the sea is comparable to the sky, and the sky to the throne of (God's) presence."

According to this statement of Rabbi Meir, the T'chelet of the Tzitzit reminds us of God Himself. Let us note that indeed, the Tanach indicates that God's immediate presence takes on a blue/green colour: identified by the Sapphire stone:

"...and they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a brick of sapphire, like the very sky for purity" (Shemot 24:10)

"I looked, and on the expanse over the heads of the keruvim, there was something like a sapphire stone; an appearance resembling a throne could be seen over them ... the presence of the Lord moved from the keruvim." (Yechezkel/ Ezekiel 10:1-4)

For this approach, the motive behind the constant wearing of the blue thread is that this is the colour of the T'chelet is a direct "link" to God and an eternal reminder of the Shechina.

2. TZITZIT AND THE NUMBER 613

Rashi tells us that it is not only the blue colour which reminds us of God and the mitzvot, but rather the entire entity of tzitzit including the way of tying them:

"Tzitzit is the gematria of 600 ; add 8 for the eight strings and

5 for the five knots and one comes to 613."

3. A COLOUR OF ROYALTY

"The tzitzit are like an insignia upon ones clothing - a sign that one puts upon a servant to mark him as one in service of his master. Likewise, when Israel see this sign, they bring into the forefront of their minds that they are subservient to God and are bound to observe all His mitzvot." (Bechor Shor)

The Sephorno also takes this line of thinking in defining the T'chelet as a way in which God marks us as his servants. But what is the meaning of this colour? Why do we choose specifically the blue T'chelet to make this statement.

Here I would like to add something and to develop this theme a little.

We know that T'chelet was an expensive dye that, due to its high cost, was a sign of royalty. The clearest example of this is in Megillat Esther:

"And Mordechai took his leave from the king in ROYAL ROBES of T'CHELET and white linen ... " (Esther 8:15, and see also 1:6)

We also see the importance of this t'chelet colour when we remember the way in which it featured so prominently in the Mishkan and the clothes of the kohanim: The Kohen Gadol wears a tunic made only of T'chelet (Sh'mot 28, 31). T'chelet thread is used in the coverings for the mishkan, the parochet, the efod (Sh'mot 26:1,31 ; 28:6,28) . We might also note that the aron itself, the ark of the covenant, along with the menorah and the Shulchan, were transported through the wilderness while covered by a cover made of pure t'chelet (Bamidbar 4:6,7,9) .

This gives us a clear impression of the importance attributed to this particular dye, this colour.

But let us move further. If we have focused upon the clothes of the Kohanim, the Bigdei Kehuna, we cannot help but notice the headband of the Kohan Gadol, known as the Tzitz - a remarkably similar word to our Tzitzit! The Tzitz is engraved with the word "Kodesh LaShem". Our Tzitzit too have the stated aim of, "Veh'yeetem kedoshim Le'Elohechem".

Let us digest some of this information then. We have created two basic associations here, two contexts in which T'chelet/Tzitzit play a significant role:

1. Royalty – malchut (the blue t'chelet die.); and
2. Priesthood - kehuna. (Tzitz)

Does this combination not take us back to our very first moments at Har Sinai when we were offered the Torah and were charged with the mission of :

"A kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Shemot 19:6)

I would suggest that the T'chelet as the "insignia of the king" is related organically to this concept. The sign of the t'chelet is not an arbitrary colour which somehow reminds us of God, like the colours of a football team remind us of that team. No! it is not arbitrary. This is the colour of royalty. It is the colour of priesthood.

By wearing the Tzitzit, we remind ourselves of our mission. We remind ourselves that we have the task of sanctifying the world, just as the priests sanctify the Mishkan. We draw into our consciousness that every Jew has a mark of royalty. It is the Tzitzit. It is a constant reminder of our King and Lord and of our responsibility to the lifestyle

that He has set for us.

SEE - REMEMBER - OBSERVE - REMEMBER - OBSERVE

The text of the Torah in describing the psycho-religious effect of Tzitzit is strange:

“Look at it and REMEMBER the God’s commandments and OBSERVE them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in **lustful** urge. Thus you will REMEMBER and OBSERVE all my commandments and become **holy** to the Lord your God.”

Notice the circular logic here. We must remember and observe so that we will remember and observe? What is the Torah saying here?

Maybe we might suggest that rather than representing a relationship of cause and effect, or it being a circular process, we might propose that these two pesukim sit in parallel, representing the negative and the positive.

On one hand, the steering clear of evil, and on the other, the active performance of God’s law. We might support this claim when we notice that each passuk presents the result of our actions. First, the negative: “not to stray after your heart and eyes in lustful urge” and then the second passuk talks more positively about becoming “holy”. The lust is contrasted with the holiness.

We might just mention as a footnote here that Chazal (Berachot 12b) identify “straying after the heart” as thoughts of heresy and “straying after the eyes” as temptation towards the sexual. One is an intellectual diversion, the other a physical one. It would seem that the Torah warns us that without correct guidelines and safeguards, we cannot necessarily rely upon our own “better judgment” to be “better”, neither in matters of the mind nor in matters of the flesh. (If you want to investigate this a little further, see Hil. Avodat Kochavim 2:3 of the Rambam and the subsequent discussion on “Freedom of Inquiry” in the pages of the Torah U’Madda Journal #1-3.)

THE MERAGLIM CONNECTION

When one studies Parshat Tzitzit, one cannot help but feel that there is a connection between this topic and the meraglim. Why might we make this claim with such certainty?

Our point of departure here is Rashi. Rashi notes the usage of the verb “TUR” in the phrase “V’LO TATTURU”. This verb does not appear frequently in chumash. In our parsha it appears 12 times with reference to the meraglim, and then it appears again in Parshat Tzitzit! Rashi comments:

“You shall not stray after your heart and eyes: The heart and eyes are the spies (meraglim) for the body; they proffer transgression to the body. They eye sees, the heart desires and the body performs the transgression.”

So here is an initial connection. But is it any more than word-play?

There is no doubt that this mitzva appears in a group of mitzvot which immediately follow and respond to the sin of the spies (see Rav Leibtag’s shiur on www.tanach.org.) There is also no doubt that certain words appearing here in proximity to each other remind us of the meraglim episode:

- Veyaturu (13:2)

- Zenuneichem (14:33)

But one further thing needs to be mentioned which maybe explains WHY this parsha works as a response to the spies episode.

The entire final passuk is couched in the terminology of the latter half of Sefer Vayikra:

“And YOU SHALL BE HOLY to the Lord your God. I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be for you as a God, I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD.” (15:40-41)

And in Vayikra:

“YOU SHALL BE HOLY for I am holy, I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD.” (19:1)

The phrase “*Ani Hashem elokeichem*” comes up countless times in Vayikra chapter 18-22. Likewise, the notion of God’s holiness in relation to Israel’s holiness and all of this against the backdrop of leaving Egypt and entering Eretz Yisrael. See Vayikra 18:1-5, 30; 19:1,4,29-30; 20:6-8, 22-26; 22:31-33. The major theme there is that in order to prosper and succeed in Eretz Yisrael, there are certain practices which may not be performed, and an entire code of laws which create an environment of kedusha (“kedoshim tihyu”) within the life of the nation and the fabric of the nation state.

If this connection is correct, then we may state that Tzitzit, which could easily fit into Parshat kedoshim (1) is placed specifically into Parshat Shelach Lecha as a response to the meraglim story. Tzitzit is a constant reminder of one’s identity. It is one of those symbols which is supposed to continually make a statement as to one’s spiritual orientation.

“Whoever has Tefillin on his head and arm, Tzitzit upon his clothing, and a mezuzah on his door is assured that he will not sin” (Menachot 43b)

“... for these mitzvot are performed continuously” (Sefer Hachinuch #21)

But all of this is stated in the language of Sefer Vayikra which re-affirms the holiness of Eretz Yisrael. Maybe after this failed attempt at reaching Eretz Yisrael, it is time to re-evaluate and to rebuild. It is time to remind ourselves as to the priorities that we must have in order to sustain a life of kedusha, resisting all outside temptation, in order to reach the Promised Land.

Shabbat Shalom.

footnote

(1) maybe alongside the mitzva of kilayim - 19:19 just like in Devarim 22:12

- Velo Taturu (15:39) Ure’item (13:18) - an unusual form in the Torah