Jewish Tribune – Shelach

**Do the Right Thing, Not the Easy Thing**

One of the mantras I often seem to be telling my children and students is “Do the right thing, not the easy thing”. Choice comes our way the whole time, deep down, we know what the right thing to do is.

For a teenage boy, on a hot summer’s day, one of those choices is whether to wear tzitzis or not. For many, thankfully, this seems outlandish. How can he NOT wear tzitzis!? Isn’t it part of the uniform of a proud Jew?

Moreover, we know that שקולה מצות ציצית כנגד כל המצות כולן, tzitzis is compared to all the mitzvos (Menachos 43b). We also know that the gematria of the word ציצית is 600, which together with the 5 knots and 8 strings, adds up to 613, the total number of the taryag mitzvos.

But on a hot summer’s day, not all boys know or internalise this. And over the years, when I discuss this with some of them, the more learned amongst them will tell me: “But Rabbi, wearing tzitzis is optional!”

The trouble is they’re right. The mitzva of tzitzis is known as a mitzva “kiyumis”. You see there are two types of mitzva – chiyuvis and kiyumis. Tefillin is chiyuvis - obligatory. It is not optional. As an adult male, I have to put on tefillin every weekday, rain or shine, tired or not tired.

But some mitzvos are kiyumis, including the mitzva of tzitzis. In other words, if I am wearing a four cornered garment, I must put on tzitzis. But I do not have an obligation to wear a four cornered garment. This often comes as a shock to the unfamiliar.

Of course, I try to explain the importance of tzitzis. I quote maamorei Chazal and tell the powerful anecdote of the Vilna Gaon on his deathbed when his talmidim saw he was crying. The talmidim were baffled. Here was a giant, who had lived the most productive of lives. These talmidim testified about the Gaon that he slept only 2 in every 24 hours. And even in those two hours, his lips were moving. At the levaya, the foremost talmid of the Gra, Rav Chaim Volozhin said of his Rebbi, that he was a throwback of the times of the Rishonim!

When questioned, the Gaon explained. “I know that in a few moments I will take leave of this world, a world where for a few coins I can buy a pair of tzitzis and fulfil a mitzva from the Torah, and soon this eternal opportunity will be gone forever.”

But it has bothered me. Why indeed is the mitzva of tzitzis not mandatory?

Another question. The parsha of tzitzis appears in this week’s sedrah, Shelach Lecha. Why here? What has tzitizis to do with the meraglim and the sad story of the spies that is the main theme of the sedrah?

Furthermore, there are some striking parallels in the Torah’s recording of the episode of the meraglim and the parsha of tzitizis.

Both use the words וּרְאִיתֶם and וַיָּתֻרוּ.

**וּרְאִיתֶם** אֶת הָאָרֶץ מַה הִוא

You shall see what [kind of] land it is (Bamidbar 13,18)

וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְצִיצִת **וּראִיתֶם** אֹתוֹ

This shall be tzitzis for you, and when you see it… (Bamidbar 15,39)

וַיַּעֲלוּ **וַיָּתֻרוּ** אֶת הָאָרֶץ

They went up and explored the land (Bamidbar 13,21)

**וְלֹא תָתוּרוּ** אַחֲרֵי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרֵי עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם זֹנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם

And you shall not stray after your hearts and after your eyes after which you are going astray. (Bamidbar 15,39)

Rabbi Frand offers an interesting answer in the name of Rabbi Nochum Lansky. Chazal tell us that sending the spies was optional. This is hinted to in the opening words of the sedrah. שְׁלַח לְךָ - send for yourself. As Rashi tells us, לדעתך, אני איני מצוה לך, אם תרצה שלח

 - according to your understanding, I am not commanding you to, if you wish to, send!

They took something that was optional, and it turned into an unmitigated disaster.

To atone for this, HKBH gave us a mitzva which is optional, and we have the choice to perform it. As it were, Hashem is saying, I am giving you a chance to rectify things. I am giving you an optional mitzvah and instead of turning into a tragedy, you could make it into a very special and beautiful thing.

That is why the mitzvah of tzitzis is so fundamental. Not only is it a way of achieving atonement, but it reminds us that in life, there are many things that are optional, but it is a question of doing the right thing not the easy thing. And for a teenager on a hot summer’s day, that is not always easy.

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