

## What is the purpose of the *tzitzit*?

*YHVH said to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelites and instruct them to make tzitzit on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and attach a cord of t'chelet (azur) to the tzitzit at each corner. This shall be your tzitzit, that you may look at it and remember all the mitzvot of YHVH and do them, and do not go scouting-around after your heart and after your eyes which you go whoring after; in order that you may remember and observe all My mitzvot and be holy to your God. I am YHVH your God who took you out of the land of Mitzrayim to be for you a God; I am YHVH your God. (Numbers 15:37-41)*

### ***Sea, Sky, Sapphire***

**Talmud, Hullin 89a:** R. Meir says. Why is azure (*t'chelet*) singled out from all the varieties of colors? Because azure resembles the color of the sea, and the sea resembles the color of the sky, and the sky resembles the color of a sapphire, and a sapphire resembles the color of the Throne of Glory, as it is said (Exodus 24): *And they saw the God of Israel and there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone; and it is also written: The likeness of a throne as the appearance of a sapphire stone.*

### ***Looking & Remembering***

**RaShi** (R. Shlomo Yitzhaki, 11<sup>th</sup> c.): It is called "*tzitzit*" because "*you shall look at it,*" as in "peering through [*meitzitz*] the lattice" (Song of Songs 2:9). *And remember all the mitzvot of YHVH: because the numerical value of the letters of the word tzitzit is 600, and there are 8 threads and 5 knots, so that you have 613 [which is the traditional number of mitzvot stated in the Torah]. And do not go scouting-around after your heart and after your eyes: "scouting around" is the same verb as in "and they returned from scouting the land" (13:25). The heart and the eyes are the "spies" of the body—they act as its agents for sinning: the eye sees, the heart covets and the body commits the sin. On the corners [kanfei] of their garments: this is an allusion to "You have seen how I bore you on eagles wings [kanfei nesharim] and brought you to Me" (Exodus 19:4).*

**S'forno** (16<sup>th</sup> c.): *Look at it and remember all the mitzvot of YHVH:* Remember that you are servants of Blessed God, and that you received God's mitzvot with a vow and oath. When you see the *tzitzit*, which is like a king's seal upon his servants, you will stop following after your hearts' inclination to gain wealth and honor, even through theft.

**Malbim** (R. Meir Yehudah Leibush ben Yehiel Michael, 19<sup>th</sup> c.): The human soul and its powers were created upright, and the heart naturally tends towards the good. However, human beings spoil their nature, devising evil in their hearts. That is why it could not simply say *velo teilkhuh aharei levevkhem* (do not go after your hearts), but rather *velo taturu aharei levavkhem* (do not go scouting after your hearts). If one were to walk according to the paths paved by the heart in its original nature, his ways would be good and straight.

(over)

## ***God & Creation***

**Meshekh Chochma** (R. Meir Simcha Hakohen, 19<sup>th</sup> c): It is as if Creation cloaks the Creator...Therefore creation in general is called *begged* - a garment. As pointed out in our introduction, that creation was not complete, and the Creator left it for us to complete and perfect... and therefore the Creator commanded us to observe the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, to teach us that reality is but a garment which has - at both ends - strands which have not as yet been woven, and is therefore in need of tassels and locks... And you, children of Adam, if you weave creation, you will become partner to God in the act of Creation, as, in the words of the Sages, "Every judge who dispenses true justice is considered as though he is the partner of God in Creation" (Talmud, Sanhedrin 99).

**Sefat Emet** (R. Yehudah Leib of Ger, early 20<sup>th</sup> c): *That you may look at it*: this is read by the Sages to mean that you shall see God's Presence, for "whoever fulfills the mitzvah of *tzitzit* merits seeing the face of the Shekhina" (Talmud, Menachot 43b). Thus we may look at the glory of God's kingdom, which exists in every thing, as it says, "*The whole earth is full of God's glory*" (Isaiah 6:3). But it is hidden, and a truly wholehearted act of self-negation allows one to see God's shining glory. Such is the meaning of wrapping oneself in *tzitzit* to "look at it/It," meant in the simplest sense: to desire only to see and come know the glory of God's name...This means that there is light locked away in each thing, hidden from us. But by negating ourselves, turning our sensations all toward God and becoming deaf to all else, the secret light is revealed to us. This too is the meaning of "look at it"—*oto*—this also means "His/Its sign" (*ot*), which refers to the sign that is within each thing, bearing witness to the Blessed One. All the creatures of heaven and earth are God's hosts, each one a sign of God's kingdom, which in this world remains hidden.

## ***Fuzzy Boundaries***

**Rabbi Arthur Waskow**: What are *tzitzit*? They are a specially tied and knotted set of fringes that many male Jews and some women once wore on all their garments, and more recently on the ceremonial prayer shawl. They seem abstract, but not only is there a tradition of the meaning of the numbers of turns and knots, but as a gestalt the *tzitzit* honor and celebrate the fact that between individuals within a community there must not be high, hard fences but soft and fading boundaries. These fringes are a mixture of "my" cloth and "communal" air. In biblical tradition, this was affirmed by assigning the produce of the corners of "my" field to the communal needs of the poor, the stranger, the orphan. The field was "mine" (under God's ultimate ownership), but its corners faded away into communal space. In the new pattern shaped by the rabbis, the fringes of "my" garment played this role. Just as the shared communal use of the corners of the field betokened God's share in my property, so the communal fringes of the garment betokened God's share in my identity. (*Godwrestling Round 2: Ancient Wisdom, Future Paths*)