**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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***MIDRASH* ON THE *PARASHA***

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**Parashat Shelach:**

**“And You Shall See it and Remember**"

**The story and the written text**

The mitzvaof *tzitzit,* the ritual fringe that must be attached to four-cornered garments (plural: *tzitziyot*), is the subject matter of the final paragraph of *Parashat Shelach, Bamidbar* 15:37-41. We will shortly examine the text.

The *derashot* in the *Sifrei* that deal with this mitzvaclose with a statement and a story brought by Rabbi Natan, a fourth-generation Tanna originally hailing from Babylonia, a disciple of Rabbi Akiva and a teacher of Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi:

Rabbi Natan said:

There is no mitzva in the Torah that does not have its reward at its side.

Go and learn from the mitzva of *tzitzit*.

It once happened that a certain person who was careful about the mitzva of *tzitzit* heard that there was a prostitute (*zona*) in a city overseas who would take four hundred gold pieces as her fee.

He sent her four hundred gold pieces, and she set a time for him.

When the time arrived, he went and sat at the door of her house.

Her maidservant went in and said to her:

That man for whom you set a time is sitting at the door of the house.

She said to her: Let him enter.

When he entered, she arranged for him seven beds of silver and one of gold, and she was on the highest bed.

Alongside each [bed] there was a bench of silver, and the highest was of gold.

When he came to that act, his four fringes came and appeared to him as four witnesses and slapped him in the face.

He immediately slid down and sat on the ground.

She too slid down and sat on the ground.

She said to him: By the Capitol of Rome [= a common form of oath in the Roman world],

I shall not let you go until you tell me: What flaw did you see in me?

He said to her: By the [Temple] service [= a common form of oath in the language of the Sages],

I saw no flaw in you, as there is no beauty like yours in the entire world.

But there is a minor mitzva that the Lord, our God, commanded us.

And twice is it written in its regard: "I am the Lord your God," "I am the Lord your God."

"I am the Lord your God," I am the one who will reward.

"I am the Lord your God," I am the one who will punish.

She said to him: By the [Temple] service, I shall not let you go until you write for me your name, and the name of your city, and the name of the hall where you study Torah. And he wrote her his name, and the name of his city, and the name of his teacher, and the name of the hall where he studied Torah.

She got up and divided up all her money: a third for the government, a third for the poor, and a third she took with her.

She came and stood in the study hall of Rabbi Chiya.

She said to him: O master, convert me!

He said to her: Perhaps you have set your eyes on one of the students?

She took out the handwritten note she had with her.

[Rabbi Chiya] said to [the student]: Stand up and take possession of what you earned.

The same bedlinens that she spread out for you in sin she spreads out for you in a permitted manner.

This is the reward [for the mitzva of *tzitzit*] in this world. How much [reward there will be] in the World to Come I do not know!

(*Sifrei, Shelach* 115)

Many have discussed this story and given it different interpretations.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In the analysis below, I will offer another reading, which links the story to the biblical verses in the section dealing with *tzitzit*. Let us first examine the verses.

And the Lord said to Moshe, saying:

Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them **that they make them throughout their generations a fringe (*tzitzit*) on the corners of their garments,**

and that they put on the fringe of each corner a thread of blue (*tekheilet*).

And it shall be to you for a fringe, **that you may look upon it, and remember** all the commandments of the Lord, and do them;

**and that you go not about after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you go astray (*zonim*);**

that you may remember and do **all My commandments, and be holy to your God.**

**I am the Lord your God,** who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God:

**I am the Lord your God.**

(*Bamidbar* 15:37-41)

The sequence of the first verses in the section dealing with *tzitzit* teach that seeing the *tzitzit* is supposed to bring a person to remember God's commandments, and this is supposed to bring him not to stray after his heart and his eyes, and thus to be saved from sin. That is to say, the mitzva of *tzitzit* **prevents** a person from the outset from following after the desires of his heart and the sights of his eyes. In the story before us, the order is reversed: the person has already strayed after his heart and is lying in the prostitute's bed in some far-off location, moments before the sin, and there he is saved by the *tzitzit* which cut off his passion. The Torah's words, "after which you go astray," are understood here as referring to a concrete action which is taking place in the present.

The Torah speaks of seeing the *tzitzit*, whereas the story says: "His four fringes (*tzitziyot*) came and appeared to him as four witnesses and slapped him in the face." The phrase, "slapped him in the face," is used in rabbinic literature in the literal sense of striking a person’s face,[[2]](#footnote-2) but in our story it can certainly be understood in a metaphorical sense, as expressing the magnitude of the impression and astonishment that the man's *tzitziyot* leave upon him, when he removes his clothing for the purpose of sin, as if he has actually been slapped in the face.[[3]](#footnote-3) The prostitute's fear that he does not find her appealing indicates that from her perspective nothing exceptional has happened with the *tzitzit.* The profound impression upon seeing the *tzitziyot* is the man's personal experience, not something that anyone else could have perceived. Thus, her amazement is clear, and her response serves as proof for the interpretation offered here.

"His four fringes came and appeared to him as four witnesses and slapped him in the face." To what do the man's *tzitziyot* attest? What do they remind him of? Let us consider his words of explanation in response to the prostitute's question later in the story:

But there is a minor mitzva that the Lord, our God, commanded us.

And twice is it written in its regard: "I am the Lord your God," "I am the Lord your God."

"I am the Lord your God," I am the one who will reward.

"I am the Lord your God," I am the one who will punish.

This *derasha* relates to the final verse in the paragraph dealing with *tzitzit*: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God." The man's *tzitziyot* remind him of the words in the verse, and the *derasha* in their regard. The content of the *derasha* brings him to a state of sharp awareness of God, Who recompenses man for his deeds. He experiences a sort of blinding revelation — clear awareness that illuminates and penetrates him — which neutralizes his attraction to the woman sitting across from him. Thus, by way of a well-structured memory process — *tzitzit🡪* verse🡪 *derasha*🡪 inspiration — the mitzva of *tzitzit* returns the man to the study hall from whence he came. There he relearns the issue, and there he once again accepts upon himself the yoke of the *mitzvot*.

The protagonist of the story does not stray after his eyes. The end of the story teaches us that his home is in the study hall, that he is a disciple of Rabbi Chiya. He belongs to the world of hearing and oral transmissions, traditions that are passed down from teacher to student and taught verbally.

However, this element of hearing by itself does not maintain purity of heart. He hears about the woman, and strays after his heart. So too his entry into the prostitute's house is the result of his hearing the words of the maidservant. The *tzitziyot* that slap him in the face belong to the element of seeing. They awaken him from his imagination and from the fanciful scenery built around him and for him. He returns to the written verse, which is visible — and from there he returns to the world of oral transmission.

A stable spiritual world is founded on both seeing and hearing. The philosopher Gotthold Lessing divides the arts into seeing and hearing, visual and aural. The art of music is connected to hearing and is absorbed through a gradual auditory process, spread over time. The art of painting is connected to seeing and is taken in all at once. The man in the story plans a long time for his entry into the woman's house, and he is even referred to by her maidservant as "that man for whom you set a time." He needs a powerful, sudden experience from the realm of vision to save him from sin.

In contrast, the woman does not come from the world of hearing. She sees before her a man who has a revelation, a moving religious experience. Through him she encounters, all at once, an entire spiritual world, and the man himself — not as a faceless and nameless client, but as a man who has experienced an internal upheaval. In response to her question, "What flaw did you see in me?" she is overtaken by the element of writing:

He said to her: But there is a light mitzva that the Lord, our God, commanded us.

And twice **is it written** in its regard: "I am the Lord your God," "I am the Lord your God"…

She said to him: By the [Temple] service, I shall not let you go until **you write** for me your name, and the name of your city, and the name of the hall where you study Torah. And **he wrote** her his name, and the name of his city, and the name of his teacher, and the name of the hall where he studied Torah.

She got up and divided up all her money…

She came and stood in the study hall of Rabbi Chiya.

She said to him: O master, convert me!

He said to her: Perhaps you have set your eyes on one of the students?

**She took out the handwritten note she had with her.**

The man comes to her by way of hearing; she hears from him, but she reaches him through writing. In a certain sense, he is her "Written Torah," through which she draws strength on her journey.

His *tzitziyot* lead him to the letters and from there to inspiration. She sees him, and with the help of the letters in his handwritten note, she makes her way to the study hall of Rabbi Chiya.

The path that she paves for herself serves as a path for his return to the study hall. On her instructions, he defines himself as he has never defined himself before: his name, his place, his study hall. He even goes beyond her request:

She said to him: By the [Temple] service, I shall not let you go until **you write for me your name, and the name of your city, and the name of the hall** where you study Torah. And **he wrote her his name, and the name of his city, and the name of his teacher, and the name of the hall** where he studied Torah.

He writes the name of his teacher, thus including himself in the chain of listening and receiving. After what he has been through, he knows his name, his place, and his study hall.

They both need vision in order to arrive. He discovers the element of seeing; she enters through the gate of hearing. Together they will build a house that is permitted: one that has room for body and soul, for holiness and life, for process and experience, for hearing and seeing.

We noted earlier the connection between the story and the wording of the verses in the section dealing with *tzitzit*. In the table below, the verses are matched with different stages of the story, in such a way that illustrates the manner in which they are connected to the words in the verses:

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| And the Lord said to Moshe, saying:  Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them that they make them throughout their generations a fringe (*tzitzit*) on the corners of their garments, and that they put on the fringe of each corner a thread of blue (*tekheilet*). | It once happened that a certain person who was careful about the mitzva of *tzitzit* |
| And it shall be to you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them; | His four *tzitziyot* came and appeared to him as four witnesses and slapped him in the face. |
| and that you go not about after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you go astray; | He immediately slid down and sat on the ground. |
| that you may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy to your God. | [Long-term memory — internal change.]  The same bedlinens that she spread out for you in sin she spreads out for you in a permitted manner. |

The description of the essence of the mitzva is transformed in the story into a man who fulfills it in a perfect manner. The second line, "And it shall be to you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember," relates to the mitzva of *tzitzit's* involvement in the man's conduct. The next line relates to the immediate result of this involvement, whereas the fourth line relates to the process that occurs in its wake.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Thus, a strong inner connection become clear between the words of the Torah in the paragraph of *tzitzit* and the story told by *Chazal.* A reflection of the Divine command is found in the lives of Israel, which are conducted in relation to the Torah's *mitzvot* along the axis between the human and the Divine: man, who is not always capable of living in harmony with all of his strengths and failings, and with the processes that he undergoes; the influence of the Torah's *mitzvot* on him; and the God of Israel who loves them and saves them even in their times of smallness, who watches over them from the windows, peeking through the cracks.

**The reward along its side**

The declared objective of the story as it is presented in the opening statement of Rabbi Natan: "Rabbi Natan said: There is no mitzva in the Torah that does not have its reward at its side," is the issue of the reward to be received for the keeping of God's commandments. The conclusion of the story is similar to its opening:

He said to him: Stand up and take possession of what you earned.

The same bedlinens that she spread out for you in sin she spreads out for you in a permitted manner.

This is the reward [for the mitzva of *tzitzit*] in this world. How much [reward there will be] in the World to Come I do not know!

Together they constitute a uniform framework for the entire story. The motif of reward which appears once again in the very heart of the consciousness of and recovery from sin, in the content of the *derasha*: "'I am the Lord your God,' I am the one who will reward. 'I am the Lord your God,' I am the one who will punish," connects the story related in the *Sifrei* to the framework.

Now let us answer the following questions: What is the relationship between the story and the issue of reward? Should the story and the framework in which it is told be explained as a single entity? If so, what is the explanation?

On the face of it, the entire story stands on its own, and there is no inner connection between the many processes contained in it and the issue of reward. Reward is explicitly mentioned with respect to the man's marriage to the prostitute after her conversion, as reward in this world, and in relation to the unknown spiritual reward in the World to Come. However, there is also another reward in the story — the Divine help that saves the man from sin. The dramatic presentation of the seeing of the *tzitzit* — "His four *tzitziyot* came and appeared to him as four witnesses and slapped him in the face," explained above as a metaphor — comes to emphasize God's intervention in the man's situation, in order to save him from sin.

If so, the story teaches that there are three kinds of reward for performing a mitzva: 1. rescue from sin; 2. reward in this world; 3. reward in the World to Come. They are all future rewards, and they all arrive from the outside (earning the love of the woman, the *tzitzit* that slap him in the face, and the reward in the World to Come). Perhaps even the introductory words to the story — "There is no mitzva in the Torah that does not have its reward at its side. Go and learn from the mitzva of *tzitzit*. It once happened that a certain person who was careful about the mitzva of *tzitzit*…" — relate, in an expanded form, to this manner of reward.

According to this, the three forms of reward appear one after the other, in chronological order. From the beginning to the *tzitzit* — the reward of protection from sin; from the rejection of sin to the permitted marriage — the reward in this world; the conclusion — the reward in the World to Come.

So too the external structure of the story — the opening relating to the issue of reward; the story itself, at the core of which stands reward; and the conclusion concerning the matter of reward — is a reflection of the comprehensive Divine view of the entire course of the story as reward for careful observance of the mitzvaof *tzitzit.* The man proceeds in his circles — he undergoes processes, acts, responds, falls and rises up — while some of the things that happen along the way reflect the supernal providence that shapes his way.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Let us conclude by looking at the man's *derasha*: "'I am the Lord your God,' I am the one who will reward; 'I am the Lord your God,' I am the one who will punish." Does the consciousness of reward or punishment stop a person at the time of one’s offense? If one believes in God and in reward and punishment, then the answer is yes, provided that this is not merely abstract recognition. The *tzitzit* which stands out prominently on the corner of one's garmenthas the power to deter one from sin. One who is careful about the mitzvaof *tzitzit* merits protection from sin through it.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See Zev Harvey, "The Pupil, The Harlot and the Fringe Benefits," *Prooftexts* 6,3 (1986), p. 259-264; Alon Goshen-Gottstein, "*Mitzvat Tzitzit*, *Ha-zona Ve-hasippur* *Ha-darshani*," *Machashevet Chazal: Divrei Ha-kenes Ha-rishon* (Haifa: 1990), pp. 45-58; Admiel Kosman, *Mo’ed* 16 (2007), pp. 61-74; idem., *Massekhet Nashim* (Jerusalem: 2007), pp. 140-146. See also Shemuel Faust, "*Al Matzaot U-masaot*," *Makor Rishon*, *Musaf Shabbat*, <http://www.daat.ac.il/chazal/maamar.asp?id=234>; Daniel Shershevsky, "*Tekheilet Doma Le-khisei Ha-kavod*," *Alon Shevut* 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rabbi Chama said in the name of Rabbi Chanina bar Rabbi Yitzchak: [Kayin] went out happy…

   Adam met him, and said to him: What happened with your case?

   He said to him: I repented and came to a compromise.

   Adam began to slap himself on the face. He said: This is the power of repentance, and I did not know! (*Bereishit Rabba* 22, 16)

   The king said: … Take the basket, and slap him on the face. And so they did, and slapped him on the face, until his face swelled up, and they broke his eyes. (*Tanchuma* [Buber], *Kedoshim* 8) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. According to the parallel source in BT *Menachot* 44a, which speaks of ladders between the beds: "She went up to the highest bed and sat on it naked. He too went up to sit naked with her. His four fringes came and slapped him across the face." The *tzitziyot* come and slap him later, and therefore it is reasonable to say that a miracle is performed here. See Rashi, ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. According to this explanation, the mention of the Exodus in the last verse, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the Lord your God," is understandable. Just as I delivered you from Egypt, so do I deliver anyone who has *tzitzit* from sin and temptation! [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The relationship between what emerges from what we have said here and Ben Azzai's statement in *Avot* 4:2: "The reward for a mitzva is a mitzva*,*" needs to be examined. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)