

Our first Temple Emunah Israel trip will always stand out in my mind. First, it was the first! Second, our youngest child has just been born 10 days before. (Yes, what I was doing still going on the trip is a story in itself!) Third, I took our daughter who was five years old at the time with me.

It was a lot of fun, but I wanted to take our daughter to see her cousins and that made an already time-pressured experience, even more so. I also needed to shop and buy some religious items. I remember Janet Goldberg and I running through the ultra-Orthodox neighborhood on Mea Shearim picking up some last minute items. Not wanting to attract any attention and to respect the customs of the area, we dressed modestly. That said, we were an interesting sight as we zoomed around with our backpacks, bargaining with various shopkeepers, while trying to keep a low profile.



In particular, I was searching for *tekhelet* (the blue strings or *tzitzit*, which as you can see from my *tallit*, I

was able to buy; I know I'm killing the suspense here). We found a shopkeeper who had sold them; in fact, he had two kinds - one that one Hasidic sect accepts as authentic and another one from another group. Classic - we all know the joke of the Jew on the desert island who builds two shuls (this is the one I go to and this is the one I would never set foot in!). So here, we have: this is the *tekhelet* I use and those, never!

But maybe we should take a step back: what are these blue threads? Where do they come from? Why did I want them? And why are they not on most *tallitot*?

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To answer these questions, let's look at the *parashah*.

While the major dramatic narrative in this week's Torah portion is about the twelve scouts, there are other pieces.

The second half of the *parashah* lists a number of laws including those about various sacrificial offerings and the laws of *tzitzit*.

There we find the text that we know as the third paragraph of the *Shema*, part of our daily liturgy, every morning and evening.

"Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves *tzitzit* (fringes) on the corners of their garments throughout the ages; let them attach a [*p'til tekhelet*], a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner." [And as you can see, there is a blue cord that is wrapped around the other white strings on my *tallit*.]

"That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall the commandments of Adonai and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge." (Number 15: 37-39)

First, this text teaches us something that sometimes gets overlooked. While sometimes the Torah only includes men in a commandment or moment (think Sinai), here, the entire people of Israel are included: men and women. I cannot emphasize this enough: this is for all of us.

Second, the context of this mitzvah. Who had crimson or blue fringes attached to their robes in the ancient world? Royalty and those who were quite wealthy. So, here the Torah is teaching us that we are all royalty before God. Every Jew is given this command; every Jew is holy and therefore, we are equal.

Third, the *tzitzit* are a reminder, like the proverbial string tied around one's finger. They remind us to do something. What? The 613 mitzvot, the commandments. And at the same time, they are a reminder not to be led astray by our desires. They are a piece of moral clothing that was supposed to help us make the right choices.

Two things happened to the original *tzitzit*. Well, first, clothing fashion changed. While people used to wear robes which had four corners on their bottoms, those garments fell out of use. And so, the mitzvah morphed into two. One, the *tallit katan* or small *tallit*, which is worn underneath our clothing like an undershirt, and the larger *tallitot* that we are wearing in shul today.

The second change was that we lost the "recipe" of how to make the *tekhelet*. Around the time of the final editing of the Babylonian Talmud (around the year 600 C.E.) the recipe for making the blue dye was lost. The blue was obtained from a sea snail called a *hilazon* and they could not figure out which species it was.

And for 1300 years, *tzitzit* came only in white.

But in the 1880's, the Raydnezer Rebbe, Rabbi Gershon Hanokh Leiner found that the cuttlefish produced a substance that passed all the tests the Talmud requires for *tekhelet*. And thus, it was brought back and while others have claimed other sources for the blue, we now have the opportunity to fulfill this mitzvah in its more original form.

For me, that is pretty exciting and that's why I have switched my *tzitzit*.

According to Rabbi Meir in the Talmud (Menahot 43b), the blue reminds us of the sea and the sea resembled the sky and the sky is the color of a sapphire, which is the color of the throne of glory.

So the *tzitzit* remind us of God. Similarly, when we put on the *tallit*, we wrap it around our heads so we are surrounded by God's presence. The traditional liturgy for that moment is taken from the book of Psalms: "*B'tzel knafekha yehesayoon*" -- we are sheltered in the shadow of your wings. That is the imagery and the feeling of that moment - being sheltered and protected, as in the protective embrace of a parent

And the blue, of course, also gets picked up in the flag of the State of Israel.

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But, what about these two parts of the parashah -- the episode of the scouts and the *tzitzit* -- do they relate to each other?

Rabbi Harold Kushner in our *Etz Hayim Humash* cites Ibn Ezra, a 12th century Spanish commentator who imagines the Israelites, at that moment, being cast into despair. After the episode of the twelve scouts who mostly bring back negative reports, the people lose hope. "God has written them off, and the dream of settlement in the Promised Land now seems impossible. To revive their spirits, God commands Moses to tell them 'When you enter the land that I am giving you.' (15:2) These words affirm that God still communicates with the people, that God has not written them off permanently. They affirm further that the promise of the Land is still in force, although it will be their children who will enter it and put these laws into practice."

Ibn Ezra's insight into this juxtaposition is fascinating: the people lose hope and now, God is giving them hope. How? By performing *mitzvot*, by putting on *tzitzit*.

Does that make sense?

When we put on the *tallit*, this *mitzvah* is working on two levels, just like the *tallit katan* I am wearing under my clothes and the *tallit* on top of my clothing. The first level is for ME -- I am wearing the *tzitzit*, they remind ME to perform all the *mitzvot*, they remind ME not to be led astray and follow inappropriate desires. That's why they are worn under our clothing, even though some Jews wear the *tzitzit* themselves outside so they can see them.

But there is the second *tzitzit* -- the *tallit*. To put on the *tallit*, we are asked to perform *ituf* -- we wrap the *tallit* around our heads, enveloping ourselves in the *Shekhinah*, in the Divine Presence. We open our eyes and see the morning light streaming through the openings in the garment -- almost as if we are seeing glimpses of the divine. When we take the time to do that practice with real *kavannah*, with real intentionality and purpose, we can feel something. We feel like we may be in the shadow of God's wings.

What does that do to us?

Hopefully, we feel closer to God. And that gives us hope.

Why?

Because standing in God's presence is a profoundly comforting experience -- we are shielded with a truth and sense of security from the One that transcends time and space, that transcends all our concerns.

But God is more than that. As Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan wrote, "God is the Power that makes for Salvation." God is the One who holds out a vision of a better tomorrow, of a better world. God presents us with a path to move ourselves and the world toward something greater, something beyond ourselves.

In the opening of the *parashah*, the ten scouts who bring back negative reports were too focused on themselves, how they were afraid of what they might encounter in the Land. Those were fears about themselves and they were real, but they allowed those fears to overwhelm themselves and they did not think about others, about the rest of the people.

The ten scouts did not see beyond themselves, beyond that moment.

The ten scouts lacked hope and they lacked God.

The *tallit* and the *tzitzit* with its blue cord, pull us into another experience. They bring God's presence into the moment and help us see beyond, see and feel something deeper, something eternal.

When we finish *ituf*, being enveloped in the *tzitzit*, we are ready to look out on others. And the *tzitzit* of our *tallitot* are seen by others. Now, we are ready to be engaged in acts of *hesed* -- acts of kindness toward others. Now, we are ready to move beyond ourselves.

The blue *tzitzit* lift our eyes to the skies, lifting our souls, giving us hope.

Hope is about something beyond this moment; hope imagines something better, the possibility of a better tomorrow.

That's what those scouts were lacking. Perhaps had God given the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* earlier, they would have done better.

We are blessed to have a *mitzvah* like *tzitzit* that points towards hope, towards God. We are fortunate to have a way to help us feel God's presence and that also helps us connect with others and through that, transform the world.