



JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES

UNRAVELING THE MITZVAH OF TZITZIS

SOURCE AND DISCUSSION SHEET



The Torah contains a fascinating biblical commandment to tie tassels, known as tzitzis, to the corners of a four cornered garment we wear. This mitzvah is so central to Judaism that it is even mentioned in the Shema.

The clothing we wear can influence not only ourselves, but even others as well. This dual role is pronounced in the mitzvah of tzitzis. The tzitzis attached to our clothing serve as a constant reminder during our action-packed days that the Jewish people aspire to connect with G-d and infuse life with profound ethical ideals. In this module we will explore the mitzvah of tzitzis and address the following question:

Q: Why is the mitzvah of tzitzis so important? What impact can some dangling strings make in a person's life?

The Torah commands the wearing of tzitzis on a four-cornered garment.

SOURCE 1: *Bamidbar (Numbers) 15:37-41 (translation by Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, The Living Torah) – The Torah source for the mitzvah of tzitzis, recited morning and evening in our daily prayers.*

G-d spoke to Moses, telling him: Speak to the Israelites and have them make tassels (tzitzit) on the corners of their garments for all generations. They shall include a twist of sky-blue wool in the corner tassels. These shall be your tassels, and when you see them, you shall remember all of G-d's commandments so as to keep them.

You will then not stray after your heart and eyes, which [in the past] have led you to immorality. You will thus remember and keep all My commandments, and be holy to your G-d. I am G-d your Lord, who brought you out of Egypt to be your G-d. I am G-d your Lord.

ויאמר יקוק אל משה לאמר: דבר אל בני ישראל ואמרת אלהם ועשו להם ציצת על כנפי בגדיהם לדרתם ונתנו על ציצת הכנף פתיל תכלת: והיה לכם לציצת וראיתם אתו וזכרתם את כל מצות יקוק ועשיתם אתם ולא תתרו אחרי לבבכם ואחרי עיניכם אשר אתם זנים אחריהם: למען תזכרו ועשיתם את כל מצותי והייתם קדשים לאלהיכם: אני יקוק אלקיכם אשר הוצאתי אתכם מארץ מצרים להיות לכם לאלהים אני יקוק אלהיכם

Q: How do you think the tzitzis remind us of all of the mitzvot?

The following two sources see the tzitzis as a powerful symbolic mitzvah which reminds us of Torah and G-d's commandments:

SOURCE 2: *Rashi, Bamidbar 15:39 On Tzitzis*

"You shall remember all of G-d's commandments" – the gematria [numeric value], of the word tzitzis is 600, plus 8 strings [four doubled over] and 5 knots [per tassel], is 613 (the number of mitzvot in the Torah)

וזכרתם את כל מצות ה' – שמנין גימטריא של ציצית שש מאות, ושמונה חוטין, וחמשה קשרים, הרי תרי"ג

SOURCE 3: *Ba'al HaTurim, Bamidbar 15:39*

"You shall remember it." Remembrance is written in the context of tzitzis; therefore, G-d commanded there to be **four tzitzis on the four corners of each garment so that anywhere a person looks he will remember.** And on each one there are **five knots** in order to remember the **five books of the Torah.** Each one has **eight strings** so that a person will refrain from transgressing with their eight organs which can lead a person astray. They are: **ears, eyes, mouth, nose, hands, feet, sexual organs and heart.**

וזכרתם אותו. כתיב זכירה בציצית. לכן צוה לעשות ד' ציציות בארבע כנפות בגדיו שכל מקום שיפנה יזכור. ובכל אחד ה' קשרים כדי שיזכור לחמשה חומשי תורה. ויש בכל אחד שמונה חוטין שימנע מלעשות עבירה בשמונה אברים המרגילים לאדם לעבירה ואלו הן: אזנים, עינים, פה, חוטם, ידים, רגלים, ערוה והלב

Q: Do you think this remembrance is merely a reminder to fulfill the other mitzvot of the Torah, or is the mitzvah of tzitzis somehow a fulfillment of the entire Torah itself?

SOURCE 4: *Rabbi Moshe Alshich, Torat Moshe, Bamidbar 15:37*

Not every person merits fulfilling all 613 mitzvot and thereby sanctifying his 613 organs and blood vessels. Therefore, G-d gave us one mitzvah through which we can remember daily all His commandments and accept upon ourselves to fulfill them. **G-d accepts good intentions [to perform a mitzvah] as if they were actually done, and [by keeping the mitzvah of tzitzis] He considers it as if we kept all of them (mitzvot) every single day.**

לא כל האדם זוכה לעשות כל תרי"ג מצות ולקדש בהם כל תרי"ג אבריו וגידיו. ע"כ מה עשה הוא יתברך נתן לנו מצוה אחת שבה בכל יום תמיד נזכור כל מצותיו ונקבל לעשותם. וידוע כי מחשבה טובה הקב"ה מצרפה למעשה ומעלה עלינו כאילו עשינו את כולם יום יום. וזהו סוף דברי הכתובים באומרו "למען תזכרו" וכו'. שע"י מה שתזכרו יום יום נחשב לפני כאילו כבר "ועשיתם אותם" וע"י כן "והייתם קדושים" כל כללותיכם איברים וגידים

This a mind-blowing concept that one can actually get credit for mitzvot that he/she didn't do!

Q: Do you think a person should only get credit for the mitzvot they actually perform? Or, should they get credit for merely the intention to perform a mitzvah even if for some reason they are prevented from doing so?

SOURCE 5A: Talmud Brachot 6a

Rav Ashi said: If a person intended to perform a mitzvah, but due to circumstances beyond his control, he did not perform it, the verse ascribes him credit as if he performed the mitzvah.

לֵאמֹר רַב אָשִׁי: חָשַׁב אָדָם לַעֲשׂוֹת מִצְוָה,
וְנִאָּסַס, וְלֹא עָשָׂאָהּ – מַעֲלָה עָלָיו הַכֶּתוּב
כְּאִילוּ עָשָׂאָהּ

So, we see that the tzitzis can lead to an intention to do all the mitzvot, and incredibly, so long as we have the appropriate intention to do the mitzvot, even if for some reason we are unable to perform them, G-d gives us the credit as if we did.

What if we don't have the proper intention when fulfilling the mitzvah? Is all hope lost? **G-d's love for us is so great, that even if we don't have proper intention when we look at them, He provides another opportunity for us:**

SOURCE 5B: *ibid.*

G-d said, "I know that you will tell me, 'We put tzitzis on the four corners of our garments, but what should we do – if when we see them they don't remind us of all the mitzvot of G-d?' ...If, when you make the tzitzis, you have in mind that they should serve as a reminder to look at and remember all of G-d's mitzvot, then you will remember them [the mitzvot] when you look at them [the tzitzis], just as people tie a string on their finger to remind them of something specific. But if you make the tzitzis by rote without intending for them to serve as a reminder, there's no chance you'll remember G-d's commandments by looking at them."

באומרו הוא יתברך הנה ידעתי תאמרו לי
הננו ועשינו ציצית על ד' כנפות כסותינו
אך מה נעשה כי נראה הציצית ולא יעלה
על לבנו זכרון כל מצות ה'... והוא כי אילו
בעשותכם הציצית תכוונו יהיה לכם סימן
להציץ בו לזכור כל המצות אז כאשר תראו
תזכרו אותם, כאדם הקושר חוט באצבעו
לזכור להביט בו דבר פלוני. אך אם תעשו
הציצית מצות אנשים מלומדה שלא בכוונת
הציץ בו לזכור, אז ודאי כי כאשר וראיתם
אותו לא תזכרו מצות ה'

We are about to make our own tzitzis and we can see just how far "having intention" goes in fulfilling this mitzvah and by extension all the others in the Torah. *I imagine that in our day when we don't all physically make our own tzitzis but buy them from a store, the equivalent intention would be that at the moment we put them on in the morning and untangle the strings and tighten the knots, to be focused on tzitzis being a reminder to do all the mitzvot of Hashem.*

The following parable from the Dubno Maggid, Rabbi Yaakov Krantz (1740-1804) illustrates the need to prepare mentally beforehand so that looking at tzitzis will serve as a reminder of all the mitzvot.

SOURCE 6: Story from the Dubno Maggid (Around the Maggid's Table p. 254)

A certain poor fellow, R' Yonah, was invited to a meal at a wealthy man's house. When all the diners were finished with their portions, the rich man, who sat at the head of the table, tinkled a bell. Almost at once, waiters came in to remove the dishes and bring in the next course. R' Yonah was amazed. He had never seen anything like that before.

After the second course was completed, the host again tinkled the bell, and again the waiters removed the plates and brought in yet more food. R' Yonah was immensely impressed. When the meal was finally over, he went out to get such a bell for his home as well.

He ran home excitedly to his wife. "We're going to have unlimited food and waiters. Wait until you see what I brought home!" He immediately placed the bell on the table and told his family to take their regular seats. He then tinkled the bell with conviction. He waited for the waiter to walk in – but nothing happened! "I don't understand it! When the rich man tinkled his bell, all that food was served!" The next day he returned the bell. "The bell you sold me is useless. I got no response when I rang it."

"The obvious reason nothing happened," said the Dubno Maggid, "is because there is neither a waiter nor food prepared in the next room. The bell summons something that is there to be summoned. Much preparation is necessary before the bell can accomplish anything.

"In some ways many of us are like this man," continued the Dubno Maggid. "For example, the Torah tells us to look at our tzitzis so that we will be reminded to perform all of G-d's mitzvot. There are many people, though, who can look at a pair of tzitzis and not be reminded of anything. All they see are strings. Only if one studies and understands how the tzitzis represent the 613 mitzvot, and has studied what the 613 mitzvot are, can one appreciate what his viewing of the tzitzis can accomplish. Merely to look at them without any preparation is like tinkling a bell without having arranged for anyone to respond." (Rabbi Paysach Krohn, Around the Maggid's Table, p. 254)

Q: How can we apply this principle to other mitzvos, to save ourselves from doing them by rote?

We can apply the holy words of the Dubno Maggid to all of our Mitzvah observance and inject meaning into our actions by trying to learn as much as we can about the mitzvos. And if we fall, and get distracted, at least we can look at our tzitzis when we put them on with proper focus and get credit on some level for keeping all of the Torah.

Till now, we have learned sources describing tzitzis as a remembrance to fulfill the other mitzvos.

Q: Can you see in the mitzvah any aspect which may even transcend mitzvah observance and provide a direct connection to G-d?

SOURCE 7: *Rabbi Aaron Lopiansky, "Tzitzis as a Connection to G-d"*

Tzitzis are like a rope tied on one end to a large rock on the top of a mountain, and on the other to man who is attached to the rope, but dangling off the side of the cliff. On the one hand, he is independent and able to scale the mountain if he chooses, yet as long as he holds the rope he is securely connected to the rock at the summit, so he won't fall. This is the relationship that G-d fashions with us, freedom and independence to be all that we can be, yet firmly attached to the Rock – to the Rock of the World (Tzur HaOlamim) that we call G-d.

How fortunate are we to have this relationship, the Torah and to be part of the Chosen People.