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# UNRAVELING THE MITZVAH OF TZITZIT & TALLIT

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Clothing is a fundamental part of human existence. Judaism views clothing as an external expression of a person's inner being. Although we may not hold the expression "You are what you wear" to be entirely true, we may adopt it as a concise way of saying, "What you wear is (usually) a good expression of who you are." The Torah contains a fascinating Biblical commandment to tie tassels, known as tzitzit, to the corners of a four cornered garment we wear. This mitzvah is so central to Judaism that it is even mentioned in the Shema. What effect can some hanging strings have on our life?

The clothing we wear can influence not only ourselves, but even others as well. This dual role is pronounced in the mitzvah of tzitzit. The tzitzit attached to our clothing serve as a constant reminder during our action-packed days that the Jewish people aspire to connect with God and infuse life with profound ethical ideals. In this Morasha shiur we will explore the mitzvah of tzitzit and *tallit* addressing the following questions:

- ☞ Why does the Torah care about the nature of our dress?
- ☞ Why is the mitzvah of tzitzit so important? What impact can some dangling strings make?
- ☞ How is there a correlation between tzitzit and the concept of the Chosen People?
- ☞ What is the difference between tzitzit and a *tallit*?
- ☞ What is *techeilet* and should we wear it on our tzitzit?

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## SECTION I: INTRODUCTION: TZITZIT AND CLOTHING – WHAT’S THE CONNECTION?

Clothing is a fundamental part of human existence and has been so ever since the initial transgression of Adam and Chava (Eve). Judaism views clothing as an external expression of a person’s inner being. Although we may not hold the expression “You are what you wear” to be entirely true, we may adopt it as a concise way of saying, “What you wear is (usually) a good expression of who you are.”

In a book entitled “How to Marry the Rich,” the author advises aspiring gold diggers to make a habit of entering exclusive boutiques and trying on the most expensive clothing available. The logic is that by repeatedly experiencing yourself in \$1,000 dresses or suits, you’ll come to see yourself as rich – which will in turn give you the aura necessary to successfully mingle with and meet millionaires. The clothing we wear can influence not only others, but ourselves as well.

### PART A. THE FIRST COVER-UP

Until eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and Chava did not wear clothing.

#### 1. Bereishit (Genesis) 2:25 – Prior to their transgression, they wore no clothes.

And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and they were not ashamed.

ויהיו שניהם ערומים האדם ואשתו ולא יתבוששו.

Before their fatal sin, one human saw his fellow not as a body, but rather as a soul. There was no shame in the body; it was as if clothed by the spirituality of the soul. After the sin, however, the body no longer shone with the light of the soul, and it became an object of shame. In response, Adam and Chava instinctively made themselves clothing.

#### 2. Ibid. 3:7, 21 – They made themselves clothing because they were embarrassed to be seen naked.

The eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked. They sewed fig leaves and made themselves loincloths.

God made leather cloaks for Adam and his wife and clothed them.

ותפקחנה עיני שניהם וידעו כי עירמם הם ויתפרו עלה תאנה ויעשו להם חגרת.

ויעש ה' אלקים לאדם ולאשתו כתנות עור וילבישם.

### 3. **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Horeb, p. 182 – Garments cover the body in order to reveal human endeavor.**

The essential purpose of a garment is the covering up of the animal element in man's body, leaving only those limbs bare which are primarily organs of human activity – namely, the face and the hands.

The transgression in the Garden of Eden involved the turning of mankind to base physical desires. The verse highlights that the sin was led by the eyes rather than by the mind (Bereishit 3:6): “The woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise.” Instead of the physical body being a reflection of an inner truth, it was drawn to the baseness of the superficial.

We wear clothing because of our acknowledgement that the post-sin body leans towards the superficial. Although our clothes are of course physical entities, they enable us to express the nature of our inner selves – something our bodies have not been able to accomplish since Adam's transgression. The Talmud, therefore, teaches that a person's clothing is considered his dignity.

### 4. **Talmud, Shabbat 113a – Clothing is a person's dignity.**

Rabbi Yochanan used to call his clothing “that which affords me dignity.”

דרכי יוחנן קרי למאניה מכבודתי.

Dignity is something that emerges from the inner depths of a person's being. Yet post-sin, the body leans towards the superficial, and bared of clothing it is no longer able to give true expression to a person's inner dignity. Clothing is therefore required to create an external manifestation of a person's dignity.

## **PART B. CLOTHING EXTENSIONS**

The Torah commands the wearing of tzitzit on a four-cornered garment.

### 1. **Bamidbar (Numbers) 15:37-41 (translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, The Living Torah) – The Torah source for the mitzvah of tzitzit, recited morning and evening in our daily prayers.**

God spoke to Moses, telling him: Speak to the Israelites and have them make tassels (tzitzit) on the corners of their garments for all generations. They shall include a twist of sky-blue wool in the corner tassels. These shall be your tassels, and when you see them, you shall remember all of God's commandments so as to keep them. You

ויאמר יקוק אל משה לאמר: דבר אל בני ישראל ואמרת אלהם ועשו להם ציצת על כנפי בגדיהם ודרתם ונתנו על ציצת הכנף פתיל תכלת: והיה לכם לציצת וראיתם אתו וזכרתם את כל מצות יקוק ועשיתם אתם ולא תתרו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם אשר אתם זנים אחריהם: למען תזכרו ועשיתם את כל מצותי והייתם קדשים לאלהיכם: אני יקוק אלהיכם אשר הוצאתי

will then not stray after your heart and eyes, which [in the past] have led you to immorality. You will thus remember and keep all My commandments, and be holy to your God. I am God your Lord, who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am God your Lord.

אתכם מארץ מצרים להיות לכם לאלהים אני  
יקוק אלהיכם:

Tzitzit, which is literally an extension of our clothing, extends the concept of clothing in a figurative sense as well.

## 2. Rabbi Shimon Schwab, On Prayer, p. 108 – Tzitzit extend the moral calling of clothing to an even higher level for the Jewish people.

The idea of clothing is a reflection of the idea that there is “more to Man than just animal.” Mankind’s supremacy over animals lies in his ability to control his animalistic nature. While a human body functions much like those of animals, with all its desires and urges, he has the unique ability to control them. For example, man can choose to fast even when food is available, whereas an animal is incapable of making such a choice. He even has the ability to elevate and sanctify his physical urges.

However, as far as the Jewish people is concerned, a person’s ability to subdue his animal nature grows and flowers into an even higher moral calling, that of acceptance of the mitzvot of God. Where moral decency – with which all humanity is charged – ends, *at the corners of their garments*, there the specifically Jewish mandate begins. The Torah presupposes the highest form of decency and dignity. We, as the Jewish people, are to make “extensions” of our clothing to symbolize our special mandate. So, when we look at our tzitzit we are reminded that our membership in the Jewish nation, through the acceptance of the mitzvot, extends our humanity to a higher moral calling.

The tzitzit tassels attached to our clothing express a level of ethical behavior higher than that expressed by ordinary clothing. They symbolize an attachment to something beyond our actual physical existence and point to a lofty purpose, as indicated by the *petil techeilet*, the single blue string (one of the four strings at each corner). Although most people do not wear the *techeilet* nowadays, its significance has not been lost.

## 3. Rabbi Aaron Lopiansky (Dean of Silver Spring Yeshiva), Class given in 2001 – The tzitzit strings attached to our clothing symbolize our purpose.

The word for the color *techeilet* (sky blue) is related to the word *tachlit* (purpose), as we can see with the sky (and anything infinite), which takes on a hue of *techeilet*, embodying the purpose that it represents.

הצבע תכלת נגזר מלשון 'תכלית', כפי שרואים  
עינינו שהרקיע (וכן כל דבר אין סופי) מקבל גוון  
תכלת, כנגד ה'תכלית' שמגולם בו. חוטי הציצית,  
וחוט התכלת שבהם, מחברים את הבגדים - את  
הביטוי החיצוני של האדם - אל התכלית (ראה

The tzitzit strings, among them the string of techeilet, connects our clothing – our external manifestation – to this purpose (see Ramban [Nachmanides], Bamidbar/Numbers 15:38). Even in our current lowly state, our external deeds, and the superficial manifestation of our clothing, are connected and directed towards this purpose.

רמב"ן, במדבר ט"ו:ל"ח). גם במצב הירוד של היום, המעשים החיצוניים שלנו, והביטוי החיצוני של הלבושים, מחוברים ומכוונים אל התכלית.

The purpose and destiny of each person is to actualize his portion in the Torah, which is embodied in a person's 248 limbs and 365 sinews, corresponding to the positive and negative mitzvot, respectively. By means of the tzitzit strings, our outer garments are directed towards actualizing one's share in the 613 mitzvot. [See Rashi on Bamidbar 15:39 in Section II, Part A. Source 3 below.]

## PART C. THE DIGNITY OF DRESS

An early Biblical story about Noah and his sons after the Flood teaches us an important lesson about the Jewish view of clothing and how it relates to tzitzit.

### 1. Bereishit 9:18-27 – The story of Noah's children after the Flood.

Noah's sons who emerged from the ark were Shem, Ham (Cham) and Yefet. Cham was the father of Canaan. These three were Noah's sons, and from them, the whole world was repopulated. Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard. He drank some of the wine, became drunk, and uncovered himself in the tent. Cham, the father of Canaan, saw his father naked, and he related this to his two brothers outside. Shem and Yefet took a cloak and placed it on both their shoulders. Walking backwards, they then covered their father's nakedness. They faced away from him and did not see their father naked. Noah awoke from his wine-induced sleep, and he realized what his youngest son had done to him. He said, "Cursed is Canaan! He shall be a slave's slave to his brothers!" He then said, "Blessed be God, the Lord of Shem! Canaan shall be his slave! May God expand Yefet, but may He dwell in the tents of Shem. Let Canaan be their slave!"

ויהיו בני נח היצאים מן התבה שם וחם ויפת וחם הוא אבי כנען: שלשה אלה בני נח ומאלה נפצה כל הארץ: ויחל נח איש האדמה ויטע כרם: וישת מן היין וישכר ויתגל בתוך אהלה: וירא חם אבי כנען את ערות אביו ויגד לשני אחיו בחוץ: ויקח שם ויפת את השמלה וישימו על שכם שניהם וילכו אחרנית ויכסו את ערות אביהם ופניהם אחרנית וערות אביהם לא ראו: וייקץ נח מיינו וידע את אשר עשה לו בנו הקטן: ויאמר ארור כנען עבד עבדים יהיה לאחיו: ויאמר ברוך יקוק אלהי שם ויהי כנען עבד למו: יפת אלהים ליפת וישכן באהלי שם ויהי כנען עבד למו:

## 2. Rashi to Bereishit 9:23 – The rewards for Shem and Yefet.

**Shem and Yefet took (Heb. וַיִּקַּח)** – It does not say וַיִּקְחוּ (the plural form – “they took”), but וַיִּקַּח (the singular form – “he took”). This teaches us that Shem exerted himself to perform this good deed more than Yefet did. Therefore, Shem’s descendants merited a *tallit* (prayer shawl) with tzitzit, while Yefet was rewarded with burial for his descendants, as it is said (Yechezkel/ Ezekiel 39:11): “I will give Gog a burial site there in Israel.”

ויקח שם ויפת - אין כתיב כאן ויקחו אלא ויקח, לימד על שם שנתאמץ במצוה יותר מיפת, לכך זכו בניו לטלית של ציצית, ויפת זכה לקבורה לבניו, שנאמר (יחזקאל לט יא) אתן לגוג מקום שם קבר בישראל.

## 3. Maharal of Prague, Gur Aryeh to Bereishit 9:23 – Shem merited a greater form of honor than Yefet.

Since these two brothers honored their father by covering him, they therefore were rewarded with being honored themselves. One merited to be buried so as not to be left in disgrace. The other merited to have the garment with tzitzit, which is an honor for the body, as Rabbi Yochanan said, “My clothes honor me” (Shabbat 113a). Certainly the honor of tzitzit, which is a mitzvah, is greater than that of burial. Shem exerted more effort into it, so he merited this clothing – which is the source of a person’s honor as a spiritual being – as an expression of his honor. Not so for Yefet, who merited only bodily honor and was not granted any mitzvah to perform.

פירוש לפי שאלו שני אחים היו נוהגים כבוד לכסות את אביהם, לפיכך זכו לכבוד, זה- לקבור את הגוף שלא יהיה מוטל בבזיון, וזה - לטלית של ציצית, דטלית הוא כבוד לגוף, וכדר' יוחנן דקרא למאני - מכבודתי (שבת דף קיג). ובודאי כבוד ציצית שהיא מצוה- הוא יותר מקבורה, ומפני ששם נתאמץ במצוה יותר- זכה לכבוד הזה, שיהיו מלבושי - שהוא כבוד האדם כאשר הוא עם נשמתו- דרך כבוד, מה שאין כך ביפת, שלא זכה לכבוד רק הגוף בלבד, וגם לא זכה לדבר מצוה.

Rabbi Yochanan Zweig asks: Didn’t Shem and Yefet essentially do the same thing – covering their father’s nakedness? Why is Shem then rewarded by having millions of his descendants perform the mitzvah of tzitzit while Yefet will only be rewarded in the distant future by the burial of his descendants after a great war?

Rashi’s answer that Shem put more effort into covering their father still leaves us wondering about the wide disparity between his reward and that of Yefet.

The effort we invest into something gauges how important it is to us. We can understand therefore that if Shem exerted more effort, it must have meant something more to him. Shem and Yefet came to perform the same act, but with different motivations. The key to understanding that difference is to realize that clothing serves two distinct functions.

Clothes protect the body from the elements and cover up the indignity of nakedness. But they can also create a sense of dignity and express inner nobility. That aspect of clothing is why, for example, we have mitzvot to dress nicely on Shabbat and Yom Tov.

#### 4. **Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 113a – We honor our holy days by dressing with dignity.**

“And you shall honor [the Sabbath]” means that your Shabbat garments should not be like your weekday garments.

וכבודתו - שלא יהא מלבושך של שבת כמלבושך של חול.

With this distinction in mind we can understand the rewards allotted to Noach’s sons. Yefet was motivated to cover his father’s nakedness. He wanted to cover up the indignity of his nakedness. Hence, he will be rewarded by his descendants not suffering the indignity of being left unburied.

Shem, however, wanted to do more than that. He wanted to dress his father for the sake of dignifying him, not just removing his disgrace. Because of the importance he attributed to restoring his father’s sense of self-respect, he invested more effort into it. Therefore, he was rewarded with tzitzit, since this addition to our clothes gives them purpose and dignity as an expression of inner depth.

Keeping this introduction in mind, we will now investigate how it is that tzitzit dignify our clothing.

#### KEY THEMES OF SECTION I

- ☞ God gave clothes to Adam and Chava, and by extension to all their descendants, as a reminder that they have the ability to rule over their basic animalistic instincts.
- ☞ The mitzvah of tzitzit extends the concept of moral decency inherent in all clothing to the higher realm of mitzvah observance.
- ☞ The sight of the tzitzit inspires us to imbue our personal lives with spiritual meaning. The tzitzit, simple tassels attached to physical, external garments, create a spiritual, internal attachment to God.
- ☞ Clothes are not just about covering up; they can also impart a sense of dignity. As we learn from the story of Noach’s sons, tzitzit imbue our clothing with this higher purpose.

## SECTION II. THE MITZVAH WHICH CONTAINS ALL OTHERS

In all areas of Jewish life, the mitzvot are the means by which we can emulate God, develop and refine our character, strengthen our Jewish belief, and infuse every action with purpose. But it's impossible for any individual to fulfill all 613 mitzvot, since, for example, there are mitzvot only for Kohanim, mitzvot only for non-Kohanim, mitzvot applicable only in the time of the Temple, and so on. In order for us to reach spiritual perfection, God gave us one mitzvah that represents of all of the mitzvot combined, namely tzitzit.

### PART A. THE ALL-INCLUSIVE MITZVAH

The Shema consists of the famous first verse and the remainder of the paragraph in which it appears in the Torah, followed by two additional paragraphs taken from elsewhere in the Torah.

#### 1. Rabbi Moshe Alshich, Torat Moshe, Bamidbar 15: 37 – Fulfilling the mitzvah of tzitzit is considered as if one fulfills all 613 mitzvot.

Not every person merits fulfilling all 613 mitzvot and thereby sanctifying his 613 organs and blood vessels. Therefore, God gave us one mitzvah through which we can remember daily all His commandments and accept upon ourselves to fulfill them. God accepts good intentions [to perform a mitzvah] as if they were actually done, and [by keeping the mitzvah of tzitzit] He considers it as if we kept all of them every single day. This is the meaning of the ending verses [in the paragraph of tzitzit] “You will thus remember,” for by remembering [the mitzvah of tzitzit] every day, it is considered before Me as if you “keep all My commandments” and thereby you will “be holy to your God” – your whole being, your organs and blood vessels.

לא כל האדם זוכה לעשות כל תרי"ג מצות ולקדש בם כל תרי"ג אבריו וגידיו. ע"כ מה עשה הוא יתברך נתן לנו מצוה אחת שבה בכל יום תמיד נזכור כל מצותיו ונקבל לעשותם. וידוע כי מחשבה טובה הקב"ה מצרפה למעשה ומעלה עלינו כאילו עשינו את כולם יום יום. וזהו סוף דברי הכתובים באומרו "למען תזכרו" וכו'. שע"י מה שתזכרו יום יום נחשב לפני כאילו כבר "ועשיתם אותם" וע"י כן "והייתם קדושים" כל כללותיכם איברים וגידים.

How does fulfilling the mitzvah of tzitzit remind us of all the mitzvot?

#### 2. Ibid. – What enables the tzitzit to serve as a reminder? The person's intention.

“These shall be your tassels, and when you see them” etc...This may be compared

“והיה לכם לציצית וראיתם” וכו'... והוא משל אל מה שדרך אנשים שלזכור דבר מאשר ירצו

to a person who wants to remember to do something and ties a string around his finger as a reminder not to forget. But if a man would tie a string around his finger *without* the intention of it reminding him of something specific, and the day comes when the string is still on his finger and he has something special to remember at the time, but he forgets, then in dismay he says, “How could I forget? What good is the string on my finger to help remind me what I need to do?” The wise man will respond, “Since you didn’t tie it with the intention of remembering this specific thing, how do you expect it to remind you?”

In a similar vein God said, “I know that you will tell me, ‘We put tzitzit on the four corners of our garments, but what should we do - when we see them, they don’t remind us of all the mitzvot of God?’...If, when you make the tzitzit, you have in mind that they should serve as a reminder to look at and remember all of God’s mitzvot, then you will remember them [the mitzvot] when you look at them [the tzitzit], just as people tie a string on their finger to remind them of something specific. But if you make the tzitzit by rote without intending for them to serve as a reminder, there’s no chance you’ll remember God’s commandments by looking at them.”

לעשות קושרים חוט באחד מאצבעותיו לראות ולזכור כל ישכח ממנו. ואם יקרה שאיש אחד קשר לו חוט באצבעו שלא בכוונת מזכרת על שום דבר ויהי היום אשר היה החוט ההוא קשור באצבעו והיה לו חפץ שהיה צריך לזכרו ושכחו. ויתמה ויאמר איך שכחתי הדבר ההוא ולא שזה לי החוט הקשור שבאצבעי לזכור אשר חפצתי לעשות. והנה נגד פניו נבונים ויאמרו לו... כי אחר שלא קשרת אותו בכוונת מזכרת חפץ זה איך על ידו זכור תזכור את הדבר הזה. והנה בדמותו וצלמו הוא הדבר הלזה.

The following parable from the *Dubno Maggid*, Rabbi Yaakov Krantz (1740-1804) illustrates the need to prepare mentally beforehand so that looking at tzitzit will serve as a reminder of all the mitzvot.

*A certain poor fellow, R' Yonah, was invited to a meal at a wealthy man's house. When all the diners were finished with their portions, the rich man, who sat at the head of the table, tinkled a bell. Almost at once, waiters came in to remove the dishes and bring in the next course. R' Yonah was amazed. He had never seen anything like that before.*

*After the second course was completed, the host again tinkled the bell, and again the waiters removed the plates and brought in yet more food. R' Yonah was immensely impressed. When the meal was finally over, he went out to get such a bell for his home as well.*

He ran home excitedly to his wife. “We’re going to have unlimited food and waiters. Wait until you see what I brought home!” He immediately placed the bell on the table and told his family to take their regular seats. He then tinkled the bell with conviction. He waited for the waiter to walk in – but nothing happened! “I don’t understand it! When the rich man tinkled his bell, all that food was served!” The next day he returned the bell. “The bell you sold me is useless. I got no response when I rang it.”

“The obvious reason nothing happened,” said the Dubno Maggid, “is because there is neither a waiter nor food prepared in the next room. The bell summons something that is there to be summoned. Much preparation is necessary before the bell can accomplish anything.

“In some ways many of us are like this man,” continued the Dubno Maggid. “For example, the Torah tells us to look at our tzitzit so that we will be reminded to perform all of God’s mitzvot. There are many people, though, who can look at a pair of tzitzit and not be reminded of anything. All they see are strings. Only if one studies and understands how the tzitzit represent the 613 mitzvot, and has studied what the 613 mitzvot are, can one appreciate what his viewing of the tzitzit should accomplish. Merely to look at them without any preparation is like tinkling a bell without having arranged for anyone to respond.” (Rabbi Paysach Krohn, *Around the Maggid’s Table*, p. 254)

### 3. **Rashi, Bamidbar 15:39 – Tzitzit remind us of the 613 mitzvot.**

“You shall remember all of God’s commandments” – the *gematria* [numeric value], of the word tzitzit is 600, plus 8 strings [four doubled over] and 5 knots [per tassel], is 613.

“וזכרתם את כל מצות ה'” - שמנין גימטריא של ציצית שש מאות, ושמונה חוטין, וחמשה קשרים, הרי תרי"ג.

### 4. **Baal HaTurim, Bamidbar 15:39 – The specific symbolism of the strings and knots.**

“You shall remember it.” Remembrance is written in the context of tzitzit; therefore, God commanded there to be four tzitzit on the four corners of each garment so that anywhere a person looks he will remember. And on each one there are five knots in order to remember the five books of the Torah. Each one has eight strings so that a person will refrain from sinning with their eight organs which can lead a person to sin. They are: ears, eyes, mouth, nose, hands, feet, sexual organs and heart.

“וזכרתם אותו.” כתיב זכירה בציצית. לכן צוה לעשות ד' ציציות בארבע כנפות בגדיו שכל מקום שיפנה יזכור. ובכל אחד ה' קשרים כדי שיזכור לחמשה חומשי תורה. ויש בכל אחד שמונה חוטין שימנע מלעשות עבירה בשמונה אברים המרגילים לאדם לעבירה ואלו הן: אזנים, עינים, פה, חוטם, ידים, רגלים, ערוה והלב.

## 5. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Horeb, p. 182 – Tzitzit reaffirm the Torah and God's existence.

Fringes have no use as a covering for the purposes of clothing oneself. You will therefore ask yourself, "What are the threads for?" You will be spontaneously led to God's law; and by this reflection, God and His law are brought to your mind. Through the affirmation of the revelation of His law, you affirm the existence of God Himself.

The principal mitzvot of belief in the unity of God, love of God, and the study of His Torah are mentioned first. After this we accept all the mitzvot of the Torah, and we conclude with the mitzvah of tzitzit that hints at all the mitzvot – "and you will see them and you will be reminded of all the mitzvot of God" (Bamidbar 15:39).

### PART B. TZITZIT SERVE AS A CONSTANT REMINDER

In addition to being a concrete symbolization of all the mitzvot, the tzitzit also help us remember our purpose in this world.

#### 1. Bamidbar 15:39 – We are told to see the tzitzit.

And you shall see them, and you shall remember all the mitzvot of God, and you shall perform them. And you shall not stray after your heart and after your eyes, which lead you to immorality.

וראיתם אותו וזכרתם את כל מצות ה' ועשיתם אתם ולא תתורו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם אשר אתם זנים אחריהם.

As Rashi comments here (Bamidbar 15:38), the very word tzitzit implies the sense of sight. Seeing the tzitzit helps keep our deeds in check. The following sources all point out that pondering the connection of our clothing to a higher purpose motivates elevated conduct.

#### 2. Abarbanel, Bamidbar 15:39 – Aside from their immediate benefit, wearing tzitzit has a long-term effect on one's soul as well.

"You will thus remember and keep all My commandments" (Bamidbar 15:40) – This seems superfluous since it says in the previous verse "[These shall be your tassels, and when you see them] you shall remember all of God's commandments so as to keep them. You will then not stray" (ibid., 15:39). [Why is the instruction to remember God's commandments repeated?]

This is coming to teach us, as stated by the philosopher [Rambam (Maimonides) on Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 3:15], that

"למען תזכרו ועשיתם את כל מצותי" יראה כפל ומותר אחרי שכבר אמר "וזכרתם את כל מצות ה' ועשיתם אתם ולא תתורו" וגו'.

אבל ענינו מה שכתב הפלוסוף שרבו המעשים בעת הלימוד יעשה קנין חזק בנפש באופן שאחרי יצאו המעשים בנקלה ומבלי קושי.

concretizing one's theoretical study with a physical action [i.e., wearing tzitzit, as stated in verse 15:39] makes a strong impression on one's soul so that subsequently these actions come easily and without difficulty.

3. **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Horeb, p. 180 – Tzitzit remind us of the invisible God and His national revelation.**

If we allow ourselves to be guided only by what we understand through our mental faculties or by the material things we see with the eye, we shall easily be led to a denial of God...In the physical world that we see around us, God does not appear to us as a visible being, nor are our senses today witness to the factual revelation that took place in the past...God does not wish you to follow the course prompted by your heart or your eye, and so He has given you a means that you will have a visible reminder of God...A means which directs your attention from the visible to the invisible and brings the past palpably before you in the present. This means is tzitzit; indeed it is called tzitzit from the Hebrew root meaning "to appear in physical form."

4. **Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Tzitzith, A Thread of Light, pp. 2-3 – Tzitzit represent our striving to live according to Jewish ideals.**

Have you ever thought about the really important questions in life? Have you ever asked yourself why you were born? What is the purpose of life? What are your responsibilities? Have you ever tried to develop a philosophy of life and then live by it? One of the world's greatest philosophers came to the conclusion that "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Socrates, in Plato's Phaedo). Have you ever examined *your* life?

Of course, we all know the main problem is not so much developing a philosophy of life, but living up to it. If we think, we know what is right and what is wrong. But when it comes down to the crunch, we tend to forget.

Deep down every Jew realizes that Judaism offers a philosophy of life that is without equal. One does not have to be overly sophisticated to realize that a philosophy of life that has survived for over three thousand years, and has dealt with every possible human problem in every possible society, must have an overriding validity. Looking at it that way, the fact that it originated with God seems almost perfectly obvious.

5. **Ibid., p. 3 – Tzitzit serve as a constant reminder in the rush of everyday life.**

Yet, in the heat of everyday life, there are many things that draw us away from God and Judaism. There are friends who pull us to conform, good times that beckon, and a desirable world of pleasures that tempts us away, even from the truths that

we recognize. Above all, there is the strong itch of desire that sweeps us along, often against our very will.

We may know what is right, but there are so many things that make us forget. It is so very hard to remember.

God realized this, so He gave us a commandment to serve as a constant reminder. The Torah clearly spells this out when it says, “They shall be your tzitzit, and you shall see them and remember all of God’s commandments and obey them, and not stray after your hearts and eyes, which lead you to immorality.”

In the simplest sense, then, tzitzit serve as a reminder. We bind them to our garments just as one might tie a string around his finger or belt in order to remember something... We wear them as a constant reminder that we must obey God’s commandments, and not be led astray by our desires.

The following anecdote, related by the Talmud, demonstrates how powerful the influence of tzitzit can be.

## 6. Talmud, Menachot 44a – Wearing and seeing the tzitzit influences our behavior.

There was once a man who was careful with the mitzvah of tzitzit (but less diligent in some other mitzvot). He heard that there was a harlot in a faraway city who charged four hundred gold pieces for her services. He sent her four hundred gold pieces and made an appointment to meet her. When the time arrived he came and sat at the entrance...She disrobed and sat on the bed. The man was beginning to undress when suddenly the four fringes of his tzitzit slapped him on his face. He slid down and sat on the ground. She also slid off and sat on the ground.

She said to him, “By the life of Caesar, I will not leave you until you tell me what flaw you have found in me!” He replied to her, “I swear by the Divine Service that I have never seen a woman as beautiful as you. But there is one mitzvah that our God commanded us, and it is called tzitzit. It says twice about it [in the Torah], ‘I am the Lord your God’ - I am the One who will punish, and I am the One who in the future

מעשה באדם אחד שהיה זהיר במצות ציצית שמע שיש זונה בכרכי הים שנוטלת ד' מאות זהובים בשכרה שיגר לה ארבע מאות זהובים וקבע לה זמן כשהגיע זמנו בא וישב על הפתח... עלתה וישבה על גבי עליונה כשהיא ערומה ואף הוא עלה לישב ערום כנגדה באו ד' ציציותיו וטפחו לו על פניו נשמט וישב לו ע"ג קרקע ואף היא נשמטה וישבה ע"ג קרקע.

אמרה לו גפה של רומי שאיני מניחתך עד שתאמר לי מה מום ראית בי אמר לה העבודה שלא ראיתי אשה יפה כמותך אלא מצוה אחת ציונו ה' אלהינו וציצית שמה וכתוב בה (במדבר טו) אני ה' אלהיכם שתי פעמים אני הוא שעתידי ליפרע ואני הוא שעתידי לשלם שכר עכשיו נדמו עלי כד' עדים.

will reward. At this moment, these four tzitzit strands appeared to me like four witnesses that would testify about the transgression I was about to commit.”

She said to him, “I will not leave you until you tell me your name...” He wrote it down and put it in her hand...She went to the Beit Midrash of Rabbi Chiya. “Rabbi, instruct me what to do so that I can convert to Judaism.” Rabbi Chiya asked her, “Perhaps you have your eye on one of the students [and your motivations to convert are insincere]?” The woman took out the note and gave it to him [and related the entire incident and convinced him that her desire to convert was sincere]. He said to her, “Go and claim that which is [rightfully] yours.”

אמרה לו איני מניחך עד שתאמר לי מה שמך...  
כתב ונתן בידה... באת לבית מדרשו של ר' חייא  
אמרה לו רבי צוה עלי ויעשוני גיורת אמר לה בתי  
שמא עיניך נתת באחד מן התלמידים הוציאה  
כתב מידה ונתנה לו אמר לה לכי זכי במקחך.

7. **Iyun Yaakov, (In Ein Yaakov), ibid. – The tzitzit did not slap him in the face physically, rather psychologically.**

[The tzitzit slapping him in the face] was metaphorical. Since he had been very careful in the observance of the mitzvah of tzitzit prior to this, they seemed to him like four witnesses that slapped him in the face.

הכל היה רק על צד הדמיון לפי שהיה נוהר מאד  
במצות ציצית קודם שבא לידי עשיית עבירה נזכר  
במצות ציצית ונדמו לו כד' עדים כאילו טפחו לו  
על פניו.

Not only did the mitzvah of tzitzit prevent him from transgressing, but this power of tzitzit so impressed the woman that she soon converted, having understood that there was something more powerful and alluring than her beauty. For this, she was willing to change her life.

8. **Ben Yehoyada, ibid. – Her intention was not to marry him, rather only to convert.**

When Rav Chiya told her, “Go and claim that which is rightfully yours,” her intention was not to marry that student, but rather to convert. But Rav Chiya saw through Divine inspiration that God willed her to marry that student in order to publicize the power of the mitzvah [of tzitzit], which brought about the sequence of events.

ומה שאמר לה ר' חייא זכי במקחך, היא לא  
נתכוונה ליקח אותו התלמיד אלא באה להתגייר,  
אך ראה ר' חייא ברוח הקודש שכך רצון שמים  
שתנשא לאותו תלמיד לפרסם כח המצוה אשר  
על ידה בא הדבר לידי כך.

## KEY THEMES OF SECTION II

- ∞ No person is qualified to fulfill all 613 mitzvot. However, since each mitzvah is designated to elevate the world, God gave us one commandment – the mitzvah of tzitzit – which reminds us of all the other mitzvot and helps us appreciate what they can accomplish.
- ∞ How does this work? How does this mitzvah remind us of all the others? When one wears tzitzit with the intention of remembering all the mitzvot, it will remind him. Just as we might wear our watch on our “other” hand to remind us of something important, so too do the tzitzit serve as a cue to remember all the mitzvot.
- ∞ Wearing tzitzit also prompts us to remember our purpose in this world – to follow God’s commandments and not be led astray by our desires.
- ∞ Observing this mitzvah daily also helps inspire us to perfect our character and strive for meaningful, long-term spiritual goals.

## SECTION III. GOD’S INSIGNIA

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The section with the commandment of tzitzit concludes with the Exodus from Egypt (Bamidbar 15:41). What is the connection between the two?

The Torah is teaching us why the mitzvah of tzitzit, as well as the other mitzvot, was given specifically to the Jews. God formed a special bond with the Jewish nation at the Exodus, and the miracles which God performed there were for this specific purpose. This time period was the only one in history when God revealed Himself to an entire nation. The Exodus and the events surrounding it made every Jew conscious of God and His involvement in all human affairs. It is because of this bond formed at the Exodus that the Jews observe the commandments of the Torah, which in turn maintain and strengthen our relationship with God.

Thus, the Exodus places a special responsibility upon the Jewish people. God rescued us from slavery and became our “Master.” We therefore wear an insignia, tzitzit, to proclaim that we are God’s nation.

### PART A. WEARING GOD’S INSIGNIA

Tzitzit are our sign of having accepted God’s Torah, and a symbol of the special relationship we have with Him:

#### 1. Abarbanel, Bamidbar 15: 40 – We wear God’s insignia on our clothes.

The verse says, “Be holy to your God; I am God your Lord” to instruct us that we

אמר “והייתם קדושים לא-להיכם אני ה' אל-היכם” להגיד שראוי שיהיו מצויינים בלבושיהם

should be distinguished in our dress like a king's or master's servants, who wear an insignia on their clothes, so that we will be recognizable as servants and messengers of God.

כעבדי המלך או האדון שמביאים בלבושיהם סימן כדי שיוכרו שהם עבדיו ומשרתי שלוחי השם.

## 2. Tosafot to Menachot 43b – Tzitzit are the sign that we are God's servants.

The Talmud compares tzitzit to a seal of clay used to identify a slave because the tzitzit testify that the Jewish people are servants of God.

מה שמדמה חותם של טיט לציצית שכן עושין לעבדים והציצית מעיד על ישראל שהם עבדי הקב"ה.

## 3. Ohr HaChaim, Bamidbar 15: 39 – Only a four-cornered garment is an insignia of God.

God only commanded this mitzvah for a four-cornered garment, and not for one that has three or five corners. Since tzitzit are a sign of servitude, God commanded us that the sign itself should proclaim our Master, as is common amongst the kings of the earth – each one has a unique insignia designated for his servants. So too God commanded us to only use a four-cornered garment upon which to make an insignia for Him, alluding to the fact that our King is the Creator of the four corners of the earth and the Master over them. A three-cornered or five-cornered garment would miss out on this message, and therefore does not require tzitzit.

צוה ה' במצוה זו שאין לעשות ציצית אלא בכסות בת ד' כנפות ולא בת ג' ובת ה', כי לצד שהציצית היא סימן העבדות, יצו ה' שיהיה הסימן גם כן יגיד מי לנו אדון, כי ימצא גם כן דבר זה במלכי ארץ, שכל אחד יעשה מין סימן אחד לעבדיו, וניכר הסימן של כל אחד, וכמו כן גזר ה' שלא נעשה סימן עבדותינו לה' אלא בטלית בת ד' כנפות, לרמוז כי מלכנו הוא הבורא ארבע קצות העולם ושליט עליה, ולזה בהיות הטלית בת ג' ובת ה' אבדה הכוונה ואין לעשות בה ציצית.

In the following powerful account we see how wearing tzitzit, the insignia of God, was so beloved to one of the Jewish people's greatest leaders, the Vilna Gaon (Rabbi Eliyahu Kramer, 1720-1797).

*The Vilna Gaon lay in bed, nearing the end of his life. He took his tzitzit in his hand and said, tears pouring from his eyes, "World, world, how fine are you, how beautiful you are! How hard it is to leave this world. Here, with such an easy mitzvah that costs only a few coins, one can merit entry to stand before God's presence. But in the World to Come, one could not get such a thing, even if one gave all one's strength for it." (Yaakov Shulman, The Vilna Gaon: The Story of Eliyahu Kramer, p. 225)*

## PART B. THE CHOSEN PEOPLE, THE MESSIANIC ERA AND TZITZIT

Our forefather Avraham searched for truth and discovered that God created and guides the world, and seeks a personal relationship with every human being. God responded by making an eternal covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) and subsequently with the entire Jewish nation after the Exodus from Egypt at Mount Sinai. The Jewish people “chose” God and accepted the Torah, and God chose them to establish and maintain Torah ideals, and to raise the world beyond its physical level. The Talmud teaches that in the Messianic era God’s existence will become clear to all humanity. At that time, the nations of the world will approach the Jews to learn about God, figuratively “grasping them by their tzitzit,” since this represents the mitzvot and indicates God’s special, personal relationship with the Jews.

### 1. **Rabbi Yitzchak Coopersmith, The Eye of the Needle (pp. 79-81), based on Derech HaShem (The Way of God – II:4) – The choice of Israel as the inheritor of Adam’s initial role.**

The Torah tells us that mankind was created to relate to God. However, after Adam’s mistake in the Garden of Eden, the elevated level on which Adam related to God was no longer available naturally to Adam or to his descendants. If it were to be attained, it would have to be through the individual choices of each member of mankind.

The only person committed enough to attain this exalted level of relating to God was Avraham. As a result of Avraham’s choices, God made a covenant with him and his descendants; a covenant that was not arbitrary but earned through Avraham’s efforts and dedication.

The Midrash relates that when the Jewish people were poised to become one nation at Mt. Sinai, God first offered the Torah to every nation of the world. Of them all, only the Jewish people wanted His Torah and the privileged closeness that came as a result of assuming the role of God’s ambassadors to the world.

Although that was the final opportunity for entire nations as a group...the door was left open for the individual. Any person, regardless of national or racial background, can merit the benefit of this privileged relationship with God by choosing to accept the Torah and become part of the Jewish nation.

### 2. **Ramban (Nachmanides), Devarim (Deuteronomy) 26:18 – God elevated the Jewish people because they accept the Torah.**

And God elevates you and makes you great through your acceptance of the Torah, so that you will be to Him a people treasured above all the nations.

“And to safeguard all His commandments”  
– for only to you was the Torah given...and

והשם רומם וגדל אתכם בקבול התורה שתהיו לו  
לעם סגולה מכל העמים,

ולשמר כל מצותיו, כי לכם לבדכם יתן תורתו  
ויצוה אתכם בכל המצות ... לא לעם אחר, כענין

not to another nation, as it is written, “He tells His words to Yaakov, His laws and ordinances to Israel, which He has not done for any nation” (Tehillim/Psalms 147:19).

שכתוב (תהלים קמז יט כ) מגיד דבריו ליעקב  
חקיו ומשפטיו לישראל לא עשה כן לכל גוי:

### 3. **Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Ner Le'Elef – We are chosen for bringing a higher dimension to the world.**

The focus of non-Jewish life is earthly existence, incorporating a broad range of norms all geared toward the ordering and taking full advantage of the world. The Seven Noahide Commandments all reflect this idea: they relate to life within the set boundaries of physical existence, within an autonomous world that knows only what is tangible.

The Sages thus term non-Jewish nations “Nations of the World.” They are essentially “of the world.”

Jewish life, by way of contrast, revolves around a plane of existence that connects the physical world with a higher, Divine existence. Unlike the Nations of the World, the deeds with which Israel is charged are therefore little understood by their human perpetrators – for they pertain to a Divine sphere that is “not of the world.”

It is for this that the Jewish people are chosen: making a heaven-earth connection, for imbuing the world with a spiritual light, and for bringing the Shechinah to reside among men.

In addition to the Jewish people’s primary purpose – to bring the Divine Presence to reside within the world – there is an added facet: “Being a light unto the nations.” As the primary vehicle through which God enters the world, the nation of Israel is charged with enormous responsibility; as managers of the Divine embassy upon earth, our behavior reflects, as it were, on God himself. Therefore, it is our duty to sanctify His Name.

### 4. **Shemot (Exodus) 19:6 with commentary of Seforno – Instructing the nations.**

And you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Seforno: “And you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” – and with this shall you be a treasure from amongst all of them, for you shall be a kingdom of priests to understand [to make understood] and to instruct all of mankind to call in the name of God.

אַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי מְמַלְכֵת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ.

ואתם תהיו לי ממלכת כהנים. ובזה תהיו סגולה,  
כי תהיו ממלכת כהנים להבין ולהורות לכל המין  
האנושי לקרוא כלם בשם ה'.

Although the Jews have played this role of “being a light to the nations” throughout history, the fulfillment of their overall mission will be realized ultimately in the Messianic era.

#### 5. **Yeshaya (Isaiah) 2:2-5 – Events in the Messianic era.**

It shall come to pass in the End of Days that the mountain of God's house shall be set over all other mountains and lifted high above the hills, and all nations shall come streaming to it. Many people shall come and say: Come, let us go up to God's mountain to the house of Israel's God, and He will teach us His ways and we will walk in His paths. For out of Zion shall go forth the Torah and God's word from Jerusalem. And He will judge between the nations and decide between peoples. And they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither will they practice war anymore. House of Jacob, come, let us go in the light of God.

והיה באחרית הימים נכון יהיה הר בית יקוק  
בראש ההרים ונשא מגבעות ונהרו אליו כל  
הגוים: והלכו עמים רבים ואמרו לכו ונעלה  
אל הר יקוק אל בית אלהי יעקב ויורנו מדרכיו  
ונלכה בארחותיו כי מציון תצא תורה ודבר יקוק  
מירושלם: ושפט בין הגוים והוכיח לעמים רבים  
וכתתו חרבותם לאתים וחניתותיהם למוזרות  
לא ישא גוי אל גוי חרב ולא ילמדו עוד מלחמה:  
בית יעקב לכו ונלכה באור יקוק:

We see from here that the Jews will be in a unique position of moral leadership in the Messianic era. At this time, tzitzit will serve as a sign to the world to identify the priestly nation.

#### 6. **Zecharya (Zachary) 8:23 – Those who uphold the mitzvah of tzitzit will be in the position to lead the nations in the Messianic era.**

So said the Lord of Hosts: In those days, ten men of all the languages of the nations shall take hold of the corner of a Jewish man's garment, saying, “Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you.”

כה אמר יקוק צבאות בימים ההמה אשר יחזיקו  
עשרה אנשים מכל לשונות הגוים והחזיקו בכנף  
איש יהודי לאמר נלכה עמכם כי שמענו אלהים  
עמכם:

The “corner of the garment” can be interpreted as the tzitzit. When people come to learn about God from the Jews, they will hang on to their tzitzit not only because they serve as the visible marker of who is a Jew but because they represent the mitzvot and allude to the dwelling of the Divine presence among the Jews (Malbim, Commentary to Zecharia 8:23).

Please see the Morasha class on the Chosen People for more insight.

## KEY THEMES OF SECTION III

- ∞ The commandment of tzitzit concludes with the Exodus from Egypt (Bamidbar 15:41). What is the connection? The Torah is teaching us why the mitzvah of tzitzit, as well as the other mitzvot, was given specifically to the Jews. At the time of the Exodus, God formed an eternal, special bond with the Jewish nation. The Jewish people were subsequently given the commandments of the Torah, which maintain and strengthen our relationship with God.
- ∞ The purpose of Israel is to bring the Divine Presence to reside within the world. By way of extension, this purpose involves an added facet: “Being a light unto the nations.” The Jews have fulfilled this mission throughout the generations, but the culmination of this purpose will be in the Messianic era.
- ∞ Just as the members of any army or profession wear an insignia on their clothing to broadcast their affiliation, so too we Jews wear an insignia, the tzitzit, proclaiming that we are God’s messengers.
- ∞ Tzitzit are not just a haphazard insignia, rather they allude to God being the Creator and Master of the four corners of the earth.

## SECTION IV. WEARING TZITZIT

In ancient times, many garments were four cornered. Clothing was not tailored as it is today but was usually a rectangular piece of cloth draped and then fastened around the body. Since everyone wore four-cornered garments, they fulfilled the mitzvah of tzitzit simply by fastening them to their regular clothing. Nowadays, because we don’t wear such four-cornered garments as our normal garb, we wear a special garment specifically to fulfill this most important mitzvah.

### PART A. TALLIT KATAN

A *tallit katan*, a small tallit, is a simple rectangular garment with a hole for the head. At the four corners, the tzitzit strings are tied and intricately wound. The tallit katan is worn all day long.

#### 1. Devarim 22: 12 – Only a four-cornered garment requires tzitzit.

Make yourself bound tassels on the four corners of your clothes with which you cover yourself.

גְּדִלִים תַּעֲשֶׂה-לָּךְ עַל-אַרְבַּע פְּנּוֹת כְּסוּתֶךָ אֲשֶׁר  
תִּכְסֶּה-בָּהּ.

## 2. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, *The Living Torah*, Note to Bamidbar 15:38 – Description of tzitzit.

The tzitzit-tassels consist of four strings doubled over so that eight strings appear to hang from each corner (Menachoth 39b). There is also an area where a single string is wound around the other seven, consisting of one third of the tassel (Menachoth 39a). This must be held in place by a knot. The custom is that there be five knots and four areas of winding on each tzitzit-tassel (Targum Yonathan). The prevailing custom is that these wound areas have respectively 7, 8, 11 and 13 windings.

## 3. Abarbanel, *Bamidbar 15: 37* – Changing fashions do not change the obligation to wear tzitzit.

In those days the custom was to wear...a garment which had four corners, and wrap themselves in it in a similar way to our tallit nowadays...The [Torah] says, “They shall make themselves tzitzit on the corners of their garments for all generations” to teach that even in future generations, [if the mode of dress changes] and they no longer wear [such] clothing, they should make themselves a four-cornered garment and put tzitzit on it.

שבזמניהם היו נוהגים ללבוש... מעיל בעל ארבע כנפים ומתעטפים במעיל ההוא כצורת הטלית אשר לנו היום... ואמר “ועשו להם ציצית על כנפי בגדיהם לדרתם” להגיד שאף שבהמשך הדורות אם לא ינהגו בני ישראל ללבוש מעילים יעשו עכ”פ בגד מד’ כנפות ויעשו להם ציצית.

Someone who loves mitzvot and cares about fulfilling the Torah should seek ways of fulfilling its precepts simply out of appreciation for what they are.

## 4. Rambam, *Hilchot Tzitzit 3:11* – One is enjoined to wear a four-cornered garment.

Even though a person is not obligated to purchase a tallit and wear it in order to fulfill the mitzvah of tzitzit, it is inappropriate for any righteous person to exempt himself from this mitzvah. Rather, a person should always strive to be wearing a garment which is obligated in tzitzit in order to fulfill the mitzvah. When praying, one must be even more careful about this.

אף על פי שאין אדם מחוייב לקנות טלית ולהתעטף בה, כדי שיעשה בה ציצית, אין ראוי לאדם חסיד, לפטור עצמו ממצוה זו; אלא לעולם ישתדל להיות עטוף בכסות המחוייבת בציצית, כדי שיקיים מצוה זו. ובשעת התפילה, צריך להזהר ביותר.

5. **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Horeb, pp. 185-186 – God wants us to feel the need to wear tzitzit so that their message will be internalized.**

God gave you the tzitzit as the means for a lesson; but He left the use of them to your own free will. He pledged you, when you wear a garment with four corners, to provide it with tzitzit; but He left it to you whether or not you wished to wear such a garment – probably so that you should first feel the need for it yourself and so grasp the means with all the more joy, thereby rendering it more meaningful to you at all times.

But who would not rejoice that the mitzvah itself was given to him as a cogent help? Who, conscious of the battle with sensuality and his own sensual nature, would not grasp the staff which stands by him in battle, directs his glance upwards and upholds God and virtue for him?

6. **Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 24:1 – A tallit katan is worn all day.**

A person should be mindful to wear a tallit katan all day so as to remember the mitzvah at all times.

נכון להיות כל אדם זהיר ללבוש טלית קטן כל היום כדי שיוזכר המצוה בכל רגע.

## PART B. TALLIT GADOL

Another manner in which we fulfill the mitzvah of tzitzit is through the *tallit gadol* (prayer shawl), which we wear primarily during our daily morning prayers. Wearing this tallit is more than just another form of fulfilling the mitzvah of tzitzit; there is a specific reason to wear it during prayer. The first time this idea is mentioned is when Moshe prays to God to save the Jewish people after the sin of the Golden Calf. God Himself shows Moshe how to wrap himself in a tallit and pray. God then lists His 13 Attributes of Mercy. The tallit, therefore, is traditionally white, a sign of forgiveness and atonement.

1. **Talmud Bavli, Rosh Hashanah 17b – God wrapped Himself in a tallit for prayer.**

“And the Lord passed by before him and proclaimed [etc.]” – Rabbi Yochanan said: Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say such a thing; this verse teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, drew His tallit around Himself like the *chazan* (cantor) of a congregation and showed Moshe the order of prayer. He said to him: Whenever Israel sins, let them carry out this service before Me, and I will forgive them.

ויעבר ה' על פניו ויקרא, אמר רבי יוחנן: אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומרו, מלמד שנתעטף הקדוש ברוך הוא כשליח צבור, והראה לו למשה סדר תפלה. אמר לו: כל זמן שישראל חוטאין - יעשו לפני כסדר הזה, ואני מוחל להם.

## 2. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 24:1 – The tzitzit should be worn during morning prayers.

[One] should be careful to wear tzitzit during [morning] prayer.

יזהר שיהיה לבוש ציצית בשעת התפלה.

## 3. Taz, Orach Chaim 10:10 – The way one wears a tallit.

[One] wraps the tallit around his head and body so that each arm [i.e. shoulders] is situated in the middle of the tallit, and on each side [i.e. left and right] he has one tassel in front and one in back.

מעטפים הטלית כמו שהוא סביב הראש והגוף והיד מפסקת בחצי הטלית מזה ומזה באופן שמב' הצדדים יהיה א' מהציצית לפניו וחלק לאחוריו.

As the next source describes, one of the reasons we wear a tallit during morning prayers is because not doing so is akin to bearing false witness against ourselves – we cannot say the Shema, which mentions wearing tzitzit, and not wear them when we say this.

## 4. Mishna Berurah 24: 3 – Wearing a tallit during Shema.

It is mentioned in the Zohar on Parshat Shelach that one who reads Shema without [wearing] tzitzit testifies falsely against himself in that he is reading the chapter of tzitzit and not keeping what it says in Scripture.

איתא בזוהר פרשת שלח לך דהקורא קריאת שמע בלי ציצית מעיד עדות שקר בעצמו שקורא פרשת ציצית ואינו מקיים הקרא.

This source only mentions and explains wearing tzitzit during the morning Shema. But one should wear the tallit throughout the entire morning prayers.

Aside from a tallit being a way of fulfilling the mitzvah of tzitzit, it is also a requisite garment for prayer. We stand in supplication before God, wrapped in a tallit, and humbly ask Him to hear our prayers. By covering ourselves, we show humility in His presence.

## 5. Tehillim 102:1 – One should wear a tallit when praying before God.

The prayer of a poor man, when he enwraps himself [in a tallit] and pours out his words before God.

תפלה לעני כי יעטף ולפני ה' ישפך שיחו:

## 6. Rabbi David ben Solomon ibn Zimra (Radvaz), 1:343 – One should cover his head with the tallit.

Even though he has tzitzit attached to his clothes, he needs to have a tallit with which to wrap himself during prayer. This is the custom of all Jews...to cover their heads with it...and customs of our ancestors [carry as much weight as laws written in the] Torah.

אע"ג דיש לו ציצית בבגדו צריך שיעשה לו טלית להתעטף בו בשעת התפילה וכן נהגו כל ישראל... לכסות בו ראשו... ומנהג אבותינו תורה היא.

## 7. Mishnah Berurah 8:4 – Covering one's head humbles a person and adds to his awe of God.

It is proper to cover his head with the tallit – because this cover humbles a person's heart and brings him to awe of God.

ונכון שיכסה ראשו בטלית - שכיסוי זה מכניע לב האדם ומביאו לידי יראת שמים.

Despite the importance of wearing a tallit, it is the custom of many Ashkenazi Jews to do so only once they're married (Mishnah Berurah, *ibid.*). In contrast, Sephardic Jewry and German Jewry wear a tallit from a much younger age.

## 8. Piskei Teshuvot, 8: 10 – The source for why Ashkenazim only wear a tallit after marriage.

It seems from the Gemara that a single boy would not cover his head with a tallit during prayer. [The Mishnah Berurah] repeats this in 17: 10 in the name of Maharil, that even older single men do not wrap themselves in a tallit until they are married, based on the verse (Devarim 22:12) "make for yourself bound tassels," which is followed by the verse (*ibid.*, verse 13) "when a man shall marry a woman." This exposition is mentioned in other Rishonim as well, who state that this juxtaposition [of tassels and marrying] is referring to wearing a tallit gadol.

משמע בגמרא שבחור לא היה מכסה ראשו בטלית... וכפל [המשנה ברורה] דברים אלו לקמן יז: בשם מהרי"ל שנוהגים שגם נערים גדולים אין מתעטפים בציצית עד שנושאים נשים, וסמכו על הפסוק "גדילים תעשה לך" וסמך ליה "כי יקח איש אשה", ומובא דרש זה בעוד ראשונים, וכוונתם על התעטפות בטלית גדול.

## 9. *Ibid.* – Different customs.

This custom, for unmarried men not to wear a tallit, spread mainly throughout

אולם מנהג זה שלא יתעטפו בחורים בטלית נתפשט בעיקר במדינות פולין וליטא ובמקצת

Poland and Lithuania and a few other European countries, following the decision of those countries' Jewish leaders, who relied on the ruling of the Magen Avraham exempting single men from wearing a tallit. But in some European countries [including Germany], and likewise in all Sephardic communities, single men do wear a tallit, as well as children who have reached the age of education, following the ruling of the majority of the Rishonim and major Halachic authorities [who do not differentiate between married and single men], and in order not to lose out on fulfilling this most important mitzvah in a perfect way.

שאר מדינות אירופא על פי גדולי ישראל שבמדינות ההם שסמכו סמיכה של ממש על דברי המג"א הנזכרים לפטור בחור מטלית... אבל בכמה ממדינות אירופא וכן בכל קהילות הספרדים מתעטפים הבחורים בטלית, ואף הילדים שהגיעו לחינוך, וכסתימת כל הראשונים והפוסקים שלא חילקו בכך, וכדי לא לאבד מצוה יקרה וחשובה זו מלעשותה בשלמות.

## KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV

- ⌘ Nowadays, although we don't normally wear four-cornered garments which require tzitzit, we should wear such a special garment in order to fulfill this most important mitzvah. We do this in two ways: by wearing tzitzit (a tallit katan) and a tallit. The purpose of wearing the tzitzit (tallit katan) is to be able to fulfill this mitzvah throughout the entire day, whereas the tallit is worn only during morning prayers.
- ⌘ The tallit is also worn to create the proper ambiance during prayer.
- ⌘ The tzitzit should be at least a square cubit (at least 19 by 19 inches) on the front and back. A good tallit should be four by six feet, but as an absolute minimum must measure one cubit in width.

## SECTION V. *TECHEILET*

This section will address the inclusion, importance and symbolism of the blue-dyed fringes on tzitzit. The Torah teaches us in the Shema, "You shall place on the tzitzit of [each] corner, *techeilet* – a thread of blue." That means one of the four tzitzit-tassels on each corner (that are doubled over so that eight strings appear to hang from each corner) would be dyed with *techeilet*. Although nowadays some people do wear the *techeilet*, the majority do not. By what criteria does a person determine whether or not to wear *techeilet*? The real question is whether or not we have maintained the tradition of the authentic source of the *techeilet*, as will be discussed below. In any case, tzitzit or a tallit without the *techeilet* does not prevent the fulfillment, or minimize the meaning, of the mitzvah.

## PART A. THE IMPORTANCE OF TECHEILET

The techeilet in tzitzit reminds us of representations of God's Presence and His role in this world. The color of the techeilet alludes to certain mystical entities.

### 1. Menachot 43b – Techeilet alludes to the Divine Presence.

It was taught: R' Meir said, "Why was techeilet singled out from all the other colors? Because techeilet resembles the sea, and the sea resembles the heavens, and the heavens [resemble] God's Throne."

תניא היה ר' מאיר אומר מה נשתנה תכלת מכל מיני צבעונין מפני שהתכלת דומה לים וים דומה לרקיע ורקיע לכסא הכבוד.

We are told to go in steps – to sea, to heavens, then to the Heavenly Throne, because the idea is to go *slowly*, to move from what is familiar to what is more removed from oneself. Also, when we see the tzitzit we begin to understand how everything works its way back to the source.

### 2. Mishnat Rebbe Eliezer, Parsha 14 (p. 264) – Techeilet alludes to God's Staff and the Tablets of the Law.

Rabbi Yehuda bar Rabbi Ilai asks, "Why does the Torah instruct us to wear techeilet? Because techeilet resembles sapphire, and the staff of God [used by Moshe and Aharon to perform miracles] was made of sapphire. This teaches that whenever Israel looks at the techeilet on their tzitzit, they should remember all the miracles and wonders that God did with that staff."

And the Sages ask, "Why does the Torah warn about techeilet? Because techeilet resembles sapphire, and the tablets [of the Ten Commandments] were made from sapphire. This teaches that whenever the children of Israel look at the techeilet they should remember everything that is written on the tablets and fulfill it." This is referred to in the verse, "You shall see them and remember all the mitzvot of God" [Bamidbar 15:39].

ר' יהודה ברבי אילעאי אומר, למה הזהירה תורה על התכלת. מפני שהתכלת דומה לספיר, ומטה האלקים סמפירינן היה, לומר לך, שכל זמן שישראל מסתכלין בתכלת הזו, יהו נזכרין כל אותן האותות והמופתים שעשה הקב"ה במטה הזה ...

וחכמים אומרין, למה הזהירה התורה על התכלת. מפני שהתכלת דומה לספיר, והלוחות היו של ספיר. לומר לך, שכל זמן שישראל מסתכלין בתכלת הזאת, הן נזכרין במה שכתוב בלוחות, ומקיימין אותן. וכן הוא אומר והיה לכם לציצית וראיתם אותו וזכרתם.

3. **Netziv, Ha'amek Davar, Bamidbar 15: 38 – Techeilet teaches us that all of life's events are guided by God.**

“A twist of sky-blue wool” – meaning the string that is wound around the white strings should be *techeilet*...This is coming to teach us that all the events in a person's life, which are symbolized by the white strings, are guided by a higher Source (God), Blessed is He, symbolized by the *techeilet*, which is a reminder of God's Throne. This is why the blue string is wound around the white strings.

“פתיל תכלת” - היינו חוט המקיף את החוטין של לבן ופותרו יהיה של תכלת... ובא זה ללמדנו דתכלת דומה לכסא הכבוד. ובא להזכיר דכל השתלשלות חיי האדם שנגד זה באו חוטי לבן מין כנף באו ממקור העליון סיבת כל הסבות יתברך. ע"כ חוט של תכלת פותרל חוטי לבן.

4. **Rabbi Avraham Edelstein, Ner Le'Elef Chumash Bamidbar Commentary, pp. 69 -70 – The white tzitzit symbolize the body, and the techeilet represents the soul.**

The tzitzit relates to the body and the soul. The white color and the strings refer to the body, while the *techeilet* refers to the soul. The soul is invisible, and it is the job of the *techeilet* to remind us of that which is invisible and to extend our end or limit. *Techeilet* itself means end or limit. Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (Horeb, no. 281 p. 183) writes, “The purpose: To remind the eye...that those things which are invisible... also have reality.” Thus, tzitzit is a mitzvah which teaches us about the spiritual balance of man, the relationship of the body and the soul. [This definition expands what Rabbi Aaron Lopiansky explained above (Section I. Part B. Source 3), that *techeilet* is related to the word *tachlit* (purpose), to realize that there is a purpose in our existence - Ed.]

(Others compare the blue to love of God and the white to fear of God.)

This leads to a more complete understanding of ourselves. The Sages tell us that the *techeilet* of the tzitzit is similar to the sea. The sea, in turn, is similar to the Heavens, and they in turn are similar to the Holy Throne. It is under this Throne that the soul of man rests. Thus, when we see the tzitzit, we begin to understand how everything works its way back to the Source. וראיתם אותו, “that you may see it [the *techeilet*]” – we will see God hidden beneath the surface of everything we look at. *Techeilet*, says the Ramban, represents a “*midah kolelet*,” a total perspective.

We make only one thread blue and not the entire garment, for a whole blue garment would imply the total mastery of the soul over the body, something unattainable in the world as we know it now. Rav Zadok HaKohane writes that there will come a time, however, when the soul will achieve this mastery and we will no longer need the one thread of blue.

Despite the incredible importance of the blue in the mitzvah, we are still able to fulfill the basic mitzvah without the blue dye on the tzitzit (as discussed below).

## PART B. THE LOST TECHEILET

After the destruction of the second Temple, the supply of techeilet virtually disappeared, although there were a few individuals who still knew where to find the chilazon, the sea animal from which the blue dye is extracted for the tzitzit. (See Sifri on Devarim 33: 19.) The basic mitzvah of tzitzit can still be fulfilled without the techeilet. The question today is whether it is possible to identify the source of the techeilet to make the dye.

1. **Rabbi Gershon Henoch Leiner, Sefunei Temunei Chol, p. 9 – It appears that the chilazon was still seen by R' Natan ben Yechiel, author of the Aruch (1035-1106).**

It seems that the techeilet was still around in the times of the Geonim...and that the Ba'al Ha'Aruch saw the chilazon and knew how to sketch it.

כי כפי הנראה שגם בימי הגאונים היה נהוג תכלת... וגם בעל הערוך נראה שראה את החלזון וידע לציירו.

2. **Bamidbar Rabbah 17: 5 – The earliest statement regarding the absence of techeilet, approximately 12th - 13th centuries.**

Nowadays we only have white [strings], since the techeilet has been hidden.

ועכשיו אין לנו אלא לבן שהתכלת נגנז.

3. **Rambam, Hilchot Tzitzit I: 4 – Absence of the blue string doesn't invalidate the mitzvah.**

If someone doesn't have techeilet, he should make the tzitzit with only white strings.

הרי שאין לו תכלת עושה לבן לבדו.

4. **Rabbi Moshe Alshich, Torat Moshe, Bamidbar 15: 37 – The Torah alludes to techeilet not always being available.**

"[Have them make tassels] on the corners of their garments." This refers to the white strings, and this will be "for all generations," including every generation, for there will never be a time when white [strings] will not be available. But there is something which will not be available in all generations, namely, "they shall include a twist of sky-blue wool in the corner tassels." This is not for all generations [the Torah does not say regarding the techeilet "for all generations"], for the blood of the chilazon will not be available in all generations.

"ועשו להם ציצית] על כנפי בגדיהם" והוא חוטי הלבן, וזה יהיה להם "לדורותם", כולל כל הדורות כי הלבן לא יחסר לעולם. אך יש דבר שאינו לכל הדורות וזהו "ונתנו על ציצית הכנף פתיל תכלת" וזהו אינו לדורותם, כי לא בכל הדורות נמצא דם חלזון.

5. **“Blue Techelet Thread” from Aish.com – In the absence of a tradition or clear proof as to the identity of the chilazon, the general practice is to refrain from wearing techeilet-colored strings in tzitzit.**

Techeilet was a bluish dye, obtained from the fluid of a sea creature called the chilazon (Tosefta Menachot 9:6). It was found on the coast of northern Israel, though there is a disagreement among scholars regarding what the chilazon actually is. Some say it is a snail, others say a squid, and some claim it is another type of mollusk.

At any rate, this particular dye was very precious and because of its value, the Romans (who conquered Israel in 63 BCE) seized control of its usage. This caused the Jewish dyers to go underground. By 639 CE, at the time of the Arab conquest, the secret of techeilet was lost altogether.

In the 1850s, Rabbi Gershon Henoch Leiner, the Radzyner Rebbe, began to search for the long lost chilazon. What he came up with was a type of squid that fit the Talmud's description. Within a few years, thousands of the rebbe's followers were wearing his version of techeilet.

However, in 1913 Rabbi Isaac Herzog (the Chief Rabbi of Ireland and later the Chief Rabbi of Israel) discovered that the techeilet dye of the Radzyner Rebbe included iron fillings in the process. Rabbi Herzog ruled that this makes the dye synthetic – and thus unfit for use. Nevertheless, there are still people today who wear the techeilet of the Radzyner Rebbe.

As Rabbi Herzog continued his research, he found that the French zoologist Henri de Lacaze-Duthiers had discovered a mollusk called *murex trunculus* that could create a blue dye. Rav Herzog decided in the end that the best candidate is *janthina pallida*. Alexander Dedekind, however, promoted *murex trunculus*, and many people use techeilet produced from these snails today.

The majority of Jews today still do not wear techeilet because we don't have a bona fide tradition coming from the time of the Sages of exactly which animal is used, and there are still unanswered questions about the species suggested to be the genuine chilazon.

## KEY THEMES OF SECTION V

- ⌘ Nowadays, although the majority of Jews do not wear techeilet, we may still glean lessons from this sky-blue dye. Techeilet reminds us of God's Presence, symbolizes life's events being orchestrated by God, and also represents the soul.
- ⌘ Techeilet resembles sapphire and the tablets of the Ten Commandments that were made from sapphire. This teaches that one who sees the string of techeilet should remember everything that is written on the tablets and fulfill them.

## CLASS SUMMARY:

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### WHY DOES THE TORAH CARE ABOUT THE NATURE OF OUR DRESS?

Clothing is a fundamental part of human existence. As an expression of our inner selves, the clothing we wear can influence how others perceive us, and also how we perceive ourselves. Before the sin of Adam and Chava, each saw the other not as a body, but rather as a soul. There was no shame in the body, because it was “clothed” by the soul. After the sin, however, the body no longer shone with the light of the soul. Unable to express the inner beauty of the soul, the body became an object of shame, representing the person as a physical being rather than a spiritual soul. Instinctively, Adam and Chava therefore made themselves clothing.

### WHY IS THE MITZVAH OF TZITZIT SO IMPORTANT? WHAT IMPACT CAN SOME DANGLING STRINGS MAKE?

- The strings of the tzitzit have symbolic meaning and thereby serve as a powerful reminder of the mitzvot and other lofty spiritual concepts such as Heaven, God’s miracles, and the tablets of the Ten Commandments.
- Wearing tzitzit is a way to sanctify our clothing and give outward expression to our inner spiritual essence.

### HOW IS THERE A CORRELATION BETWEEN TZITZIT AND THE CONCEPT OF THE CHOSEN PEOPLE?

Due to their symbolism and the fact that they are unique to Jews, the tzitzit have become the emblem of our special relationship with God. They represent the concept of a people chosen by God with the goal of spreading awareness of Him throughout the world.

### WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN TZITZIT AND A TALLIT?

- On the one hand, the tallit (whether big or small) serves as the means for wearing tzitzit. But there is also more to it than just that:
- The tallit is always a four-cornered garment, indicating that our God is the master over all “four corners” of the world.
- A tallit gadol worn during prayer also help to focus our awareness and humble our spirits before God as we pray to Him.

### WHAT IS TECHEILET AND SHOULD WE WEAR IT ON OUR TZITZIT?

- Techeilet, the blue strings of the tzitzit, are an important component of the mitzvah; it fell into misuse because the tradition about how to make it was lost over the years.
- More recently there have been attempts to re-establish a legitimate form of techeilet; however, the general consensus is not to accept these versions of techeilet.
- The basic mitzvah of tzitzit can still be fulfilled without the techeilet.

## ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDED READING & SOURCES

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Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Tzitzith, A Thread of Light, Mesorah Publications, 1984.

**Women and Tzitzit:** See Ner Le'Elef Booklet "Women and Judaism II," pp. 123-125.

### **Tzitzit – The Mitzvah which Contains All Others: The Power of Recall.**

Tanna d'Vei Eliyahu 26

Tur Orach Chaim 24

Da'at Zekainim Ba'alei HaTosafot Bamidbar 15: 32

### **God's Insignia**

Kuzari 1:89

Rambam Yesodei HaTorah 8:1

Guide for the Perplexed 2: 35

Menachot 43b, Rashi and Tosafot

Seforno Bamidbar 15: 39

Mishnah Berurah, Orach Chaim 8:26

### **What are Tzitzit?**

Tosafot Berachot 14b s.v. U'Meniach

Ibn Ezra, Bamidbar 15: 39

### **Techeilet**

Techumin vol. 16, 24, articles on techeilet by Rabbi Yehuda Rock

Rambam Menachot 4: 1

Biur HaGra Orach Chaim 9: 2

Tanchuma Shelach 15

Aruch s.v. Chilazon

Torah Temima Numbers 15: 38, #118

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