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## Tzitzit: Tying Us to Our Purpose

"Why do you wear those strings?" asked Cody Webb, a professional dirt biker, pointing to my tzitzit fringes. I had approached Cody after spotting him by the Western Wall wearing a Red Bull hat - the distinct mark of a competitive extreme athlete - out of place amidst a sea of religious Jews deep in prayer. He told me about his upcoming dirt-biking competition in Israel and I invited him to ask me anything about Judaism

and Israel. Sure enough, as I've often found, his first question was about my tzitzit.

### Unraveling the Mitzvah

In this week's Torah portion God gives us the mitzvah of tzitzit:

"[The children of Israel] shall make for themselves Tzitzis on the corners of their garments, throughout their generations, and they shall affix a thread of sky blue wool (techeiles) on the fringe of each corner.<sup>1</sup> They shall be Tzitzis for you, and when you see them, you will remember all the commandments of God to perform them, and you shall not wander after your hearts and after your eyes after which you stray." (Numbers 15:38-41)

From these verses, we see three answers to Cody's question of why we wear tzitzit:

1. God commanded us to wear them
2. They remind us of all the commandments
3. They prevent us from straying after our hearts and our eyes.

The first answer seems clear enough, but the second two should trouble us. How could mere dangling strings possibly remind us to keep all 613 commandments? What power do these simple tassels possess to guard our wandering eyes and restless hearts?

### From Fig Leaves to Fringes

Before we answer these questions about tzitzit, which we wear on the corners of our clothes, let's step back and remind ourselves why we wear clothes in the first place. The Torah teaches that

Adam and Eve began their lives in the garden completely naked. After they sinned, they became embarrassed by their nakedness, so God benevolently made them clothes to help combat their newfound shame.

But the real story lies in the details. What exactly caused Eve to sin? “The woman **saw** that the tree was good for food, and that it was a **delight to the eyes**, and that the tree was **desirable** to make one wise” (Genesis 3:6). The verse clearly shows that Eve's desire for the fruit's pleasures caused her to stray from God's command. By giving in to this desire, Eve didn't just commit a personal sin—she fundamentally altered human nature itself. As the progenitor of all humanity, her choice created a spiritual precedent that would echo through every generation. Eve's surrender to physical temptation embedded this weakness into humanity's very DNA. From that moment forward, physicality would possess an almost magnetic pull away from spirituality, leaving humans nearly indistinguishable from animals in their susceptibility to instinct and desire—a reality we witness everywhere in our world today.

To combat this newfound vulnerability, God gave them clothing. By covering their bodies, Adam and Eve would distinguish themselves from the animal kingdom and declare their intention to rise above base instinct. Clothes therefore represent both our ability and our moral obligation to overcome our lower, animalistic nature and reclaim our spiritual destiny.

But for the Jewish people, God took this obligation a step further. The commandment of tzitzit, as an extension of clothing, represents an

extension of our moral and spiritual obligations here on earth. Not only must we overcome our animal instincts, but we must channel our energy towards a higher cause.

Rabbi Shimon Schwab, one of the great Jewish leaders of the last generation, explains:

“As far as the Jewish people are concerned, a person's ability to subdue his animal nature grows and flowers (*tzitz*) into an even higher moral calling - that of acceptance of the mitzvot of God. Where moral decency – with which all humanity is charged – ends (i.e. at the corners of their garments), the specifically Jewish mandate begins. The Torah presupposes the highest form of decency and dignity. We, as the Jewish people, are to make “extensions” of our clothing to symbolize our special mandate. So, when we look at our tzitzit we are reminded that our membership in the Jewish nation, through the acceptance of the mitzvot, extends our humanity to a higher moral calling.”

To summarize, clothes distinguish us from animals and remind us to rise above base desires and instincts. The tassels of our tzitzit distinguish us from other humans and remind us to channel our energy towards serving God.

### **Purpose Woven Into Thread**

This concept becomes even more remarkable when we examine the intricate details of our tzitzit.

- **The Blue Thread** - The Ramban reveals that the Hebrew word "*Techeilet*" (the blue thread) shares its root with the word "*Tachlit*"— purpose.<sup>2</sup> Every glance at our

tzitzit awakens us to our purpose—the additional moral responsibility to fulfill the 613 mitzvot prescribed by the Torah.

- **Knots and Strings** - According to Rashi, these 613 mitzvot are embedded into our tzitzit: "The numeric value of the word tzitzit—600, plus each tassel's 8 strings and 5 knots, equals 613—the precise number of mitzvot given in the Torah. Thus the verse declares: 'And when you see them, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord to perform them.'"<sup>3</sup>

These design elements work together to fulfill the verse's promise that tzitzit will prevent us from wandering "after your hearts and after your eyes." How? As we've seen, Tzitzit tether us to our purpose. Purpose-driven people naturally resist the alluring influences that captivate the eyes and heart. An elite athlete understands that going out for drinks instead of getting a good night's rest could be the difference between Olympic gold and obscurity. When your mission becomes crystal clear, temptations lose their power. That's the power of Tzitzis—they simultaneously tie us to our purpose and untie us from worldly temptation.<sup>4</sup>

Tzitzit simultaneously tie us to our purpose and untie us from worldly temptation.

### **Threading Purpose Into Daily Life**

For those who wear tzitzit, I invite you to infuse your morning habit with deeper purpose. Before saying the blessing and donning your tzitzit, pause to connect with your purpose. Remember

that as a Jew, you carry the elevated responsibility of 613 mitzvot. Use this moment to anchor yourself in your mission and strengthen your resistance to the allurements that lead hearts and eyes astray.

For men who don't yet wear tzitzit, this mitzvah requires minimal effort for maximum meaning. The entire process takes thirty seconds—you can remove them afterward or wear them discreetly tucked under your shirt.

For women, while tzitzit aren't your obligation, the deeper principle applies powerfully to your life. Each morning as you choose your clothing, ask yourself: "How does what I wear today express my values?" Whether selecting modest attire that honors your inner dignity or choosing colors and styles that reflect confidence rather than attention-seeking, your clothing choices become daily declarations of purpose. Just as tzitzit remind men of their higher calling, your thoughtful approach to dress can serve as a constant reminder of your unique role in elevating the world through wisdom, compassion, and spiritual strength.

Whether through sacred tassels or thoughtful clothing choices, may we all find ways to thread purpose into our daily lives and resist the pull of empty wandering.

Shabbat Shalom!  
Avraham

1. Important background: We lost access to the snail that produced this blue dye. Therefore, today, for the most part, people wear all-white tzitzit. However, there are some who believe they rediscovered that snail and therefore use its dye to make a thread of blue in their tzitzit
2. See footnote 1

3. Rashi on 15:39 - וזכרתם את כל מצות ה' AND YOU SHALL REMEMBER ALL THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD — The ציצית will remind one of all the commandments because the numerical value of the letters of the word ציצית is six hundred, and there are eight threads and five knots in the fringes, so that you have six hundred and thirteen, which is also the number of the commandments of the Torah.
4. The Talmud (Menachos 44A) offers a vivid example of how tzitzit prevent us from "wandering after our hearts and eyes": There was once a man who was careful with the mitzvah of tzitzit (but less diligent in some other mitzvot). He heard that there was a harlot in a faraway city who charged four hundred gold pieces for her services. He sent her four hundred gold pieces and made an appointment to meet her. When the time arrived he came and sat at the entrance... She disrobed and sat on the bed. The man was beginning to undress when suddenly the four fringes of his Tzitzit slapped him on his face. He slid down and sat on the ground. She also slid off and sat on the ground. She said to him, "By the life of Caesar, I will not leave you until you tell me what flaw you have found in me!" He replied to her, "I swear by the Divine Service that I have never seen a woman as beautiful as you. But there is one mitzvah that our God commanded us, and it is called tzitzit. The Torah says twice about it, 'I am the Lord your God' – I am the One who will punish, and I am the One who in the future will reward. At this moment, these four tzitzit strands appeared to me like four witnesses that would testify about the transgression I was about to commit." She said to him, "I will not leave you until you tell me your name..." He wrote it down and put it in her hand... She went to the study hall of Rabbi Chiya. "Rabbi, instruct me what to do so that I can convert to Judaism." Rabbi Chiya asked her, "Perhaps you have your eye on one of the students [and your motivations to convert are insincere]?" The woman took out the note and gave it to him [and related the entire incident and convinced him that her desire to convert was sincere]. He said to her, "Go and claim that which is [rightfully] yours (i.e. convert and marry him)."



## Self Projections

After returning from scouting the Land of Israel, the spies reported that there were giants living in the land. They said, "We saw ourselves as grasshoppers, and that's what they thought of us, too" (Number 13:33). But how did they know what the inhabitants of Canaan thought of them? After all, they were spying the land surreptitiously and spoke to no one along the way. How could they know what anyone was thinking?

The answer requires a closer look at what they said. Firstly, the spies said that they saw themselves as grasshoppers, and then they say "that's also what the giants thought of us." In other words, they were taking what they thought of themselves and projecting it onto these giants. The giants may well not have looked at them as grasshoppers, but because the spies saw themselves that way, they could only imagine that was how others were seeing them, too.

We do the same all the time.

People who think a lot of themselves believe that everyone is equally impressed. And people with low self-esteem think that nobody likes them. Neither is necessarily right, of course, but their own thinking becomes their personal reality.

In truth, the people living in Canaan were intimidated by the Jewish people. The Jews may have been smaller than the Canaanites physically, but their reputation was massive. They had recently decimated the Egyptians, the most powerful empire the world had seen to date, and defeated the powerful Amalekites in battle. The Canaanites may have been giants, but they were actually afraid. The Jewish people would have swept into Canaan with no one to oppose them. But their own thinking about themselves would not allow them to see this possibility.

I recently saw a play that illustrated precisely the opposite. Golda Meir and those at the founding of the State of Israel were surrounded by five Arab armies -- larger and better equipped, intent on their destruction. But in the Israeli's own eyes, they were invincible. And so they were.

Limitations in life are so often of our own creation. We think we cannot do something, and so we cannot. We need to learn to see beyond the limits that our personal thinking imposes upon us. Only then will we begin to realize just how vast the human potential stored within each and every one of us really is.



## Hope For the Future

In the years prior to World War Two, it was known that two Chassidic sects – the Belzer and the Munkatch Chassidim – did not get along very well. In the town of Munkatch lived a Belzer chassid named Moshe Silber. Fiercely loyal to his Rebbe, he would often argue with the Munkatcher Rebbe. One day, in the midst of such an argument, the Munkatcher Rebbe turned to Moshe Silber and said, "You will die with your *tallit katan* on!" (A *tallit katan* is the small fringed garment that religious men wear under their shirts.)

Some years later, the war came and Moshe Silber was deported to Auschwitz. The threat of death was constant: He suffered hunger, illness and sheer brutality. Of course, in Auschwitz there was no way of obtaining, let alone wearing, a *tallit katan*. So Moshe Silber never doubted that he would survive Auschwitz. Why? Because, after all, the Munkatcher Rebbe had said he would die with his *tallit katan* on. If the Munkatcher Rebbe – a great *tzaddik* – had said so, it was doubtless to be that way.

Ultimately, Moshe Silber did survive the war. And for years after, he would sit wearing his *tallit*

*katan* in his house in New Jersey, telling visitors wonderful stories about his former opponent, the Munkatcher Rebbe – whose words had given him the strength and hope to survive a living hell.

Time and time again, we see how focusing on the future can get people through times of deep crisis and tragedy. Such an instance is alluded to in this week's Torah portion, Shlach.

Moses, at the behest of the Israelites, sends a group of spies to scout the land of Israel. Ten of the 12 spies bring back a negative report, warning the Israelites of great danger if they enter the land. The Canaanites, they explain, are very strong and the Israelites will be no match for them.

Though the remaining two spies, Caleb and Joshua, argue against this scenario, the people do not believe them and a wave of despair engulfs the Israelite camp. Many speak openly of flouting God's will and returning to Egypt. Angered by this treachery, God informs them that, indeed, they will not enter the land of Israel. Instead they will wander 40 years in the desert, and it is only their children who will inherit the land.

An interesting Midrash points out that this was really not all for the bad. Because it was clear that the Israelites were not ready to enter Israel. In truth, they needed time in the desert to grow spiritually, and to gain a greater confidence and trust in God.

Nevertheless, with the news of their banishment to the desert, an even greater despair became rampant in the Israelite camp. What guarantee did they have that any Israelites would ever enter the land?!

In an effort to calm the people and assure them that everything would work out, God tells Moses to teach the Jewish People the mitzvah of "Challah." (This is the separation of a portion of dough, which is then given as a gift to the Kohanim.) The key here is that "Challah" is a Mitzvah which initially could only be observed when the Jewish People entered the land of Israel!

It was a great comfort for the people to learn that the Almighty was making plans for the nations' future entry into the land. Though their present circumstances were trying, they were confident they had a future to look forward to. Just like Moshe Silber and the *tallis katan*...



## The Color of Tzitzit

There is a small, yet growing subfield within psychology called color psychology. Researchers in this field are interested in how people perceive, relate to, and respond differently to various colors. Some reactions that we have to colors may be based on biology. For instance, since blood rushes to the face when one becomes aggressive, the color red, in both humans and animals, is a signal of dominance. Other reactions to colors may be based on a learned association between

the color and another object. For instance, a Yankee fan may feel happy when seeing blue pinstripes because he or she associates that color scheme with the team.

Towards the end of this week's Torah portion we are informed of the mitzvah of *tzitzit*. We are commanded to place fringes on our garments, including a thread that is *tekhelet*. The purpose of doing so is stated explicitly within the verses, as they function to remind us of God's commandments and not to wander after our hearts and eyes. Later authorities debate the exact color of *tekhelet*. Some say it is blue, some violet, and some green. Others debate how many strings have to be *tekhlet* and how many are to be white.

How exactly does wearing fringed garments remind us of the mitzvot and prevent us from wandering after our hearts and eyes? Numerous explanations have been given, some focusing on number symbolism, others on the significance of garments, and still others on the importance of color. Focusing for now on this last category, the question becomes more specific: how does wearing blue/violet/green strings interspersed through white strings, remind us not to sin?

Rabbi Meir (*Menachot* 43b) tells us that looking at *tekhelet* sets off a string of associations that keeps us from sinning. *Tekhelet*, which he seems to understand as being blue, is a similar color to the ocean, which is a similar color to the sky, which is a similar color to G-d's Throne of Glory. Ramban adds that within the word *tekhelet* are the words *kol* (all) and *tachlit* (purpose). Meaning at its core *tekhelet* reminds us of our mission in this

world, which is to serve God by doing *mitzvot* and avoid sinning.

Writing in the 15th century, Rabbi Isaac Arama suggests that there is another important moral significance embedded within *tekhelet*. The message is dependent on a medieval color theory which is not followed in modern times. The assumption was that there were seven colors that flowed on a spectrum: white, yellow, red, green, blue, purple and black. At the extremes of the spectrum were white and black, and sitting in the middle was green. Rabbi Arama, presumably understanding that *tekhelet* is green, argues that the symbolism behind *tekhelet* is that it is the middle ground between extremes. This serves as a model for our character traits that we should follow the middle path.

Using Rabbi Arama's precedent to interpret the message of *tekhelet* based on the color science of his time, perhaps there is another layer to *tekhelet* that we can add by viewing it through the prism of modern color psychology. In a fascinating article researching how colors impact marketing strategy, Lauren Labrecque and George Milne summarize previous findings as to the psychological significance of different colors. White, the total reflection of all of the colors, is associated with sincerity, purity, and peace. Blue, which along with violet represent the shortest wavelength of all of the colors, is associated with intelligence, trust, and duty. In contrast, colors on the longer end of the wavelength spectrum (like red, orange, and yellow) stimulate states of excitement and arousal, oftentimes emotions related to sin.



## **Shlach** (Numbers 13-15) *basic compendium*

As the verses indicate, *tzitzit* function to counteract sin. Presupposing that *tekhelet* is blue, perhaps the duty and loyalty invoked by seeing blue and the purity associated with white, are meant as a counter to calm the excitement represented by the red of sin. In addition to the associations that lead to us to think of God's throne, the psychological symbolism of the colors themselves may serve as an intervention to arrest the arousal of sin and remind us to be loyal to God.

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