

Sh'lah 5767—Remembering Leads to Doing Leads to God...

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When I first began seriously considering rabbinical studies, I scheduled what was known as a “preliminary interview” with Rabbi Bill Lebeau, the dean of the Rabbinical School at JTS. As a student in List College, the undergraduate program at the Seminary, Rabbinical School was a familiar entity. I took classes with its students; I *davvened* each morning with them, and saw them in the halls. Constantly exposed as I was to the rabbinical students, who seemed to me like the royalty of the Seminary, it was easy to idealize them and their program of study; it was only natural to want to be a part of their “club,” as it were, and to enter Rabbinical School myself. As much as the allure of the Rabbinical School did play a significant part in my initial desire to join its ranks, I knew that my yearning to become a rabbi was about something more than simply becoming a part of an elite *hevrah* of students at the Seminary. So as I prepared for my preliminary interview, I knew I had to be able to articulate, convincingly, what it was that was drawing me to the Rabbinical School—not only to secure my admission to the program, but also for myself. During the interview, Rabbi Lebeau and I discussed many things—my involvement in student activities at the Seminary and at Barnard, my personal Jewish beliefs

and practice, my upbringing, and then he hit me with the question I knew I had to nail: Why did I want to go to Rabbinical School? The answer I gave is one that still resonates with me very deeply.

As a college student, I participated in a number of community organizations and social action projects. I delivered meals to homebound people living with HIV/AIDS through an organization called God's Love We Deliver. I staffed a local homeless shelter that provided a place to sleep for 10 men struggling to get back on their feet. I was active in campus movements both to update Columbia University's sexual misconduct policy and to advocate for the advancement of female faculty in the university. I also lived in Morningside Heights, the neighborhood dominated by Columbia University that is essentially an extension of the Upper West Side. My neighborhood was full of people who shared my commitment to social action and activism, and who were also Jewish, and involved in their Jewish communities. However, I had begun to notice that my neighbors' engagement in these acts of *tikkun olam*, of working to improve the world, were more an expression of their socially liberal values than a response to Judaism's call to be immersed in this kind of work. For me, my community involvement was in large part my response to that call. I wanted to go to rabbinical school, I explained to Rabbi Lebeau, to share that message, to

teach more about how Judaism instructs us to work to improve our world, and to encourage others to build a bridge between their Jewish engagement and their involvement in social organizations.

Embedded in our parasha this week is just that message. The last few verses of today's Torah reading are perhaps best known to us as the third paragraph of the Shema. These five *pesukim* comprise the *mitzvah* of putting *tzitzit* on the corners of our garments. In the ancient world, when people wore garments—not unlike togas—that had clear corners, *tzitziyot* were to be added to everyday apparel. In modern times, our clothing is a bit different, and we have created a garment, which we wear primarily during prayer, to fulfill this *mitzvah*—the *tallit*. There is much to say about the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*, much meaning to draw from these five short verses.

However, I want to focus our attention in on what the Torah describes as the function of *tzitzit*. We read in chapter 15:39: והיה לכם לציצת וראיתם אתו וזכרתם ...ועשיתם אתם. —That shall be your *tzitzit*; you shall look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them. When we look at the *tzitzit*, we recall *mitzvot*, and remember to follow them. The *tzitzit* is a visual reminder, not unlike the archetypal string tied around your finger.

One of the things that always bothered me about the image of the string is that it has no inherent meaning. I could tie a string around my finger to

remind me to do something, or remember something, but there is nothing intrinsic to the string that tells me what it is I'm supposed to remember. In the eyes of the Torah, *tzitzit* is no different—it simply means “fringe,” and seems to have no salient feature that screams “*mitzvot*.” How is it then, that our *tzitziyot* cause us to remember the *mitzvot*?

The Talmud, in *Massekhet Menahot*, spends quite a bit of time pondering the same question. The Sages suggest that this *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* is equal to the sum total of *mitzvot*. Rashi explains that equation is literally an equation. The numerical value of ציצית is 600—צ=90, י=10, ת=400— $90+10+90+10=600$; each *tzitzit* in its completed form is composed of 8 strings and 5 knots, yielding a total of 613, the traditional number of *mitzvot*. Each *tzitzit*, by its very name and by its very appearance, contains within it a reminder of all the *mitzvot*. Having discovered this, we cannot help but think of *mitzvot* when we see *tzitzit*.

Next, the Talmud offers us a bolder interpretation of this *mitzvah*. Citing our verse from our parasha-- והיה לכם לציצת וראיתם אתו וזכרתם את כל-- והיה לכם לציצת וראיתם אתו וזכרתם את כל-- you shall see it, and recall all of God's *mitzvot* and observe them, we learn that this *mitzvah* is equal in value to all of the *mitzvot* in total. Why? Because seeing leads to remembering, and remembering leads to doing. For the Rabbis, remembering the *mitzvot* is not enough. The

ultimate purpose of *tzitzit* is to spur us to action. This progression from vision to memory to action, at least as described in the Talmud, is almost automatic. For them, remembering the *mitzvot* is the same as doing them, as one cannot exist without the other. *Tzitzit* means *mitzvot*, and *mitzvot* mean, well, *mitzvot*.

For better or worse, this causal link between memory and action is not always so obvious to us. We live in a world where we see our actions as the deliberate results of our decisions. Sometimes, our decisions are informed by our awareness of *mitzvot*, and sometimes they are not. It is entirely possible for us to take an action that is also a *mitzvah* for reasons not related to that fact. Similarly, it is possible for us to be aware of a *mitzvah* and not take action. If we are to hold onto this two-step link between *tzitzit*, *mitzvot*, and action, we need to redefine it, to broaden its meaning.

Step one: Seeing *tzitzit* leads to remembering. What is it we remember when we see our *tzitzit*? We may, like the Rabbis of the Talmud, see 613 *mitzvot* in the letters, strings, and knots of each *tzitzit*. To cite another rabbinic interpretation, these fringes remind us of the exodus from Egypt. We are commanded to tie them to the corners of our garments, כנפי בגדיהם. This word, כנף, can also mean “wing,” and it takes us to another mention of wings, the description of how the Israelites left Egypt—borne by

God על כנפי נשרים, on eagles' wings. We may also recall כנפי השכינה, the protecting shelter of God's embrace. Or, our memories may be more personally significant. We may remember sitting next to a father or grandfather (one day hopefully a mother or grandmother) in shul and playing with the *tzitziyot* that dangled down from their *tallit*. Many of us may recall the sense of pride and connection to our people we felt when we wrapped ourselves in *tzitzit* for the first time.

These recollections, whether interpretive or personal, are powerful, and it is they that will drive us to take that second step, the step of action.

When I look at my *tzitziyot*, it is the connection with the exodus from Egypt that I see most clearly. I remember that the experience of being enslaved and of being a stranger demands of us compassionate care for those who are now strangers themselves. The knowledge that so many of our *mitzvot* are explained by the phrase—for you were strangers in the land of Egypt leads me to take the kinds of action that brought me into the dean's office that day so many years ago.

I'd like to leave us today with a few questions, which are really a challenge. What is it that we recall when we see our *tzitziyot*? What do those memories mean to us, and what do they urge us to do? How can our

tzitziyot serve as a catalyst for us to take action, motivated by the memories they inspire?

May our *tzitziyot*, enriched by the *mitzvot* and meanings we ascribe to them, shelter us in God's presence as we strive to translate our memories into action.