



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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WHY JEWS HAVE CHUTZPAH

A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman אה ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

KI TEITZEI

WHY JEWS HAVE CHUTZPAH

“Sabra” is the word used to denote native-born Israelis. But where did this word come from? A sabra is a fruit that grows in Israel. The sabra, or prickly pear, is covered with sharp thorns on the outside—but is soft and sweet on the inside.

It’s the same thing with Israelis: abrasive on the outside, but soft and sweet on the inside!

Some say that this is true not just for Israelis, but for Jews in general—when dealing with others, Jews are also often “rough”. But why is this?

In this week’s Torah portion, we learn about the mitzvah of tzitzis. According to the Torah, any four-cornered garment requires the tzitzis fringes. Now, what is the reason for this mitzvah? Everyone knows the mitzvah from the third chapter of the Shma prayer: “And you shall see it and remember all of G-d’s mitzvos”—by means of physically viewing the tzitzis, one is reminded of all the mitzvos.

But this provokes the question: How exactly does the mitzvah of tzitzis remind us of all the other mitzvos, more than any other mitzvah?

One well-known explanation is cited by Rashi, in the Talmud (Tractate Menachos 43b). There, Rashi points out that the Hebrew word “tzitzis” is numerically equivalent to 600 (every Hebrew letter has a numerical value, and the Hebrew letters that compose the word “tzitzis” add up to 600). Now, if you take 600 and add the eight strings and five knots that each fringe contains, you get 613—which reminds us of the 613 mitzvos.

But a person would have to be a serious Torah scholar for this reminder to work. Firstly, he would have to know how to read Hebrew. Secondly, he would have to know the numerical equivalents of all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and thirdly, he would have to be aware of the fact that each fringe has exactly eight strings, plus five knots. So it’s a bit hard to say that this is the simple meaning of “and you shall see it and remember...”—that just by looking at the tzitzis, you’ll immediately be reminded of all the mitzvos.

So Rashi cites another explanation. He says that the Hebrew word “tzitzis” is grammatically related to the Hebrew word “maytzitz,” which means “peeking.” The word “maytzitz” appears in a verse in Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs, which states, “maytzitz min hacharakim,” meaning, “peeking through the cracks.” Rashi explains that through tzitzis, G-d is maytzitz, G-d peeks, at the Jew constantly. Thus, the word tzitzis itself reminds the Jew of G-d and, by extension, of all the mitzvos.

But to understand that, one also needs to be at least half a Torah scholar.

So there’s another explanation in the Talmud. Tractate Menachos tells us that while the Temple stood, tzitzis weren’t made the way they are made today, with all the strings simple white. Back then, one string out of each set of eight was dyed blue with a blue dye called “techeiles.” The Talmud tells us that “the techeiles [strings of the tzitzis] looked like [the color of] the sea, and the sea looked like [the color of] the sky, and the sky [looked like] the Throne of Glory.” And Rashi explains this piece of Talmud to mean that “from the power of the techeiles, one is reminded of He Who sits on the throne.”

What does that mean? It means that the techeiles reminds us of Heaven—and the techeiles-colored tzitzis remind us G-d. However, for 2,000 years, we have not had techeiles.

So along comes another explanation. This one is cited in the Code of Jewish Law, Laws of Tzitzis 24:1: tzitzis are “like a person who warns his friend about something by tying a knot on his belt to remind him.” Apparently, people used to tie strings on to their belts or other garments to remind themselves of various things. In like manner, the Code tells us, we tie “five knots symbolizing the Five Books of the Torah on four corners so that whichever way we turn, we remember the mitzvos.”

Certainly, all these explanations are correct. But for a five-year-old studying the simple meaning of the text, it’s still hard to understand how “and you shall see them and remember...” means that when you physically look at your tzitzis, you should be reminded of all the mitzvos. After all, when a person looks at his tzitzis, what does he see? Strings!

Now, what’s the purpose of a string? To tie and bind two separate things together.

Now, let’s go back to the mitzvos. What does the word “mitzvah” mean?

If you ask a man on the street, “What does ‘mitzvah’ mean?”, he’s likely to tell you that it means “a good deed,” like helping a little old lady across the street or giving charity.

But there are mitzvos that don't necessarily fall into the category of "good deed." For example, circumcision is not necessarily a "good deed"—just ask the baby and see what he says... Blessing the lulav is a mitzvah, but there's no good deed involved—you're not helping anyone by waving a palm branch around. Likewise, eating matzah on Passover is a mitzvah—but there's no "good deed" involved.

Chasidic philosophy explains that the Hebrew word "mitzvah" is related to the Aramaic word "tzavsa," which means "bond." In other words, a mitzvah is something that binds G-d and the universe together. For example, when a person puts a mezuzah on the door of his house, he binds the house to G-d. When a Jewish boy says a blessing on his food, he binds his food to G-d—meaning that he recognizes that the food belongs to the Creator and that He is the one who created it and provided him with food. Likewise, when a person gives charity of his own money, he binds his money to G-d.

Thus, the mitzvos are strings that bind the universe with G-d. And therefore, when the Jew sees strings dangling from his garment, he is reminded of all the mitzvos, since the entire goal of the mitzvos is to bind and tie the universe with G-d.

But to get the string into the garment or into anything, one first needs to make a hole in the garment. And to make the hole, one needs a "needle"—and the needle is sharp. With the point of the needle, one pokes a hole in the garment and thus threads the string into the garment.

The Rebbe teaches us that the Jew is the "needle," and his mission is to make a "hole" in this material world so as to thread the mitzvah into it.

The problem is that the world often resists spirituality, so the needle needs to be sharp and pointed so as to succeed in threading the mitzvah into it.

And that's why Jews are especially prickly and have a lot of chutzpah—because without it, they'd never succeed in threading mitzvos into life in this world.

In order to stand strong as a Jew, one must have a little chutzpah. For example, many people are embarrassed to put up a mezuzah on their office door—lots of employees pass by and they would start asking questions, and the Jew would not have answers for them. So he decides that it's better not to have it up in the first place, and that's the end of it.

Other times, there are parties where the food isn't kosher. Now, they don't necessarily want to eat non-kosher food, but on the other hand, they don't want to make a fuss—

so they say they're vegetarian, or that they're allergic to that particular food, or that they're on a special diet that doesn't allow that particular food.

That's why a Jew needs chutzpa to successfully overcome all these tests—which makes all Jews sabras, not just Israelis. We are the needle that threads the world together with G-d. Yes, we are prickly from time to time, even to each other—but without that sharpness, the Jews would never stand strong.

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