

Shelach-The Colors of Tzitzis

[From Rabbeinu Bachaya]

By Rabbi Eliyahu Kirsh

In Bamidbar 15:37-41 we read of the mitzvah of Tzitzis. The name tzitzis comes from the fact that these 'fringes' are placed at the edges of and tied to the garment as we find in Yechezkel 8:3 when Yechezkel states that Hashem sent a hand and took him by the tzitzis of his head which is understood as the hair. This is the understanding of Rashi, Even Ezra and Rabbeinu Bachaya among other Rishonim.

Rabbeinu Bachaya states that the tzitzis is referring to the four threads placed in each corner. He also states that the Torah uses the word tzitzis three times to correspond to the three mitzvos that are equal to the entire Torah which are Shabbos, tzitzis and the prohibition of idolatry. He also mentions other symbols associated with tzitzis. The holes made in the garment to put in the tzitzis are like eyes. The five knots correspond to the five senses and the eight strings correspond to the eight days before bris milah.

Rashi and Rabbeinu Bachaya, also among other Rishonim, bring the explanation of Tzitzis to be seeing as we find in Shir Hashirim 2:9 *meitzitz*, peeking through the lattices of the window. Since Hashem is everywhere, one should be careful not to do any wrong at any time in any place. The Tzitzis had two colors which can be understood to represent two different themes. Regarding the white, Rabbeinu Bachaya then mentions that we are commanded to put on a tallis just as Hashem, as it were, wrapped himself in a tallis when he taught Moshe the order of the thirteen middos to be recited as supplication at a time of need. This recitation brings forgiveness. The intention here is that the tallis is white, symbolizing purity and forgiveness as we find in Yeshaya 1:18, 'though your sins are like scarlet they will be whitened like snow.' This perhaps can be extended to the *lavan*, the white threads of the tzitzis. The Torah tells us that there are also blue threads. The *techeiles*, blue color, according to our mesorah, could only come from the chilazon fish. No other dye could be used for the *techeiles* of tzitzis. Chazal tell us that the blue color is like the color of the sea which is like the color of the sky in the early evening which in turn, is like the *kesai bakavod*, Hashem's throne of glory. This throne of glory was revealed on the night that Hashem slew the first born of Mitzrayim, showing Hashem's glory in that he reveals himself and gets involved in our world. Our wearing of tzitzis shows that we believe that Hashem took us out of Mitzrayim to do his mitzvos. While we do not have the *techeiles* today, nevertheless, the various themes understood from the blue and white, Hashem's glory and Hashem's forgiveness and purifying us, represented by the two colors of tzitzis are as just as relevant today.

Rabbeinu Bachaya also states that the Torah mentions our exodus from Mitzrayim not only as a reminder of the past and our obligations to Hashem on account of past miracles he did for us. There is a hint to the future as well. Just as there was a great revelation of the *shechina* at the time of our going out of Mitzrayim, so too, there will be a great revelation of the *Shechina* in the future as well. Just as Hashem did great miracles for us in the past, he will do miracles for us again in the future at the time of the final geulah. Our heritage is not based on legends of the past but we believe in a great future as well. In merit of keeping the mitzvah of Tzitzis, may we merit the pristine closeness to Hashem, symbolized by the mitzvah and may we merit seeing all of the miracles of the final geulah. Amen.