Preface Tzitzit

Day 32

Torah Sources for the Mitzvah of Tzitzit

דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם וְעָשׂוּ לָהֶם צִיצִת עַל כַּנְפֵי בִגְדֵיהֶם לְדֹרֹתָם וְנָתְנוּ עַל צִיצִת הַכָּנָף פְּתִיל תְּכֵלֶת: וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְצִיצִת וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹת יְהוָה וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְלֹא תָתֻרוּ אַחֲרֵי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרֵי עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם זֹנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם: לְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתָי וִהְיִיתֶם קְדֹשִׁים לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם:

The Torah states (*Bemidbar* 15:38-40): "Speak to the people of Yisrael and tell them that they must make *tzitzit* for themselves on the corners of their garments for all their generations, and they must insert a strand of *tekhelet* with the tzitzit on each corner. This will be tzitzit for you. When you will see it you will remember all of God's commandments and perform them. You will not veer after your hearts or after your eyes as you are wont to veer erratically after them. This is so you will remember and perform all My commandments, and you will be holy to your God." This is the primary source for the Torah's mitzvah of tzitzit.

Another source in the Torah is in *Devarim* 22:12: גְּדִלִים תַּעֲשֶׂה לְךָ עַל אַרְבַּע כַּנְפוֹת כְּסוּתְךָ אֲשֶׁר תְּכַסֶּה בָּהּ: - "Make for yourself fringes on the four corners of your garments with which you cover yourself."

Etomology

Rashi (comment to *Bemidbar* 15:38) offered two explanations for the term tzitzit:

a) Tzitzit means something that dangles from the end of another object, comparing it to the verse (*Yehezkel* 8:3), "וַיִּקָּחֵנִי בְּצִיצִת רֹאשִׁי – He took me by the *tzitzit* (locks of hair) of my head." In *Menahot* (41b), Rashi commented that the fringes are called tzitzit since they dangle from the corners of the garment.

It is likely that this explanation is the source of the halakha requiring the strands of the tzitzit to each be dangling separately, so that they are not tangled with one another. In fact, the *Levush* (8:7) taught that the term tzitzit means separate strands, based on the verse in *Yehezkel*.

b) Another interpretation of the term tzitzit cited by Rashi is ''something that people look at,'' based on the Torah's instructions, ''you will see it.'' The term is used in this sense in the verse (*Shir Hashirim* 2:9), ''מֵצִיץ מִן הַחֲרַכִּים – he peers through the cracks.''

The Torah also refers to tzitzit by the term *gedilim*, which means ''cords braided together. This is because the halakha requires the tzitzit strands to be wound and knotted together. See the *Mishna Berura* (11:66) and see below in *Siman* 11.

Definition of the Mitzvah

Any man who wears a four-cornered garment must attach tzitzit to each of the corners. As long as he does not wear the garment, he is not obligated to attach tzitzit to it, although he plans to wear it in the future. In other words, a person is obligated to fulfill the mitzvah of tzitzit only when wearing such a garment, but simply owning such a garment does not make him obligated. In Talmudic terms, the mitzvah of tzitzit is called *hovat gavra*, an obligation of the person, and not *hovat mana*, an obligation of the garment.

Moreover, it is technically permissible to avoid fulfilling this mitzvah by wearing only garments that do not have four corners. The Torah does not obligate one to wear such a garment in order to fulfill this mitzvah. By choosing to wear a four-cornered garment, one volunteers to fulfill this mitzvah. Thus, it is termed a *mitzvah kiyumit*, a mitzvah that one can fulfill if one chooses, but if someone chooses not to fulfill it by avoiding the situation that obligates him, he is not guilty of any sin.

In this aspect, the mitzvah of tzitzit is different than the mitzvah of tefillin. Everyone must put on tefillin every weekday; no one has the choice not to fulfill that mitzvah. If anyone allows a day to go by without putting on tefillin, he is liable to be punished severely. Tefillin is termed a *mitzvah hiyuvit*, a mitzvah that must be fulfilled under all circumstances, if possible.

Nonetheless, our Sages taught, if someone is capable of fulfilling the mitzvah of tzitzit and chooses not to because he does not value the mitzvah, he is liable to be punished for this when God is already angry at the world for other reasons. Below in *Siman* 24, an argument appears proving that in our times no one will be punished for refusing to fulfill this mitzvah, even if God is angry for other reasons. Even so, if someone chooses not to fulfill this precious mitzvah, he loses the opportunity to gain its enormous rewards.

Below, in *Simanim* 9, 10 and 11, the reader will find the halakhot dealing with the size of the garment that requires tzitzit, of what kind of material must the garment be made, the definition of a ''corner,'' and more. In this *Siman*, the reader will find the halakhot regarding the blessing recited when putting on a tallit, the procedure of putting on a *tallit gadol* and a *tallit katan*, and in

which circumstances is it necessary to recite the blessing a second time after taking off a tallit and putting it back on.

Tekhelet

The Torah commands us to dye some of the tzitzit strands with the color *tekhelet* (Illustration № 1) when such dye is available. *Tekhelet* is extracted from the body of a sea creature called *hilazon*. The Talmud states (*Menahot* 44a): ''The *hilazon* has a body that resembles the sea and it is a sea creature. It is found rarely on the shore, perhaps once in seventy years, and a substance that its body secretes is used for the *tekhelet* dye. Since it is so rare, the dye is very expensive.''

Tosafot (*Menahot* 38a and 38b) ruled that half of the tzitzit strands, meaning two strands in each tassel, are to be dyed with *tekhelet* while the other two are left in their natural whiteness. Rambam (*Hilkhot Tzitzit* 1:6) ruled that only half of one strand is dyed with *tekhelet*, leaving seven half-strands white. Rabbenu Avraham ben David (ibid.) ruled that one entire strand of the four is dyed with *tekhelet*. In the following halakha (1:7), both Rambam and Rabbenu Avraham described at length how to wind the strands together.

Nowadays, we no longer know which animal is the one that supplies the true *tekhelet* dye, and therefore we do not dye any of our tzitzit strands, leaving them all white. Our Sages taught that if someone has no tzitzit strands dyed with *tekhelet* he can still fulfill the mitzvah using all white strands. Likewise, if someone has only strands dyed with *tekhelet* and none remaining white, he can fulfill the mitzvah using all four of the strands dyed with *tekhelet*. This is because the Torah states, ''When you will *see* it,'' and not, ''When you will *see* them,'' teaching that either type of strand is sufficient [although not ideal]. See the *Mishna Berura* (13:5).

The *Or Hahayim* (comment to *Bemidbar* 15:38) demonstrated that the Torah predicted that a time would come when *tekhelet* would not be available. For this reason, the Torah states ''*for all their generations*'' before it mentions the mitzvah of *tekhelet*. This alludes to the fact that the mitzvah of white strands would be fulfilled in all generations, but that of *tekhelet* would not.

In recent generations, a number of Torah scholars have attempted to identify the *hilazon* and make the mitzvah of *tekhelet* available once again. Most notable was the Hassidic leader of Radzin, who researched this for many years and came to the conclusion that it is a squid. Several Hassidic courts have adopted this in practice, and wear tzitzit with strands dyed with an extract based on the squid's ink. More recently, other researchers have decided that the *hilazon* is a shelled snail, a member of the genus *murex*. Despite these claims, most people still use exclusively white tzitzit strands, based on the Midrash stating that the source of *tekhelet* will be revealed with the arrival of Mashi'ah. See below in *Siman* 10:17.