

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Shlach
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פרשת שלח
כ"ו בסיון תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Bemidbar* (Numbers) 13:1-15:41

In this *parasha*, Moshe sends scouts to explore the Land of Israel; ten of them convince the people that it will be too difficult to conquer the land; Hashem responds to their lack of confidence by punishing Bnei Yisrael with 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. The people are given the commandments of meal offerings, libations [liquid offerings], *challah* [an offering of dough], and *tzitit* [fringes on four-cornered garments].

The *maftir* of this *parasha* (the last verses of the Torah portion which are repeated before the *haftarah*) is probably familiar to many of us from *Tefilat Shacharit*, the morning prayers, because we recite them as the third paragraph of the *Shema* prayer [15:37-41]:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם וַעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם צִיצִית עַל־כַּנְּפֵי בְּגָדֵיהֶם לְדֹרֹתָם וְנָתַנּוּ עַל־צִיצִית הַכָּנָף פִּתְּיֵל תְּכֵלֶת: וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְצִיצִית וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֶת־כָּל־מִצְוֹת ה' וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְלֹא־תִתְּרוּ אַחֲרָי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרָי עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר־אַתֶּם זֹנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם: לִמְעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת־כָּל־מִצְוֹתַי וְהֵייתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם: אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם לְהָיוֹת לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: 'Speak to the Bnei Yisrael, that they make throughout their generations *tzitzit* [fringes] on the corners of their garments, and that they put with the fringe of each corner a thread of blue. And it shall be to you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of Hashem, and do them; and that you do not follow after your own heart and your own

eyes, which you use to go astray; that you may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy to your God. I am Hashem your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am Hashem your God.'

Many intriguing ideas appear in this paragraph, such as needing fringes on one's garment, not turning astray after our hearts and our eyes, remembering that God brought us up out of Egypt, and others.

One of the most intriguing is the "thread of blue" that we are supposed to put on the corners of our garments. This blue thread – פְּתִיל תְּכֵלֶת – *petil tekhelet* – is discussed in the Talmud, and according to the *Tosefta* [a compilation of the Jewish Talmudic oral law from the late 2nd century, which did not make it into the Talmud], the only source of the blue dye for the *petil tekhelet* is a *chilazon*, a very specific snail found off the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. During the Roman occupation in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE, making this blue dye was prohibited and we subsequently lost the capacity to make it, having forgotten how it was made. In the late 20th century, through a series of purposeful and inadvertent occurrences, we once again discovered the source of *tekhelet* and how to manufacture it. For more information on this aspect of *tekhelet*, please visit www.tekhelet.com or watch the following video on Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iXYd_4aQgtQ

Why are we commanded to put this kind of blue fringe on our clothes? Two "colorful" opinions shed light on this question and reinforce the idea of the spiritual nature of this physical symbol.

Sifre, one of the ancient books of Midrash Halacha, upon which the Mishna is based, states the following [*Shlach* 15:39]: "Rabbi Meir said: Whoever observes the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit* [the commandment of fringes on clothes], is considered as if he greeted the Divine Presence, for *tekhelet* reflects the sea, and the sea reflects the sky, and the sky reflects God's holy throne."

Another take on the spiritual meaning of the *tekhelet* on the *tzitzit* is offered in Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 14: "And the Rabbis said: Why does the Torah command us regarding *tekhelet*? Because *tekhelet* resembles sapphire, and the *Luchot* [the tablets containing the Ten Commandments] were of sapphire [see Rashi on *Shmot* 34:1 quoting the *Tanchuma*], to tell you that as long as the people of Yisrael gaze upon this *tekhelet* they are reminded of that which is inscribed on the

Luchot and they will fulfill it, and so it is written, 'And you shall see it and remember.'”

These sources not only serve to explain at least some reasons for the *mitzvah* of *tekhelet*; they also remind us that the physical world and the spiritual world resemble and reflect each other. Physical objects have spiritual meanings and spiritual concepts have physical manifestations. This notion derives from the idea that God, a Spiritual Being, created a physical world from the Divine Essence.

Whether this resonates with you personally or not, it is certainly an interesting concept upon which to ruminate.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Can you think of other reasons the Torah tells us to put a blue thread on the corner of our garments?
- What other physical objects can we find spiritual meaning in? How is this meaning manifested?
- Bringing together the two opinions quoted above, why do think the midrash claims that the *luchot* were made of sapphire?