



Shlach – Fringe Benefits

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It was a tragic and traumatic event. What began as a simple reconnaissance mission descended 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 went so terribly wrong and these leaders led their constituents astray. They managed to convince the people that entering and conquering the land promised to Avraham Avinu had 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 died in a plague and the nation was condemned to roam the desert for the next four decades. The generation which left Egypt would not enter the Land of Israel, but die in the desert. The next generation would ascend and conquer the land.

The Parsha ends in a striking way:

“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? How does the placement of this mitzvah somehow correlate to the sin of the spies?

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 of the Tzitzis reminds us of our all-important mission: 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-by-step process. One can't immediately go from *Earth* to the *Throne of God*. There is a progression. First you go to the sea, then to the heavens, etc. 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, he may 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 we will be tall or short, rich or poor, wise or foolish. But God does not decide what we want from life. We must each decide what we want to accomplish, who we want to be and what contribution we want to make to this world. The *mitzvah* of *tzitzis* reminds us of our capacity to grow, to be great and accomplish incredible things. But we can only activate these abilities if we choose to do so. God can command us to do many things, but He cannot command us to strive for growth. This is a choice we each must make. Thus, the Torah makes the mitzvah of Tzitzis something one must actively choose to do rather than being required.

The spies lost their way. Somehow, they forgot about what “they wanted out of life.” They forgot that from the inception of our people, when God first communicated 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 fall 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.