BS”D

Parshas Shlach

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*During normal activities, during the pursuit of life and livelihood, Tzitzis is a reminder of the Mitzvos of Hashem.*

Don’t Follow Your Heart

At the end of this week’s Parsha, the Torah tells us about the Mitzvah of Tzitzis. The Tzitzis are supposed to contain a blue thread called *techeiles*. The Torah says, “You should look at it (the Tzitzis), and remember all of Hashem’s commandments… Do not follow your heart or your eyes in pursuit of which you have been led astray… You will be reminded and do all of My commandments, and be holy to your G-d.” (BaMidbar 15: 39, 40)

How does looking at the threads of the Tzitzis remind you to do all the Mitzvos?

Rashi says that the numerical value of the word Tzitzis ציצית is 600. Each fringe has eight strings and five knots so that the total came to 600 + 8 + 5 = 613. This is to remind us of all the 613 Mitzvos.

The Ramban says he doesn’t understand Rashi. First of all, to get the numerical value of 600 for the word Tzitzis, you have to write it with two “yuds.” The Torah, in fact, spells Tzitzis with only one yud (ציצת), so the value is 590. Furthermore, by Torah law, you only need six strings (although the custom is eight) and only two knows (although the custom is five). So you don’t have the second half of Rashi’s system; “eight” and “five” are not Torah law.

The Maharal defends Rashi as follows: Even though Tzitzis is written without the extra “yud,” both “yudin” are, in fact, pronounced, i.e., according to the way we actually pronounce the word, the numerical value is 600.

As far as getting the number 13 to add to the 600, perhaps in the time of the Torah, the custom was to make either 13 loops (so we do get the number thirteen) or seven loops that have six spaces between them, so we also get 13 (7 + 6). The Torah gives you various options how to tie the Tzitzis. The Torah is telling you when you tie the Tzitzis, do it in a way that will remind you of the 613 Mitzvos. So when we make Tzitzis according to our custom of eight strings and five knots, we have chosen to incorporate the “613” in that particular way. By doing this, we are creating a reminder of the Mitzvos that we are supposed to remember by looking at the Tzitzis.

The Ramban himself learns that it is primarily the blue thread that reminds us of the Mitzvos. The sages said that the blue of the techeiles is like the blue of the sea which in turn is like the blue sky, which in turn is like G-d’s Throne. Also, mystically the techeiles represents the Sefirah of Malchus, Divine Kinship, thus reminding us of all the Mitzvos of serving the A-lmighty King.

The Sforno explains that the Tzitzis are like the sign the servant wears to show who his master is. The Tzitzis is such a sign to show we are servants of Hashem.

The Midrash compares the Tzitzis to a life-line. If someone is drowning in the sea, the captain of the ship throws the person a rope and tells him, hang on to the rope. If you let go, you will drown. The strings of the Tzitzis tell us the same thing; hang on to the Mitzvos, keep connected to G-d, and you will live.

The Torah tells us not to follow our hearts and eyes. Rashi says the heart and the eyes are the provocateurs of sin. The eyes look at something, the heart desires it, and then the rest of the body follows, doing all the bad things he sees and wants.

The sages (Brachos 12b) say, the heart represents heresy (*meenus*), the eyes immorality, the bad desires idolatry. So the Tzitzis reminds us to control our desires and not indulge in grievous sin.

There’s a well-known story in the Gemora (Menachos 44a) about the power of Tzitzis. I’ll write a short version of the story:

A man, who happened to be very careful in the observance of the Mitzvah of Tzitzis, heard of a very beautiful courtesan who charged a small fortune for her services. The man journeyed to her location and was ushered in to her presence. As he removed his garments, his four Tzitzis tapped his face. He got off the bed and sat on the floor. The amazed courtesan asked why he rejected her at the last moment. He said to her, you are the most beautiful woman I can imagine, but my four Tzitzis appeared before me as four witnesses to what I was about to do, and therefore I must abstain. (The story ends that the woman was so impressed that she eventually converted to Judaism and married that man.)

It’s interesting to note that the story says this individual had always been careful about the Mitzvah of Tzitzis. That seems to also mean that he did see and experience the Mitzvah as a means of remembering Hashem. On this occasion, though, he “followed his heart and eyes” and was about to sin. Yet the Tzitzis and what they stand for gave him the strength to overcome his desire and indeed “be holy to your G-d.”

By the way, “Do not follow your heart…” or more literally, “Do not stray because of your heart…” is considered a specific Mitzvah of the 613 Mitzvos. In fact, it’s a Mitzvah, as the Sefer HaChinuch points out, one is obligated to do 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It means, don’t follow your impluses, your idle fancies, your Yetzer Hora. Control your impulses, and do not indulge in any sinful activity.

The Ibn Ezra learns that to not follow the heart and the eyes means not follow every indulgence and pleasure that you seek. For if your lives become focused on seeking pleasure, you will automatically stray from G-d, for overindulging the heart defiles the soul. Rather, as the Torah continues, “You shall be holy to G-d.” Tzitzis reminds you of your purpose; a G-dly, holy life, not a self-indulgent one.

I’d like to add one important point. Nowadays, we think of the Tzitzis as a ritual garment worn as a Tallis during morning prayer or as a smaller garment worn usually between the undershirt and the shirt (tallis katan). Actually in the time of the Torah and even later in Talmudic times, the Tzitzis was not a ritual garment. The ordinary garments of those days generally had four corners and were wrapped around the body as a sort of cloak or upper garment. These garments required Tzitzis. So Tzitzis is a reminder during normal activities, during the pursuit of life and livelihood, of the Mitzvos of Hashem. Whatever you may be doing, hold on to those strings, hold on to that lifeline. Being holy to G-d is not merely an activity in the synagogue. It’s a full-time job. It’s a way of life. It *is* life.