

The Mitzvah of Tzitzit: The Third Paragraph of Shema and the Hidden Symbolism of a Paramount Mitzvah

Every morning and evening we have a special Torah commandment to recite the *Shema*. The third paragraph of the *Shema* focuses primarily on the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. We find this commandment recorded in *Parashat Shelach*:

God spoke to Moshe, telling him to speak to the Israelites and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments for all generations. Let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner. That shall be your fringe: look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them, so that you do not stray after your heart and eyes which in the past have led you to immorality. You will thus remember and keep all My commandments and be holy to your God. (*Bemidbar* 15:37–40)

The Torah thus explains the purpose of this *mitzvah* – “look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them...” In fact, so central is the paragraph of this commandment that it became the third section of the *Shema*, the daily declaration of Jewish faith, and during its recitation we have the custom to kiss the *tzitzit*. *Tzitzit* are also so beloved that they accompany a Jew even after death, as every Jewish male is buried in his *tallit*.

Why is this *mitzvah* so important?

All too often the words of the *Shema* flow mindlessly off our tongues, many times with little thought or meaning. Below are a collection of fascinating insights that give greater depth and appreciation for this central paragraph within our *tefillah*.

A *mitzvah* equivalent to all the others combined

Rashi (*Bemidbar* 15:39) quotes the *Midrash Tanchuma* which states that the numerical value of the word “*tzitzit*” ($90 + 10 + 90 + 10 + 400$) = 600. Add to this the eight strings and five knots that constitute the fringes and one has a total of 613, the same number as the number of *mitzvot*. Thus, by looking at the *tzitzit*, we recall all the commandments. Similarly, Rashi emphasizes that this *mitzvah* is equivalent to all the *mitzvot* for it says, as cited above, “you will thus remember and keep all My commandments.”

Seeing beyond the surface

The *Ba'al Ha-Turim* (*Bemidbar* 15:39) points out that the term “*zekhirah*” (remember) appears in the context of the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* (“*le-ma’an tizkeru*” – “you will thus remember”). This, he writes, is why the *tzitzit* are placed on all four corners of the garment – so that any direction one turns one sees the *tzitzit* and remembers the *mitzvot*. Furthermore, the five knots remind us to think about the five books of the Torah. Similarly, the eight strings remind us to refrain from sin – for there are eight body parts that pull one towards sin (the ears, eyes, mouth, nose, hands, feet, private parts, and the heart). One who overcomes his desire merits to be above the eight heavens. On the other hand, one who submits to sin is judged at the grave and the seven levels of *Gehinom* (i.e., eight levels of punishment).

The Rashbam (*Bemidbar* 15:39) quotes the *gemara* in *Menachot* (43b) that one who sees the blue thread of the *tzitzit* is reminded of the sea. The blue of the sea in turn reminds one of the blue sky which brings one to think of the glorious throne of God. Thus, contemplating the *tzitzit* enables one to feel closer to the Creator. Along the same lines, the *Keli Yakar* (*Bemidbar* 15:38) suggests that the blue threads remind one of the ocean and the lessons one can learn from it – namely, that the ocean must stay within certain defined bounds; should it overrun these bounds, the result can be devastating. So too, a Jew must live within the defined guidelines of the Torah. To leave these limits would result in tragedy. The Ramban (*Bemidbar* 15:39), in commenting on the blue thread (*tekhelet*) in the *tzitzit*,

highlights that the root of the word *tekhelet* is “kol” – “everything.” In wearing the *tzitzit* with *tekhelet* a person is reminded to follow God in every aspect of his life. The Alshich (ibid.) also emphasizes the theme of remembrance, as he notes that the fringes of the *tzitzit* can be compared to one who ties a string around one’s finger as a reminder. By wearing *tzitzit*, we are donning a constant reminder.

R. Baruch Ha-Levi Epstein in his *Torah Temimah* (*Bemidbar* 15:39) takes this idea even further. He shares a beautiful insight that he heard in the name of the Vilna Ga’on that speaks to the importance of making actual reminders for ourselves as opposed to relying on our memories. For we see by David (*Shmuel Aleph* 17:34), “and David told Shaul, I was a shepherd to my father and came along a lion and a bear and this sheep (*seh*) ran from the pen.” The Vilna Ga’on notes that while the verse says “*zeh*” – “this,” we read it “*seh*” – “sheep.” The *Midrash* elaborates, stating that when David saw that a miracle occurred through this sheep, he slaughtered it, removed its skin and made a garment from the skin. He would wear that garment as a constant reminder of the miracle God wrought for him. Thus, both the *keri* and *ketiv* make sense. In other words, when David shared this story with Shaul Ha-Melekh he pointed to the garment of sheep (“*seh*”) skin he was wearing (“*zeh*” – “this”), as proof that he had faith in God and was prepared to fight Goliath. So too, the *tzitzit* serve as a similar reminder of our constant connection to God, and our faith in Him.

Restraining the body

The *Da’at Zekeinim* (*Bemidbar* 15:38) notes that the *tzitzit* are one third tied and two thirds hanging loose strings, parallel to the heart that is seated one third the way down a person’s body. In discussing the relationship between the heart and the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*, my grandfather, the Chief Rabbi of Netanya, R. David Shloush, in his *sefer Or Chadash*, questions why it was necessary for the verse to repeatedly emphasize the importance of remembering in relation to this *mitzvah* (“and recall all the commandments...you will thus remember”). What the Torah is warning us, he answers, is against a person having the attitude that he will remember and perform all the *mitzvot* and simultaneously satisfy his personal desires whenever that individual chooses. To prevent this type of attitude, the verses come to teach us that if we follow our heart’s desire, one sin will lead to the next (“*ve-lo taturu acharei levavkhem...*”) resulting in our forgetting all the *mitzvot*. Therefore, *tzitzit* serve as a reminder not to go astray after our heart’s desires. Similarly, the Ibn Ezra (*Bemidbar* 15:39) emphasizes that it is far more important to wear *tzitzit* throughout the day than to wear them in shul. After all, who is going to sin in shul? But during the day, when one is not in shul, temptations abound and the *tzitzit* serve as a needed, constant reminder to adhere to the word of God.

A circle of holiness

My grandfather also highlighted an interesting connection between the *tzitzit* and the *tzitz* worn by the *Kohen Gadol*. They both share the same root, which refers to the concept of looking and seeing, as in “*meitzitz min ha-charakim*” – “peering through the lattice” (*Shir Ha-Shirim* 2:9). The *tzitz* was a golden plate, two finger-widths tall, that went from ear to ear on the *Kohen Gadol*’s forehead. Interestingly, this was held up by a strand of *tekhelet* which went from ear to ear that was tied in the back, forming a circle – such holiness fully surrounding the brain (the seat of wisdom) of the *Kohen Gadol* with the *Shem Ha-Meforash* (the sacred name of God)! What a sight it must have been to see the *tekhelet*, which reminds one of God’s throne of Glory, attached to the *tzitz*, which has God’s Eternal Name! Just as the *Kohen Gadol* would wear the *tzitz* and reflect on the holiness in which he was involved, so too every Jewish male can wear his *tzitzit* and reflect on the significance of the *mitzvot*.

My grandfather also noted that there are two sets of fringes in front of the garment and two in the back. Those in the front serve the purpose of enabling us to look at them and remember all the *mitzvot* of *Hashem*. But what is the value of those in the back if we never see them? He answers that there is a *mitzvah* for a person to not only reflect on his own actions and his own *tzitzit* but rather the actions of his neighbor and his neighbor’s *tzitzit* as well. If one’s neighbor’s actions are good then you should learn from that person. If one’s neighbor’s actions are bad, then you should rebuke him appropriately. Similarly, one should always reflect on one’s own actions and realize that others are constantly watching and learning from you. The fringes in the back are what others are seeing in us.

It is my hope that having shared these thought-provoking insights we can come away with a much richer appreciation for this paramount *mitzvah* and all that it symbolizes.