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## How the Mighty Fall

This week's Torah portion tells the fateful story of the 12 spies who were sent to spy out the land of Israel.

*"Shelach lecha anashim... Send forth, for yourself, men..."* (*Bamidbar* 13:2). Hashem is telling Moshe to send them out "for yourself" – not for Me. I've already told you that it is a good land; there is no need for spies. But if this is what you want, I will not stop you. I will not take away your independence. But be sure to choose "*anashim*" (which Rashi tells us means men of distinction, righteous leaders). It is a dangerous mission; be sure to send the best.

The Torah says, "Moshe sent them forth... by the mouth of Hashem; they were all distinguished men; heads of the Children of Israel" (*ibid* 13:3). What does "by the mouth of Hashem" mean? The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 16:5) explains that Moshe did not rely on his own judgment in selecting them. He conferred with the Almighty on each one: "Is he up for the task? Is he the strongest leader

of this tribe?" And God gave His stamp of approval for each man chosen, testifying that indeed, "*kulam anashim* – they are all distinguished men."

Moshe then sends twelve of the greatest men of the Jewish people to spy out the land. It's a dream team! Yet for some reason Moshe is very concerned that something horrendous is going to happen.

Moshe's fear compels him to change the name of his devoted student: "And Moshe called Hoshea the son of Nun, Yehoshua" (*ibid* 13:16), adding a *yud* to signify the prayer, "May God save you from the evil counsel of the spies." He is actually worried that Yehoshua, the future leader of the Jewish people, the one who will lead them into the land of Canaan and wage fierce battles against the thirty-one kings, is going to be convinced to become a traitor. Why was Moshe so concerned?

Moshe was not alone in recognizing the insidious dangers of this mission. The Talmud (*Sotah* 34b) tells us that the only reason Calev ben Yefuneh was able to resist the temptation to join the other spies was that he went to the graves of the patriarchs in Chevron to pray that he be protected from their evil counsel. Why did a great *tzaddik* like Calev feel that he was in such great danger that he needed the Almighty to save him?

But perhaps the most mystifying aspect of this saga is how quickly this illustrious, handpicked group went from being righteous leaders to being disloyal, faithless liars who brought back an evil report that demoralized the entire nation. The verse says, "They went and they came" (*ibid* 13:26). But the previous verse already says they returned, so how can the Torah say, "They went"? Rashi explains: "What is meant by 'They went'? To compare their going with their coming. Just as their return was with evil intent, so was their departure with evil intent." The ten spies were infected

with evil intent the moment they left, long before they entered the land of Israel and began their mission.

What is happening here? God Himself gives testimony that each of the spies is a righteous, distinguished leader. Yet as soon as they start on the road they already have the appalling intention of undermining Hashem's plan, preventing their generation from entering the land of Israel and planting the seeds of all future calamities, culminating with the destruction of our two Temples on Tisha b'Av (Taanis 29a). One moment, the spies are *tzaddikim*, and the next moment, they are evil - with no time in between for anything to have caused them to fall so precipitously. What changed?

## Face the Nation

The only thing that changed was that now they are going to the Land of Israel with the responsibility of reporting back to the Jewish people. They are going to have to face a fearful nation that is eagerly awaiting their report. A moment before, they were *tzaddikim*, but now they have to stand up to their society and tell the people something they do not want to hear: "Friends, we have to fulfill our mission and invade the land of Canaan! The Almighty is with us, and there's nothing to fear!" Suddenly these courageous, righteous men are thrust into the difficult situation of confronting the people and giving them a report the majority are not interested in hearing. The people do not want reassurance - they want confirmation of their fears.

Right from the start, the pressure to bring back a negative report subtly affected the objectivity of ten out of the twelve spies and caused them to decide not to risk their popularity and stature by pushing an agenda that went against what the Jewish people desired.

We are all creatures of society. We crave

approval and validation. We prefer not to take a stand that goes against the grain and makes us vulnerable to criticism or attack. When Yehoshua and Calev got up in front of the nation and told them, "You have nothing to fear. We can go up!" the people called them murderers and wanted to stone them. Who wants to be called a murderer? It is far easier to put on blinders and view the situation through subjective eyes that will appease the people.

Society is an incredibly powerful force. If the masses expect you to come back with a report that says they do not have to enter the Land of Israel, you come back with that report. That type of societal pressure creates a formidable undertow that constantly erodes our understanding of what is true and good. And it is very easy to get caught in this pull.

For example, we know that the crown of Torah is available to each and every Jew, regardless of his level of intelligence (See "Terumah: The Crown of Torah"). As the Rambam authoritatively states, "Whoever wants it may come and take it" (*Hilchos Talmud Torah* 3:1). Chazal say, "One who says I searched and did not find, do not believe him... and one who says I searched and did find, believe him. This is referring to the area of understanding Torah" (*Megillah* 6b). We have a guarantee that anyone who sincerely puts in the effort to understand Torah will attain it. That is a halachah, an indisputable fact.

No matter who you are, if you make the genuine effort to learn and know Torah, you can attain the crown of Torah. Hashem will help you; He makes that promise.

But deep down, do we believe it? Our society tells us that only the gifted individuals can become towering *talmidei chachamim*, Torah scholars. For the rest of us, it's just not realistic.

We think this way because our society conveys

that message, drowning out the reality that is defined only by the Torah. We all get caught in the undertow and lose our bearings, which causes us to give up on the goal.

Realizing how dangerous societal pressure can be, Moshe prayed for Yehoshua. Calev recognized this danger as well, and so he prayed to Hashem to give him the strength to resist the pressure and be able to stand before the people and tell them they are all wrong.

## Recognize the Danger

The Rambam says, "It is natural for a man's character and actions to be influenced by his friends and associates and for him to follow the local norms of behavior." (*Hilchos Dei'os* 6:1) This is a reality that every one of us must contend with. It is hard to hold onto your sanity and stand up to society. But the first step in winning this battle is to recognize how powerful the pull of society is. If you do not appreciate the need to struggle, there is no chance you can resist the undertow.

Then you have to work on attaining clarity, to know what is true and what is false as clearly as you know that you have five fingers. It would be exceedingly difficult for someone to convince you that you have six fingers. Reach that level of clarity with regard to your fundamental convictions, too.

And lastly, tap into the power of social pressure and channel it toward good. As the Rambam continues, "Therefore, one should associate with the righteous and be constantly in the company of the wise, so as to learn from their deeds. Conversely, one should keep away from the wicked who walk in darkness, so as not to learn from their deeds." It's a crazy world out there. Surround yourself with role models and a community that embodies Torah values.



## How Do You See Yourself?

Consider this situation:

*You're unhappy with your current status. An opportunity comes along to embark on a new career. But you panic! Instead of envisioning the potential, you visualize long, tedious hours and less leisure time. You ask yourself, "Will I be consumed by a demanding work schedule?" As your anxiety increases, you start to wonder, "Can I measure up to my colleagues? What if they don't like me?" Then you begin to rationalize that things aren't really so bad where you are. After all, your basic needs are provided for. Maybe it's not the right time for a change.*

*Self-doubt validates your decision. Finally, you breathe a sigh of relief. It's definite: you're staying put.*

For many of us, the known is preferable to the unknown. Many people fear change; they'd sooner remain in a dead-end situation. How do you see yourself? What would you do? It can be a tough choice.

The challenge of confronting change opens up this week's Torah portion. On the cusp of entering the Promised Land, Moshe selects one leader from each of the twelve tribes, each of wisdom and stature, to scout out the condition

of the Land of Israel and its inhabitants. Upon returning from their mission, ten of these esteemed leaders deliver a dismal report of what they encountered. Regarding the land's inhabitants, they declare, "We were like grasshoppers in our eyes, and so we were in their eyes."

How is it possible that men who'd heard God's Divine voice at Har Sinai saw themselves as lowly grasshoppers? At first glance, their reactions are perplexing and incomprehensible. Let's delve beneath the surface to uncover a deeper understanding of human nature.

If you allow your value to be defined by how others see you, healthy self-esteem is elusive. Regardless of what you do or achieve in life, you'll always rely on someone else for validation. On the other hand, as the Chafetz Chaim explains, "When you view yourself as inferior, you'll assume that others also view you in this manner."

While on their mission, each of the twelve leaders encountered the same people and places. How is it possible that only two of the twelve returned with positive tidings?

Typically, people notice the things that concern them the most. Yehoshua (Joshua) and Calev (Caleb), the two that gave a positive report, delighted in the sanctity of the Holy Land. They *chose* to notice the abundance of God's blessings. This became their focus. Because the eyes of the other ten were focused more on the physical features of the land, that's what they noticed. Ten perceived obstacles; two perceived opportunities.

Accordingly, the concluding injunction of *Parashas Shelach* states, "Don't follow after your heart and eyes that lead you astray." The verse first mentions the heart, followed by the eyes. This order implies that the eyes notice according to what the heart desires. Yehoshua and Calev aspired more toward spiritual

growth, focusing their eyes on positive opportunities within the Promised Land. In stark contrast, the other ten perceived glaring drawbacks. Biases and personal desires influence how each of us views life.

As Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonasan: "A person is shown [in his dreams] only the thoughts of his heart." This has been expounded upon by many, as reflected in the popular phrase, "We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are." Chassidic teachings illuminate yet another significant consideration. In the wilderness, the people didn't have to deal with daily material concerns. Heavenly manna provided sustenance, while the water of Miriam's well quenched their thirst. The people were able to focus on serving God without distraction. Ten of the leaders sent to scout the land worried—and rightfully so. How would they fare when these daily miracles would cease? The people's focus would be diverted to working and harvesting the land. This would decrease their time for Torah study and spiritual pursuits. Therefore, they reasoned that it would be preferable to extend the present situation for as long as possible—hence, the negative report.

From this perspective, we can perceive what occurred with greater clarity. Those ten tribal leaders mistakenly believed that God's providence did not extend into life's mundane daily activities. They erred by thinking that the Divine Presence only could be encountered in extraordinary events. God desired the people to enter the Holy Land, where they would learn to live within a spiritual structure while engaging with the physical world. Integrating the spiritual and the material is the means through which we can carry out God's will in establishing a dwelling place in the physical world. Spirituality isn't achieved by insulating oneself, but by directing our desires to reach God-intended goals. Spirituality is not self-contained,

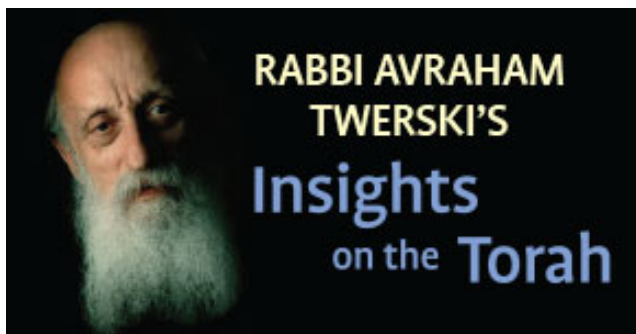
but expansive; God's Presence surrounds us.

Confronting change is as challenging today as it's always been. Each of us experiences and relates to change differently. Transition-related anxiety is nothing new. An awareness that God's providence orchestrates every transition we encounter magnifies the purpose and value within every change we face. A person with a positive self-image will view change as an opportunity for personal and spiritual growth, whereas one with low self-esteem might fear change because of the possibility of failure. Unchecked negativity typically can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The Torah's wisdom infuses a person with a sense of healthy self-esteem. A daily dose of Torah study coupled with observing mitzvot can help us learn to grow through the transitions of our ever-changing lives.

## Making It Relevant

1. Next time you are challenged by a possible change, ask yourself, "How might this help my personal growth?"
2. See yourself as spiritually growing through your next transition. How might this look?
3. Realize how a negative mindset can limit your opportunities.
4. Don't allow others to determine how you see yourself.



## Distorted Self Image

"We were like grasshoppers in our eyes, and so we were in their eyes" (Bamidbar, 13:33)

In this unique syntax, the Torah teaches us a psychological principle of the greatest importance: The way you feel about yourself is how you think others perceive you.

Rashi's comment expands upon this concept. The spies said, "We heard the Canaanites say, 'Look! There are ants crawling in our vineyards.'" The Torah says that the spies felt as small as grasshoppers, which are still much larger than ants. Furthermore, how could the spies know what the Canaanites were saying? How could they understand their language?

Rashi is teaching us that low self-esteem is progressive and self-reinforcing. If you have a distorted, negative self-concept, it is apt to further deteriorate. You may begin by feeling as small as grasshoppers, but your self-image will shrink and you will eventually think even less of yourself. In addition, you will assume that others are making negative comments about you, even if you are not privy to what they are saying. A distorted, negative self-concept can lead to paranoia.

The Midrash on this verse expounds another important psychological principle.

"God said, 'I forgive you for saying, "We were like grasshoppers in our eyes." But why did you say, "And so we were in their eyes?" How do you know that I did not make you appear to them as mighty angels? For that I do not forgive you'" (Tanchuma).

Why was the second statement a more grievous sin than the first?

Rabbi Henschel Lebowitz explains that a distorted negative self-image is an emotion. I have noted in my books that there is a strange phenomenon. People who are most gifted may have the most profound low self-esteem. Their undeniable, factual achievements seem to

make no impact on their self-concept. Whatever the source of low self-esteem, it is an emotion that is not altered by factual reality.

The concept that God is omnipotent is an intellectual belief. The Midrash says that when God told Moses that the Israelites should go into the sea, Nachshon went into the water up to his neck and then the waters divided. It was Nachshon's faith that enabled him to overcome the emotional fear of drowning, and it was this faith that warranted the miracle.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman (Baal HaTanya) says that it is innate within the human being that intellect can triumph over emotion. When we allow our emotions to outweigh our intellect, it is a laxity and dereliction on our part.

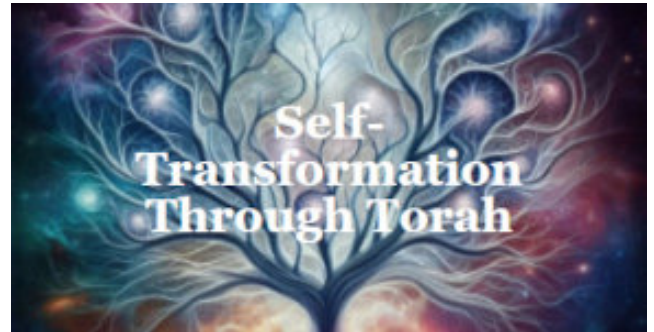
The Midrash says that God forgave the spies for having a poor self-concept. That is an emotion which is not easily overcome. Their sin was in failing to exercise their ability to act according to their intellect. Having witnessed the many miracles of the Exodus, they knew intellectually that God could make them appear to the Canaanites as mighty angels. It was not even a lack of faith that was their sin. It was their failure of surrendering to their emotions when they should have followed their intellect (Chidushei HaLev, Bamidbar p. 86).

This is a teaching which we should apply regularly in our lives. As far as our distorted self-concept which depresses our self-esteem is concerned, this is something which we should seek to change by finding ways to elevate our self-esteem. But until we achieve that goal, we should not allow this emotion to determine our behavior. We should be able to act on factual reality.

But how can we know factual reality when our emotions distort our perception? By getting an opinion of ourselves from a reliable objective observer. If we are told that we are good, worthy and competent, we should act

accordingly even if we do not feel that way.

Nachshon brought about a miracle by following his intellect rather than his emotion. You can accomplish virtually miraculous things by acting according to intellect rather than emotion.



## **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 - ה' מצות כל את וזכרתם AND YOU SHALL REMEMBER ALL THE COMMANDMENTS OF GOD — The because commandments the all of one remind will יציית the numerical value of the letters of the word יציית 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)."