



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Shelach

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Shelach

Living On The Fringe



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

The World Cup is upon us. With some 5 billion people tuning in, it is the world's largest branding, marketing and advertising event. And that thought brings us to the question: Does Judaism have a logo by which it creates brand awareness?

Yes, it does and that's what this sermon is all about.

Sermons are notoriously irrelevant. Often they speak of high concepts and deep, philosophical ideas that are difficult to comprehend – the equivalent of solving the Middle East crises. But the “small” matters, like how we should raise or educate our children, aren't always addressed. The big ideas of global thinking do not always translate into our simple, personal, local lives. I mean how does the concept of world peace really affect your taking out the garbage?

The rabbi speaks of God and soul but who really can comprehend God, or relate to this idea of a soul? We are busy trying to raise our kids and make a living, and most of us do not have the time or the luxury – even if we do have the interest – to think about these global concerns and engage in philosophical musings.

For this reason, let us explore one simple mitzvah – a mitzvah which defines the brand of Judaism – the mitzvah of *tzitzit*.

It is called living on the fringe.

**LIVING ON THE FRINGE:
THE MITZVAH OF TZITZIT**

1. Major Decisions (Joke)

Yenta and Nudnik have been dating for a while when the issue of marriage intrusively comes up. They obviously like one another and are ready to take the next step.

One night, when out for a drink, Yenta turns to Nudnik and says: “You know, when we get married and start a family, I think you should make all the big, major decisions and I’ll make the small, minor ones.” Nudnik thinks this is a great idea and readily agrees.

Nudnik proposes to Yenta. She says yes and the couple begins to prepare for the wedding. When discussing the wedding location, hall, caterers, guest list and flower arrangements, every time Nudnik chimes in with his two cents Yenta reminds him that she’ll take care of the small decisions and he should focus on the big stuff.

Okay.

After being married for a few months, Yenta is pregnant with their first child. Mazal Tov! Nudnik suggests that perhaps they should start looking for a bigger place in a more family-friendly community. Yenta informs him that she will take care of all the small decisions and he should handle the big stuff.

And so it goes. When it comes to schools for their children, summer plans, lifestyle issues ... Yenta always says this is beneath Nudnik to worry about; he should worry about the big stuff.

Finally, after years of marriage, when Yenta and Nudnik are grandparents many times over, Nudnik musters up the courage and asks Yenta what she meant back when they were dating when she said she would be making the small decisions and he the big ones?

“Well it’s clear and simple,” says Yenta. “I said that I would make all of the small decisions – like anything having to do with the family ... where we should live, what type of car we should buy, how many kids we should have, how we should raise them, which schools our kids should go to, which synagogue we should join ... all that small stuff. And you should take care of the big decisions, like whether or not we should invade Afghanistan, or if Obamacare is good for the Jews, or what Israel should do about the peace process...”

2. Small Stuff

Sermons are notoriously irrelevant. Often they speak of highfaluting concepts and deep philosophical ideas that are difficult to comprehend – the equivalent of solving the Middle East crisis. But the small stuff, like how we should raise or educate our children, aren’t always addressed. The big global concerns do not always translate into our simple, personal, local lives. I mean how does the concept of world peace really affect your taking out the garbage?

The rabbi speaks of God and soul but who really can comprehend God, or relate to this idea of a soul? We are busy trying to raise our kids and make a living, and most of us do not have the time or the luxury – even if we do have the interest – to think about these global issues and engage in philosophical musings.

For this reason, I will not be giving a speech on big ideas, or universal theories, or world peace, or saving the whales – though serious concerns be they all. Instead, over the next few minutes, while I have your divided attention, I would like to share some thoughts on one simple mitzvah.

3. Branding and Marketing

Before I reveal which mitzvah shall get the treatment today, let us talk a little about branding.

Every major corporation, organization, or product is into branding. Indeed, today everything and everyone is into branding. There are logos, icons, symbols, trademarks, images, memes, and hash-tags that brand this and embed that upon our sorry consciousness. Everyone is talking about having a visual presence, online or off, that creates brand awareness.

The World Cup is upon us and something like three-quarters of planet's inhabitants are projected to tune in at some point or another. The marketing, branding, and advertising frenzy is ridiculous. An estimated \$600-million dollars is to be spent by the event's top eight sponsors alone, more than double the highest total ad revenue from any Super Bowl. And, save for halftime, the World Cup doesn't even have commercials!

Image and brand recognition is no joke. If it were a joke, it would be a very expensive one.

So let me ask you: Does Judaism have something like this? Does Judaism have a logo by which to create brand awareness?

Yes, it does and it's the mitzvah which is the subject of this sermon. A mitzvah which is all about "product" consciousness. A mitzvah discussed in this week's Torah reading.

4. Parshat Shelach

This week's Torah reading – *Parshat Shelach* – covers a wide range of subject matter: from a special-ops reconnaissance mission in the Promised Land to the punishment of forty years in the desert; from the libation offerings of wine and oil to the scrumptious mitzvah of challah. It is brimming with messages, both hidden and revealed and then comes the grand finale ... when the Torah relays a mitzvah that informs all mitzvahs.

This is a mitzvah that reminds us of all other mitzvahs, a mitzvah that is so physical and touchable that it turns the most spiritual and sublime into the most practical and wearable. In the Torah's own words:

And God spoke to Moses saying: "Speak to the children of Israel and you shall say to them that they shall make for themselves tzitzit on the corners of their garments, throughout their generations, and they shall affix a thread of sky blue on the fringe of each corner."¹

The mitzvah is to attach fringes – *tzitzit* – to any four-cornered garment. If you look around you, the prayer shawls you see are the exact implementation of the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, some three-and-a-half thousand years after it was commanded. That alone is humbling and awesome.

So essential and important is this passage of the Torah that it comprises the final part of the *Shema* – “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One” – the holiest of Jewish prayers we say several times every single day. And the Talmud considers it equivalent to all other mitzvahs combined!²

5. A Reminder

As is not usually the case, the Torah explicitly gives the reason and purpose for this mitzvah of *tzitzit*.

This shall be your tzitzit, and when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord so as to keep them, and you shall not wander after your heart and eyes which have led you astray. Thus, you will remember and keep all My commandments and be holy to your God.³

Of all the images and symbols attributed to Judaism, only one contains branding language. As Coca Cola’s classic signature reminds us of Coke and Nike’s swoosh reminds us of sneakers, the *tzitzit* remind us of God and His commandments. When you see the fringes, you remember the Creator and the 613 mitzvahs He has given us.

¹ Numbers 15:38.

² Menachot 43b.

³ Numbers 15:39-40.

Just as Coca Cola has its classic script scrawled across stadiums and billboards, to remind people to drink regular Coke or Zero Coke or Cherry Coke or Diet Coke with a hint of vanilla and a twist of lime, so (with a thousand separations) do the *tzitzit* swing and dangle to remind us of the Creator and His commandments.

Branding is all about creating brand awareness and product placement in the consumer's conscious mind, and *tzitzit* are all about keeping us aware and conscious of our souls and their purpose.

The mitzvah of *tzitzit* is the mitzvah that reminds us of all other mitzvahs. Thus, if we were to understand the essence of *tzitzit*, perhaps we could also understand the essence of all the other commandments.

6. Why the Redundancy

As is usually the case with a Torah teaching, a question will lead us to our destination of greater understanding. And the first question we ask about the mitzvah of *tzitzit* is: Why is it introduced with a seemingly redundant statement:

Speak to the children of Israel and you shall say to them that they shall make for themselves tzitzit ... Should not this verse have said either Speak to the children of Israel or you shall say to them? Why does it say both, to both speak to them and say to them?

To deepen the mystery, the Talmud,⁴ in discussing different laws concerning the interruption of the *Shema*, states that *Speak to the children of Israel* is not considered the beginning of the *tzitzit* section; *you shall say to them* is considered the beginning. If so, why then have *Speak to the children of Israel* at all?

⁴ *Berachot* 14b.

7. Fundamentals

Rabbeinu Bechai, in his commentary on this verse, explains that this seemingly redundant “speak (*dibbur*)” and “say (*amira*)” conveys a fundamental aspect of the mitzvah of *tzitzit* and indeed of every one of Torah’s 613 commandments:

- *Daber el Bnei Yisrael – Speak to the children of Israel* – means “Convey to the children of Israel, the general mitzvah of *tzitzit*.”
- *V’amarta aleihem – And you shall say to them* – means “Tell them the specific details of the mitzvah.”

Every mitzvah has both a *klal* and *prat*, both a general impression and detailed specifications. And this is exactly what is being addressed here – first the general impression and then the specifics.

As is normally the case with the Torah, the general mitzvah is related in the actual Written Word, while the details and specifics – the specs if you will, o tech generation – are conveyed in the Oral Tradition, such as the Talmud and Halachah.

Why is this such an important lesson for us that the Torah has to actually repeat itself to teach us this? Perhaps we could answer this question by examining the general idea of *tzitzit* and its specifics.

8. Tzitzit: Two Meanings

As the 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, points out, the word *tzitzit* has (at least) two meanings: 1) “fringes/tassels/threads/strings”⁵ or 2) to “see.”⁶ We are meant to attach fringes to our four-cornered garments, and we are also meant to see these fringes.

⁵ Ex. Ezek. 8:3.

⁶ Ex. Song 2:9.

To see is to take in the whole big picture of something, to see its being in entirety, and to capture its complete image. When you see something you see all of it. On the other hand, threads or strings are small details – pixels, if you will, in a greater, high-resolution image.

To reference a well-known and well-used example of a beautiful tapestry: When you look at the tapestry you see the vibrant colors and patterns and images as a whole; the entire tapestry conveys a feeling of awe. Then, as you move in closer, you begin studying its details, perhaps even whipping out a magnifying glass in order to better observe the individual strands and threads that make up the whole. First you see the whole general picture, and then you get to know its details.

Tzitzit, at first glance, reminds you of God and His commandments. Then, as you begin to look closer at the individual threads and knots, you begin to realize and understand that these fringes are composed of many, many specific details.

Indeed, as Rashi states, the *tzitzit* themselves reflect the 613 mitzvahs of the Torah (because the letters of the word *tzitzit* have the numerical value, *gematria*, of 600, and the *tzitzit* themselves include 8 strands and 5 knots for a total of 613). That is one example of the detailed threads in the general tapestry of the *tzitzit*.

Another example: If you add up the strands from all four corners (4 times 8) you get 32, which is the numerical value of *lev* meaning “heart.” One of the reasons that the Torah mentions for the mitzvah of *tzitzit* is that *you shall not wander after your heart...* These divine threads, equaling “*lev/heart*,” ensure that we focus our heart in the right and pure direction.

This is why God uses a double instruction to Moses – to speak to the children of Israel about the general tapestry of the mitzvah of *tzitzit* and also to say to convey to them the specific details (strands/threads) of this tapestry’s composition.

9. Personal Lesson⁷

Tzitzit is the conscious reminder of all the 613 mitzvahs and is thus composed of 613 parts. This means that the principle of *klal-prat* (general-specific) exists in every single mitzvah. Every mitzvah leaves a first impression when it is initially perceived, and then, upon closer look, it begins to show its details – its threads, strings and strands.

Sometimes, when all we see is the big picture, it can seem irrelevant and impractical. Sometimes, when all we only focus on are the details, they can seem too petty. But God instructs Moses – and us – to become intimate with both.

This is true of everything in life – from our marriages to our jobs. Doing the small things like taking out the garbage or smiling at a co-worker adds up to the bigger picture and success in our lives. And when we are aware of the bigger picture, when we see both the forest and the trees, then even the tiniest thread is not too small, for every detail is exciting and transformative.

When we look at the world, we have to see the general, all-encompassing truth – that the universe is a beautiful, harmonious, unified tapestry created by God.

And, indeed, this is what we say when we put on our *tallit* in the morning:

*My soul, bless the Lord!
Lord my God, You are very great;
You clothe Yourself in glory and majesty;
You wrap Yourself in light like a garment
And spread out the heavens like a curtain.*⁸

God is everywhere, enwrapping and encompassing and engulfing the whole world in His holy *tallit*.

⁷ For all this, see Ohr Hatorah, Shelach p. 544ff.

⁸ Psalms 104:1-2.

But then we have to also focus on the details, seeing how every seemingly small act – and no act is too small – weaves and composes this divine tapestry. How every single mitzvah, and every single detail of every single mitzvah composes and weaves the strands and threads on this global *tallit*.

10. Story

To drive this point home, allow me to share a story:

One day a traveler, walking along a lane, came across three stonecutters working in a quarry. Each was busy cutting a block of stone. Interested to find out what they were working on, he asked the first stonecutter what he was doing. “I am cutting a stone! Stop bothering me!” yelled the man.

Still none the wiser, the traveler turned to the second stonecutter and asked him what he was doing. “I am cutting this block of stone to make sure that it’s square, and its dimensions are uniform, so that it will fit exactly in its place in a wall. Stonecutting is how I make my living and support my family.”

Now the traveler understood that this was the stonecutter’s skill and how he supported himself and his family, but he was still unclear as to what exactly the stonecutter was working on. Thus he turned to the third stonecutter. He seemed to be the happiest of the three and when asked what he was doing replied: “I am building a sanctuary.”

Often times in life, we get caught up with the technicalities of the cutting of the stone and forget that we are actually building. But all of these individual threads, every single tassel or string, is part of a divine tapestry, a whole sanctuary.

This is the importance of seeing the whole garment of the *tzitzit* and remembering the bigger picture.

But, as the stonecutters demonstrate, the big picture is not enough. The small picture, the actual cutting of the stone, the actual carving of the material – a small chip here, a tiny incision there – is what actually builds the sanctuary. The details, the specifics, make the *tzitzit* what they are.

11. The Jewish Dog (Joke)

A man walks into synagogue with a dog. The *shamash* comes up to him and says, “Pardon me, this is a House of Worship, you can’t bring your dog in here.”

“What do you mean,” says the man, “this is a Jewish dog. Look.”

And the *shamash* looks carefully and sees that where some dogs have collars around their necks this dog has a *tallit* around its neck.

“Kishke,” says the man to his dog, “*daven* (pray)!”

“Woof!” says the dog, stands on his hind legs, wraps himself in the four corners of the *tallit*, and begins to shuckle back and forth in heavenly ecstasy.

“Wow,” exclaims the *shamash*. “That is absolutely amazing! Incredible! A miracle! You have to take him on tour to all the synagogues in the world – a Jewish dog – to demonstrate to people this divine revelation!”

“Maybe you can convince him,” says the dog-owner to the *shamash*. “All he wants to do is become a doctor.”

12. Conclusion

Every day (every Shabbat) in the synagogue, all the men don the *tallit*, a four-cornered shawl with *tzitzit* dangling from the four corners.

We see it every single day (or week) and we should never take this routine for granted. The *tallit* and its *tzitzit* remind us constantly that there is a bigger picture, a global tapestry whose weaving is up to us. We do so by implementing and actualizing and knotting the individual strands of our good deeds into one greater whole.

The *tallit* and its *tzitzit* remind us that we are here on this earth to unite the four corners of the world, and this is done by focusing on very single corner, nook and cranny, no matter how small, and tying that detail into the greater collective.

Every single mitzvah we do is another strand, another string in the global *tallit*. This is why the mitzvah of the *tzitzit* is a reminder, creating “brand awareness,” and why it is the embodiment of every other mitzvah.

Unlike Coke or Nike, *tzitzit* isn’t marketing or advertising a product outside of ourselves. *Tzitzit* is a reminder of who and what we are.

It is the purpose of creation to reveal how the world is one big *tallit* and we the individual holy *tzitzit* that make it sacred.

May this great mitzvah, branding and symbolizing all the 613 commandments of the Torah, may these *tzitzit*, these four corners on our garment, tasseled and swinging with holy threads, lead to the ultimate ingathering of the Jews from all the four corners of the world (as we say in the blessing preceding the *Shema*) with the coming of the final and complete Redemption speedily in our days!

Shabbat Shalom!