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CONTINUITY

Shlach – Fringe Benefits

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It is a tragic and traumatic event. What began as a simple reconnaissance mission descends into a slander campaign against the Land of Israel, Moshe and ultimately, God Himself. The *Meraglim* (spies) were upstanding men, leaders of their respective families and tribes and yet something happened. Something went so terribly wrong and these leaders led their constituents astray. They managed to convince the people that entering and conquering the very land promised to Avraham Avinu had now become impossible. They convinced the Jewish nation that it had all just been smoke and mirrors, that they had been betrayed by Moshe. The Divine response was quick and decisive. The spies die in a plague and the nation is condemned to roam the desert for the next four decades. The generation which left Egypt will not enter the Land of Israel. They will die in the desert and the next generation will ascend and conquer the land.

What struck me is how the Parsha ends:

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the children of Israel and you shall say to them that they shall make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments, throughout their generations, and they shall affix a thread of sky blue [wool] on the fringe of each corner. This shall be fringes for you, and when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord to perform them, and you shall not wander after your hearts and after your eyes after which you are going astray. So that you shall remember and perform all My commandments and you shall be holy to your God. I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt to be your God; I am the Lord, your God (Bamidbar 15:37-41).”

The Mitzvah of Tzitzis (tying fringes on the corner of our garments) is an important one but why is it given now? Does the placement of this mitzvah somehow correlate to the sin of the spies? Is there some deeper message which God is conveying to us?

The biblical mitzvah of Tzitzis requires that one of the strings be dyed with *techeiles* (blue dye). The Gemara explains:

Rabbi Meir said: Why is Techeiles different from all other colors (i.e. why did the Torah command us to dye the string of the Tzitzis blue instead of some other color)? Because, Techeiles resembles the sea, the sea resembles the sky and the sky resembles the Throne of God (Menachos 43b).”

The light blue color the Tzitzis reminds us of our all-important mission – the need to establish a relationship with God. We have many responsibilities during our time in this world. Establishing a meaningful and fulfilling relationship with God allows us to accomplish them all. The blue string reminds us that spirituality is a “step-process.” One can’t immediately go from *Earth* to the *Throne of God*. There is a progression, there is a process. First you go to the sea, then to the heavens Spiritual accomplishment is like climbing a ladder if you try to get to the top in one step, you will fall. Meaningful spiritual accomplishment must be advanced through a series of small, concrete steps. As such the mitzvah of Tzitzis teaches us an all-important approach to life. Spiritual growth must be a priority, establishing a relationship with God is an ultimate goal for which we strive.

Yet, we find something interesting in regard to this mitzvah. It is not obligatory. One is only obligated in Tzitzis if one has a four-cornered garment. If one never possesses such a garment one could go through an entire life-time never fulfilling this mitzvah (contemporarily we go out of our way to obligate ourselves in this mitzvah by wearing a four-cornered garment). But if this mitzvah (and its message) is indeed so important then why is it not obligatory?

Rav Moshe Feinstein zt”l explains that God decides many things. He decides if I will be tall or short, rich or poor, wise or foolish. But God does not decide what I choose to want from life. I must decide about what I want to accomplish, who I want to be and what contribution I want to make to this world. The *mitzvah* of *tzitzis* reminds me of my capacity to grow, to be great and accomplish incredible things. But I can only activate these abilities if I choose to do so. God can command me to do many things. He can command me to keep Shabbos and the laws of Kashrus. He can command me to be honest and charitable. But He cannot command me to grow as an individual – this is I choice I must make. God cannot command me to be as vast as the sea, as luminescent as the heavens or to grab hold of His Throne. Only I can choose this for myself. Thus, the Torah makes the mitzvah of Tzitzis something you must actively choose to do rather, than one that is automatically required.

What happened to the spies? How did they commit this terrible sin? Because they lost their way. Somehow they forgot about what “they wanted out of life.” They forgot that from the inception of our peoplehood, when God first communicates with Avraham, the goal was to bring us to our Land. They became so overwhelmed with the details of existence that they forgot to look beyond their immediate circumstances to the beautiful sea, heavens and Throne that awaited them. When the spies saw the “problems” in the Land they had a decision to make. Should we fail prey to small mindedness and throw our hands up in defeat? Or should we choose something bigger, better and holier for ourselves? Unfortunately, they made the wrong the decision and we still feel the impact to this very day. God gave us the mitzvah of tzitzis in the immediate aftermath of the sin of spies with the hope that its beautiful message would inspire us to be better in the future.

It is easy to get caught up in the rapid pace of life. We juggle multiple responsibilities and wear many hats. It is important to take the time to write a life mission statement. What do we want to accomplish? Who do we want to be? What impact do we hope to have? How will we measure the success of our lives on this earth? It is not enough to wear Tzitzis, we have to live Tzitzis. Do we want growth? Do we want spiritual success? Do we want a passionate relationship with God?

May we be privileged to explore the depths of our personal sea, ascend the heights of our individual heavens and feel the warmth and closeness of the Divine.