

THE CENTRALITY OF MITZVAS TZITZIS

Parshas Shelach

By Rabbi Menachem Rokeach

The conclusion of this week's Parsha, about the Mitzva of Tzitzis (fringes), is fundamental and is one of the three portions recited daily in Krias Shema. Several thoughts regarding this Mitzva are crucial for intensive observance:

a) One wonders what concept is found in this Parsha that connects it to the two others, Shema and Vehoyo Im Shomoa. These other two portions are indeed linked to each other by major precepts in common. The requirement to learn Torah and teach it to children is mentioned in both. Also the statutes of Tefilin and Mezuzah are mentioned in both. It is logical to seek some linkage to the third portion, Tzitzis, as well.

b) The verse states, "And you shall see it (the Tzitzis) and remember all the commandments of Hashem..." Where in the Tzitzis is ingrained the capacity to remember all six hundred and thirteen Mitzvahs? Expounds Rashi (Menochos 43b) it is based on the numerical value of the word. The five letters of the word add up to a total of six hundred, adding the 5 Keshorim (knots) and the eight fringes sum up six hundred thirteen (Taryag). Comments Tosfos (39a): This calculation is correct the way the word is pronounced, but the way it is written, with only one yud, four letters, totals only five hundred ninety. Tosfos resolves this perplexity as follows: The word Tzitzis is mentioned in this portion three times; one of them reads L'TZITZIS, the prefix letter LAMED numerically amounts to thirty. This number is distributed equally to each of the three, adding ten to each, thus totaling six hundred.

This letter "Lamed" means learning. It is the study of Torah that possesses the capacity to remember all the six hundred thirteen Mitzvahs. "The laws of Hashem are true; altogether righteous" (Tehilim 19:10), well integrated with each other. This, then, is the key to the linkage of this portion with the two other portions. For the requirement of Torah study is also a major theme in the two other portions of Krias Shema.

The fact that this fundamental precept is indicated in the one letter, Lamed, in L'tzitzis, is a most eloquent testimony to the teaching in the Ethics of the Fathers (Avos 6:3). "He who learns from his fellow man a single chapter, a single Halacha, a single verse, or even a single letter, must treat him with honor". This letter "lamed" in L'tzitzis is one single letter, and yet is fraught with utmost consequence. There are many precepts derived from one single letter. This letter Lamed, however, is more striking, linking this mitzvah to all 613 Mitzvahs.

The centrality of Torah study in all of Jewishness cannot be overemphasized. The very first Bracha in the morning upon arousal is Birchas HaTorah. The Mishna following the Bracha quotes the statement "Talmud Torah is equivalent to them all".

The very beginning of the first Talmudic tract, Brochos, discusses the time of the evening Shema, i.e. when the stars can be seen. Rashi comments on those who daven Maariv earlier, that the recital of Shema in that period does not fulfill the recital obligation. It only achieves the benefit of Torah study before the Shemona Esra. Study before prayer, apparently, enhances the power of Tefilah.

c) In addition to the Tzitzis focus as the third of the three portions of Shema, it also plays a paramount role in the Bracha introducing the Psukei d'Zimra, the Bracha Boruch Sheomar. The Mishna Brura quotes unequivocally to hold the two front Tzitzis in hand upon reciting Boruch Sheomar, and kiss the Tzitzis upon conclusion of the Bracha (chapter 51:1).

The reason, it may be suggested, hinges on the above. The letter "Lamed" in L'tzitzis urges us to study also the translation and deeper meaning of the chapters of Haleluyah, which are introduced in Boruch Sheomar. When one offers a compliment, praising another, in language he does not understand, it is bereft of real importance. The code of law clearly decrees that the "davener" should know the translation of the words he utters (Ch. 98, see Mishna Brura 101:2). In chapter 50:2 the Mishna Brura differentiates between parts of Tefila, regarding fully understanding the context.

d) One wishes to add another reason for taking the Tzitzis in hands upon reciting Boruch Sheomar. In that Bracha it is stated: "Through the psalms of David Your servant we shall laud You Hashem our G-d with

praises and songs". Indeed the Haleluya chapters are all from Tehilim, authored by David. So is the chapter Vayevorech David (Chronicles 29:10-13) referring to David. In fact, however, this part of Shachris includes the Song of Moshe, "Oz Yoshir Moshe." The Shiras Hayam is no part of David's shirim.

It is for this reason, one wishes to suggest, that the fringes, Tzitzis, are held in hand, for it is indicative of the Song of Moses. As Rashi expounds at the "fringe" of the Parsha, "the eight fringes are commemorating the Song of Moshe, which was sung on the eighth day of the Exodus." By holding the Tzitzis in hand one acknowledges the song of Moses in the praises together with the Haleluya praises of David.

Interestingly, the Shira (Oz Yoshir) and Hallel have much in common, and are sometimes referred to interchangeably. (See Talmud Sotah 30b "How did they sing the Shira? as a major leading the congregation in Hallel... or as a minor leading..."). Same may apply to Haleluya of Psukei d'zimra. Thus the Tzitzis held in hand at the start (Boruch Sheomar) appropriately indicates concluding David's praises with Moshe's Shira.

One hastens to add that the count of eighth day is eight from erev Pesach, instead the seventh day from the Exodus itself. The reason is the additional observance of "seeing" the tzitzis (Ureisem). This is parallel to the blood of the paschal lamb sprinkled on the door upon which Hashem said "Veroisee", I will SEE the blood on the door post and save you (Shmos 12:13). Rashi comments: SEE = concentrate on your observance of the Mitzva not looking for flaws. The parallel is exceedingly significant because the "Ureisem" of the Tzitzis, too, is indicative of the fulfillment of all 613 Mitzvahs, with no flaws.

Accordingly, the Boruch Sheomar not only introduces the Haleluya of Psukei d'Zimra. It also serves as a MATIR (justification) to "allow" expressing the praise. The humble person, otherwise, may feel unworthy to utter the sublime praises of Hashem. The Tzitzis, and the concentration on the positive, gives even the humble person the stamina of access to praise Hashem.

