

Shelach: Showing Your True Colors

- Nisson Shulman.

Tzitzit, the reason for techelet

(This sermon outline is based on a sermon by Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm. While I have shortened it and put it into outline form, some of his examples and language remains in the original.)

1. At the end of the Torah reading tzitzit. It is one of the rare instances of the Torah where the reason for the commandment is given, that "You shall see the Tzitzit and remember all the commandments of God." So the tzitzit are a visual symbol of all the commandments of God, and it stands to reason that the way we perform this Mitzvah and the method of its manufacture should represent our attitude to all of God's commandments.

2. Originally, one of the strands was heavenly blue. (Current debate about whether we have rediscovered the manufacturing process of techelet.) So today the overwhelming majority of Jews use only the white threads for the tzitzit.

3. But there are many ways to create blue. Why not use a substitute? The Talmud discusses this. It tells of a cheap way to create the same effect, Kala Ilan, indigo, a cheap common vegetable dye. Talmud quotes a passage which declares that the Almighty would punish a person for using this dye and declaring it to be techelet. Why? Even more startling is the opinion which states the reverse. That if one does use the authentic and rare techelet and passes it off as the cheap and common indigo, he too sins and is blameworthy. What does this mean?

4. Both statements in the Midrash have a symbolic meaning, and refer to God's demand that we be honest in our religious conduct; that there is no place for hypocrisy in our lives.

5. The first case is obvious; a person who uses an imitation and passes it off as the real thing is a hypocrite. [The word in Yiddish for hypocrite is hazir fisel kasher, a kosher pig's foot. Why? Pig is the only barnyard animal to stretch its feet out in front when it lies down instead of folding them under him - as if to say, "See? I'm a kosher animal!" (Ed.)] A person might get away with this for a little while, but in the end the Almighty will exact justice from such people. Much more illuminating is the statement of some of our Rabbis that the reverse is also true! God is also displeased with *tole techelet bebigdo veomer kala ilan hu!* Why?

6. Because this statement refers to moral cowardice! It refers to the person who disguises the authentic and makes excuses for it. There is a strong, neurotic tendency for some people to have the courage only of other people's opinions, but not their own! They are afflicted with a moral weakness and are ashamed of their elemental decency, apprehensive lest they gain too good a reputation. They are fearful lest their virtue prove anti-social. They wear techelet and declare it is *kala ilan*.

7. Examples: A person enters a restaurant with colleagues or friends or business associates, or is at a convention, sits down at the table, clears his throat, and apologetically whispers he is a

vegetarian. Of course the real reason he is eating a special diet is that he keeps kosher, but is unwilling to admit that. He is wearing tehelet, but is making believe it is only kala ilan.

8. Or a man who is invited to participate in a Friday night outing and politely declines, saying that it is "family night". It is really because of Shabbat, but he or she is not happy with admitting this.

9. Or the person who says that Israel must be befriended by other nations because it is a democracy in the Middle East. This is near sighted! And if all other nations around Israel were also democracies, even bastions of freedom, would we then lose our concern about the fate of Israel, our God Promised Land?

There is one Biblical personality who symbolizes the attempt to minimize a good deed, and that is Judah. At the sale of Joseph, Ma betza... What profit... The Rabbis were very harsh with Judah for this statement. The Talmud states, applying a passage in Psalms as proof (Psalms 10:3), that everyone who praises Judah for this despises God. Why?

10. Judah really didn't believe what he said. It wasn't only a matter of expedience. He really wanted to save Joseph. Quietly, secretly, he felt that it was wrong to do what they plotted, that Joseph was his flesh and blood and must be saved. But all he said was, That is not profitable, let's sell him instead. Judah was a man of Tehelet masquerading as indigo.

11. No wonder the verse ends with the words, "And the brothers heard". Well of course they heard! He was speaking to them! Onkelos, cited by Rashi, explains the meaning. "They listened". The Torah testifies that they were ready to listen to whatever Judah, their leader said. And if he had said straight out, save him, they might have been reluctant, but would have done so! Judah's momentary weakness, his reverse hypocrisy, making excuses for his real motive, was the reason for the great tragedy of the sale of Joseph and ultimately our descent into Egyptian bondage.

12. Judaism doesn't permit us to dissemble. Like Judah, we too might be heard. We do not ever know the real effect on others that pride and uprightness, steadfast acknowledgment of our Jewish uniqueness, can have. We have heard a great deal about resisting the Yetzer Hara. It is equally imperative not to resist the yetzer hatov.