



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Shelach Lecha: Reminders

- Do we need a constant reminder that we are Jewish?
- Why do people – men or women – wear a wedding ring? Would they otherwise forget that they are married?
- Is a symbol such as a wedding ring a sign for oneself or for others?

In this week's Parsha Discussion we discuss *Tzitzit*, the fringes attached to a four-corner garment which are presented by the Torah as a sign and a trigger:

...Let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner... see it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge. Thus you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God (Deut 22:12, Num 15:37-41).

Tzitzit can be found in two forms: In a *Tallit* donned during prayer, and in a *Tallit katan* worn under one's clothing as a private expression of this *mitzva*. In recent decades, *Tekhelet*, the ancient blue dye would seem to have been rediscovered, as well.

- Why do fringes, and the blue thread in particular, recall all the commandments of God? And why do they curb lustful urges?

1. THE COLOR OF THE SHECHINA

Rabbi Meir would ask: How does *Tekhelet* differ from other colors? - *Tekhelet* is similar in color to the sea, and the sea is comparable to the sky, and the sky to the throne of (God's) presence." (*Menachot* 43b)

Here, *Tekhelet* of the *Tzitzit* reminds us of God Himself. It is true that several verses indicate a blue sapphire color associated with God's essence, a color associated with the sky:

...And they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a brick of sapphire, like the very sky for purity. (Ex. 24:10)

I looked, and on the expanse over the heads of the cherubs, there was something like a sapphire stone; an appearance resembling a throne could be seen over them ... the presence of the Lord. (*Yechezkel*/ Ezekiel 10:1-4)

If *Tekhelet* resembles a blue sapphire color, and if that is synonymous with the divine presence, then the blue thread of *Tzitzit* is a direct reminder of God.

2. A REMINDER OF THE COMMANDMENTS

Rashi informs us that over and above the blue color which signifies, the divine presence, the threads and knots of the *Tzitzit* allude to the 613 commandments:

The word *Tzitzit* has the numerical value (*gematria*) of 600; add 8 for the eight strings and 5 for the five knots and one comes to 613.

In Hebrew, each letter is given a numerical corollary. Here, צ = 90; י = 10, and ת = 400. 90+10+90+10+400 = 600. Add 8 and 5 and you have 613.

Can a numerical cryptogram really recall a sense of spiritual duty? Maybe! If the connection is known widely enough, the numerical cipher will recall a deeper consciousness.

3. A COLOR OF ROYALTY and PRIESTHOOD

The *tzitzit* are like an insignia upon one's clothing - a sign that one puts upon a servant to mark him as one in service of his master. When Israel sees this sign, they bring into the forefront of their minds that they are subservient to God... (*Bechor Shor*)

Why is the blue color a sign of Israel's subservience to God?

Royalty: Historically, *Tekhelet* was an expensive dye that was affordable only to aristocracy. As such it was a symbol of royalty. The clearest example of this is in *Megillat Esther*:

And *Mordechai* took his leave from the king in royal robes of *Tekhelet* and white linen... (*Esther* 8:15, and see also *Esther* 1:6)

One might suggest that donning *Tekhelet* is like wearing royal livery. Much as the courtier of the king has his clothes emblazed with the royal emblem, similarly, every Jew will bear a sign of service to God. This works in a dual way. It signifies a life of service to God, but it is also a source of pride that one is associated with God.

Priesthood: The *Tekhelet* dye featured prominently in the *Mishkan* and the clothes of the *kohanim* (priest): The High Priest's tunic is dyed with *Tekhelet* as is the breastplate (Ex.28:6,28,31). *Tekhelet* thread is used in the coverings for the *mishkan*

and its curtains (Ex. 26:1,31). The Holy Vessels were transported protected by *Tekhelet* covers (Num. 4:6,7,9).

But the connection might be stronger still. The High Priest dons a head-plate, held in my place by a *Tekhelet* string, called a *Tzitz*. It is engraved with the words *Kodesh LaShem* (Holy to God). Our *Tzitzit* might be like a mini-*Tzitz*. We are meant to feel like we too are similar to a priest – each and every Jew. *Tzitzit* are designated as a route to holiness: “Thus you shall be reminded to observe all my commandments and to be holy to God.” As such, the *Tzitzit* generate awareness that we are all ambassadors for and servants of the Almighty with a mission to sanctifying the world, just as the priests sanctify the *Mishkan*.

(See more on the *Tzitzit*=Priest connection in Rabbi Shai Held’s essay <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/every-jew-high-priest>)

Today a *kippa*, and other head-gear for males and females have become the classic Jewish symbol of dress to mark a person as a *mitzva*-observant Jew.

- Does a *kippa* work for you?
- What do you have that would remind you of God?
- Would *tzitzit*, the original sign and reminder, be a more suitable piece of apparel?

Shabbat Shalom!