

SHELACH (NUMBERS 13:1-15:41)**Fringe Benefits**

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Isn't it amazing that people can look at the same thing and see two different things?

Moses acquiesced to the requests of his People and sent twelve spies from the Paran Desert to explore the Promised Land. The selected reconnaissance men were ranking members of their respective tribes. Each was a distinguished, righteous man. The 40-day mission concluded with a report to the nation. Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, eventually settled in the Land of Israel with the Israelites. The other ten died in disgrace in the Paran Desert.

What had happened? All twelve spies saw a land that flowed with milk and honey. They all saw ample fruits and Canaanites. The problems began when their respective minds drew very different conclusions from the information their eyes had provided. Joshua and Caleb saw a beautiful and holy land that G-d was prepared to give to them. Their fellow scouts saw an aggressive Canaanite fighting force that would repel any Israelite efforts to inhabit the land.

Caleb and Joshua were in the minority. The Israelites believed the negative reports of the majority and wanted to return to Egypt. They feared for the welfare of their wives and children. As a result, G-d decreed that they would get what they had asked for. They would NOT enter the land. Rather, the nation would wander in the desert for 40 years (one year for each day of the mission) until all of the adults who had rejected the Land of Israel had died. Only then would THEIR CHILDREN enter the land.

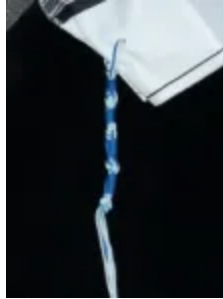
Amazing. These people personally witnessed G-d's ability to wreak havoc on the infrastructure of the powerful kingdom of Egypt. Yet, they were afraid of a couple Canaanite nations?!! They saw the Ten Plagues and the drowning of the Egyptian cavalry. They knew what G-d was able to do for them. Didn't they realize that with G-d's help THEY COULD EAT THE CANAANITES FOR LUNCH??!?!

Before answering this question, let us examine the end of this week's Torah Portion. There we find the Mitzvah of *Tzitzis* -- fringes:

"... they will make Tzitzis on the corners of their garments . . . and put a strand of "T'cheiles" (turquoise wool) on the Tzitzis of each corner . . . You will see it and remember all of G-d's Mitzvahs and fulfill them. You will not stray after you hearts and your eyes that have led you to immorality in the past."
(Numbers, 15:38-40)



How do the *Tzitzis*, these tassel-like fringes on the corner of a *Tallis



*remind us to serve G-d? One factor is the *T'cheiles*, the strand of wool that was dyed with the blood of the "*Chilozon*," a marine animal whose identity is no longer known. (Since we no longer know the identity of the appropriate source of this dye, we make our *Tzitzis* with white strings only. There are, however, some people who claim to have successfully identified the *Chilozon*, and have re-introduced this colored thread into their *Tzitzis*.) Gazing upon this turquoise thread reminds us of the sea. The sea, in turn, reminds us of the sky, which is similar to sapphire. Sapphire is similar to G-d's throne, the reminder of which should serve to distance us from sin. (Chullin, 89a)

Another way that *Tzitzis* keep us in line is through "*Gematria*," or association by numerical value. Every Hebrew letter has a numerical value. The letters of the word "*Tzitzis*" add up to 600, which, when added to the eight strings and five knots on each corner, give a total of 613, the number of commandments in the Torah. (Rashi, verse 39)

In all due respect, both of these concepts seem to be a stretch. Will color association and number games really keep us on the straight and narrow path, if we would be otherwise tempted to stray?

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, of Blessed Memory, asked an additional question: The Torah requires us to attach these fringes only if we are wearing a garment that has four corners. (For example, a *Tallis* or a poncho.) However, we are not technically required to put on such a garment if we don't want to. Strictly speaking, if we would choose not to put on the large *Tallis* that we wear in the synagogue, or the small *Tallis* that is worn under the shirt, we would be exempt from wearing *Tzitzis*. If the Mitzvah of *Tzitzis* is so important, why is it optional?

Rabbi Feinstein answered that *Tzitzis* are NOT an instant source of inspiration to those WHO CHOOSE NOT TO BE INSPIRED. If we are inclined to be receptive to the message of the *Tzitzis*, we will look at the color and think of G-d's throne. If we possess the spiritual sensitivity to WANT to be inspired, we

will do the math and come up with 613. If, however, we are not looking for this message, we'll see nothing but knotted blue and white strings.

Insisting that an uninterested person wear *Tzitzis* sends a message to a place where nobody's home!

We can now understand the situation of Joshua and Caleb vs. the "Paran Ten." The ten other spies weren't interested in "making *Aliyah*." Therefore, it was very easy to come up with reasons why the Land of Israel was unassailable. Where Joshua saw opportunity and G-d's all-powerful hand, the others saw roadblocks. Joshua and Caleb looked for G-d's power and might, and found them. The others looked for excuses and found them.

If we are open-minded and receptive to what G-d wants to tell us, we can see His influence everywhere. A little blue string or a blade of grass is all it takes. If we are not interested in what G-d wants to tell us, ten THOUSAND plagues won't impress us.

When I was little boy, my parents used to take me to concerts to hear classical music. It was a total waste of time and money. (Sorry, Mom.) Had a connoisseur of classical music been in the audience, he might well have observed that it was a masterful performance. I wouldn't know. I really wasn't interested, and was therefore impervious to the delightful pleasures of experiencing a maestro's talents.

We can appreciate all that G-d does for us if we are willing to pay attention. Prayer can be uplifting or it can be tedious. Torah study can be a revelation of the grandeur of G-d's majesty. It can also be a purely cold and intellectual pursuit. It all depends upon whether or not our "strings are attached."

As I write this at 5 o'clock in the morning, my daughter is sitting outside. G-d's world is re-awakening. She is watching the swirling fog lift and listening to a concert of chirps and tweets. "How," she asks, "can anyone deny G-d's presence in the world?"

Easily. They're sleeping.

Have a great Shabbos.

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