

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Sh'lach
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Sh'lach – Tie a knot in your handkerchief

Let me tell you a story about a little boy called Reuven.

One day, Reuven had a knot tied in his handkerchief. In maths class, when he should have been listening to the teacher, he took out his handkerchief and placed it on his desk. He admired the knot and showed it to his friend. It was a beautiful knot, well-tied. When he got home from school, his mother asked him if he remembered to stop off and pick up some flour and sugar on his way home so she could bake a cake for his father's surprise party. "Oh no!", he said. "I totally forgot". "But how could you forget?", exclaimed his mother, "you tied a knot in your handkerchief especially to remember!" "D'oh!!! That's what it was for!"

Apparently, people used to tie a knot in their handkerchief when they had to remember to do something (well at least that's how the cliché goes). The knot would remind them that they have to remember something. Either the knot would trigger their memory, or it would prompt them to rack their brains trying to remember. Handkerchiefs are less common these days. Some people put their watch on the other hand to remind themselves of something. I know someone who is always putting their watch on the 'other hand' to remember something important. Since their watch is almost always on the 'other hand', when they have something really important to remember they put their watch on the proper hand for a change.

All wisdom comes from the Torah. The source for tying a knot in your handkerchief could very well be in the following paragraph this week's Parasha. This paragraph should be familiar since we recite it twice a day, every day, as the third paragraph of the Shema:

Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: "Speak to Bnei Yisrael and you shall say to them that they shall make for themselves tzitzit [fringes] on the corners of their garments, throughout their generations, and they shall affix a thread of t'chelet [wool dyed blue] on the fringe of each corner. This shall be tzitzit for you, and when you will see it, you will remember all the commandments of Hashem to perform them, and you shall not wander after your hearts and after your eyes after which you stray. So that you shall remember and perform all My mitzvot and you shall be holy to your G-d. I am Hashem your G-d, Who took you out of the land of Mitzrayim to be your G-d, I am Hashem your G-d" (Bamidbar 15:37-41)

There is Biblical mitzva to recite Shema twice a day. However, there is a dispute as to which paragraphs are required according to Torah law and which were added on by the Rabbis. Most opinions hold that the above paragraph was added by the Rabbis. Why did the Rabbis add this paragraph? The Gemara¹ teaches us that there are five important messages that are included in this paragraph:²

- The mitzva of tzitzit
- The Exodus from Mitzrayim
- The acceptance of the yoke of mitzvot
- The need to beware of heretical opinions and sinful thoughts
- An admonition against idolatrous thoughts

There is actually no positive mitzva to wear tzitzit. There is just a prohibition to wear a four cornered garment without tzitzit. These days, four cornered garments are not so commonly used as clothing. But the Rabbis, aware of how precious this mitzva is, encourage us to wear a four cornered garment specifically so that we can fulfil the

¹ Brachot Daf 12b

² The first three items on the list are mentioned explicitly. See the Gemara there which explains how the other messages can be derived from the wording of this paragraph.

requirement of tzitzit.³ The story is told of the Vilna Gaon on his death bed, holding his tzitzit and crying. When asked why he was crying, he explained that in this world, one can perform such a precious mitzva for such a small price. But where he was going, to the World to Come, he would no longer have the ability to perform this mitzva.

There is a lot that can be said about the mitzva of tzitzit. For example, after bringing the mitzva of tzitzit, the pasuk quoted above says: “and you shall not wander after your hearts and after your eyes after which you stray”. Why is “heart” mentioned before “eyes”? Isn’t that the wrong order? Don’t we normally see something first and then our hearts are stirred up and then we stray? But that is all a topic for another day.⁴

This week we will focus on one aspect of the mitzva of tzitzit. The aspect that is relevant to our story of Reuven and his knotted handkerchief. The pasuk states as follows:

*“...and when you will **see** it, you will **remember** all the commandments of Hashem to **perform** them,”*

Tie some knots in some string. And when you see the knotted strings, that should remind you that there is something important that you need to remember i.e., to keep Hashem’s mitzvot. How does this work? The pasuk gives us a very simple formula. **See. Remember. Do.**

- **See:** when you see the tzitzit
- **Remember:** remember Hashem’s mitzvot (the tzitzit themselves hint to the 613 mitzvot⁵)
- **Do:** perform the mitzvot. Don’t just remember them... do them!

The mitzva of tzitzit provides us with a visual reminder to perform the mitzvot. There is a debate amongst the poskim as to whether the tzitzit strings should ideally be kept out of one’s clothing on display, or tucked into one’s clothes. The Mishnah Berurah⁶ writes very strongly about the importance of leaving the tzitzit visible. On the other hand, the Arizal would keep his tzitzit strings tucked in. Most Sephardim follow the Arizal. Many Ashkenazim keep their strings out, but those who work among goyim often keep them tucked in. Some have the compromise of wrapping the strings around their belt and then tucking them in – so they are still visible but in a more discreet manner.

But either way, tzitzit strings are seen regularly. Men see them every morning when they put their tzitzit on and during Kriyat Shema. We see them at shul in the mornings when the men wear their tallit gadol. And if you have an active three-year-old boy at home, you will inevitably see tzitzit strings hanging out everywhere – out of shirt sleeves, or tangled up in his shoelaces (I’m not sure how that happens).

But when we see tzitzit strings, do we remember what we are supposed to? Or are we like Reuven in the story above, and forget about what we are meant to be recalling.

When men recite the third paragraph of Shema, we hold the tzitzit in our hands, kiss them, and pass them in front of our eyes⁷. That is a great opportunity for us to remember the simple message: See the tzitzit. Remember Hashem’s mitzvot. Do them. And women who recite this paragraph of Shema can obtain the same message, even without holding tzitzit in their hands.

Let’s try something this week:

1. When reciting the third paragraph of the Shema, focus on the meaning of the words and the precious mitzva of tzitzit.
2. When you see tzitzit strings, remember Hashem’s mitzvot. And then do them.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ See Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 26:6 and see the story in Menachot 44a where an angel informed Rav Ketina that in a time of wrath, one is punished for failing to wear a four-cornered garment and thereby bypassing the requirement for tzitzit.

⁴ Perhaps next year we will focus on this BE”H.

⁵ The word tzitzit in gematria adds up to 600. When you add the eight strings and five knots that we have on each corner we have a total of 613, the number of mitzvot in the Torah (Rashi to Bamidbar 15:39).

⁶ Siman 8, seif katan 26.

⁷ Some poskim (such as Rav Moshe Feinstein) did not kiss their tzitzit during the third paragraph of Shema because it interfered with their concentration. But the common custom is to do so. Especially for those of us who don’t have such good concentration anyway.