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THE MEANING OF THE TALIT

ONE OF THE KEY SYMBOLS OF JUDAISM IS THE FRINGED GARMENT WORN BY MEN during prayer. There are two parts to it: the rectangular cloth, originally a cloak which enveloped the person, and the fringes at each corner. If one attends the Synagogue, especially during the Morning Service, it is a familiar sight. But what does it mean?

In a brief paragraph at the end of the Sedra¹ the Torah states that the fringes should remind a person of all the Commands given by G-d. Seeing the fringes should be an encouragement not to go astray after one's heart and one's eyes. The paragraph ends with the declaration that G-d took us out of the land of Egypt, a concept repeated many times in the Torah.

This passage is included in the Shema prayer, said by both men and women. Men wear the Talit, the white cloak with the fringes at the corners, during the Morning Prayer². The symbolism of the Talit is relevant to all.

The white cloak, generally striped with black or blue stripes in a traditional pattern, represents the Divine radiance surrounding the person. This has the quality of infinity, it is beyond measure. From this boundless dimension, beyond understanding, emerge the strands of the fringes, called Tzitzit. These represent the Commands of the Torah. The numerical value of the Hebrew word Tzitzit adds up to 600, which together with the 8 threads and 5 knots makes 613, the number of the Commandments³.

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The Commandments of the Torah enter our personal human world, with instructions about what to eat, about honesty in business, about marriage. The Commandments bring the Divine radiance into our very being. The Commandments enter our lives and are part of our world. Yet one does not just have fringes alone, representing the Commandments. The fringes are attached to the Talit, which is traditionally a large enveloping cloak.

This stresses the idea that the source of the Mitzvot is from infinitely transcendent G-d, far beyond it the world. The symbolism of the Talit helps us appreciate our Jewish relationship with G-d: there are the detailed Commandments, represented by the fringes, and also the awareness that the source of the Commandments is G-d, beyond our understanding. This awareness helps us feel a sense of dedication to G-d, observing the Commandments even when this seems challenging.

Today many people work a five day week. But refraining from work on Shabbat can still present a serious challenge. Devoting time to Tefilin and prayer in the morning, and making time in the afternoon for the Afternoon Prayer, are steps which take us beyond ordinary, secular attitudes to work and to life.

It is in this sense that remembering and keeping the Mitzvot expresses a personal, daily going out of Egypt, mentioned at the end of this passage in the Sedra. Our awareness that the Mitzvot are not just pleasant traditions but Divine Commands help us keep them in a manner which lifts us out of conventional patterns. This is our personal going free from Egypt⁴, not just on Pesach but every day of the year.

As when the Jews left Egypt laden with gold and silver, may G-d grant abundance of every kind to each of His people, men and women. The Tzitzit fringes and the Talit express our freedom, our bond to infinite G-d within the daily world⁵.

1. Numbers chs.13-15. See 15:37-41. 2. Since the law to wear Tzitzit applies specifically during the day, this law is a positive command governed by time. The Sages explain that generally such laws do not apply to women, who represent the spiritual source of Time. 3. Rashi to Num.15:39. 4. The Hebrew word for Egypt, *Mitzrayim* also denotes limitations, *meitzarim*. 5. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 2 p.324-5.

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SEDRA SHELACH

A MIND OF YOUR OWN

“He is such a weirdo” said Sam. “who?” asked Yoni. “that new boy who moved to the school the beginning of this week” said Sam. “I know, his glasses are so weird” said Yoni. “Yes, and he speaks with such a funny accent, I would’ve thought he came from a different world” joined in Michael, and with that Yoni and Sam burst out laughing.

Later in the history class Mr Lewis was speaking about the Romans and their conquest of Britain. After five minutes into the lesson, the new boy put up his hand and asked “vot doz Romun meen?”. With that the whole class started laughing. The new boy turned beet red and hung his face. Mr Lewis was a little shocked at the scenario and tried to answer the question and rebuke the class at the same time, but wasn’t very successful at either.

“Vot doz Romun meen?” “vot doz Romun meen?” Michael was saying again and again by the kitchen table with a chuckle. “What are you saying?” asked Leah. “Well, it’s really funny” said Michael, and he told her about the new boy, and how he said “vot doz Romun meen” and how everybody laughed.

“You boys are really horrible, making fun of someone who’s a bit different” said Leah. “And it’s even worse to think my own brother joined in. Haven’t you got a mind of your own?”

Later that night Michael was lying in bed and feeling quite bad, but he wasn’t sure why. He was tossing and turning in his bed. He looked at his clock, it was already ten thirty.

“Oh dear, I will be tired tomorrow” Michael thought to himself.

After a while he heard his father walking by his bedroom. “Hey, Mike” whispered his father from outside his room. “It sounds like you can’t sleep”.

“Yes, ” grunted Michael, “it’s so annoying”. His father came into the room. “Why can’t you sleep?” he asked.

“I don’t know, no clue” answered Michael. “Alright” said his father, “maybe you could talk yourself to sleep. Tell me about anything interesting which happened today”.

“Okay” said Michael, and he told his father about the new boy from out of town. “Well, well,” said his father. “Let me tell you something about this week’s Sedra which might give a comment on what was going on.” “This week’s Sedra is about the Spies,” said Michael. “I don’t get the connection”.

“Well the Jews sent twelve spies into Israel to see if the land is good to live in” started his father, “and they came back and told everybody they would never be able to conquer the Land, they should forget it. Everyone got very upset.” “I still don’t see the connection,” said Michael.

“Well,” said his father, “although ten of the Spies were saying bad things about the Land, two of them were not. They had minds of their own and did not accept what the others were saying. They insisted the Land was good, and they would be able to enter it as G-d told them.”

“Oh” said Michael. “Now I get the point, you mean I should have had a mind of my own and not just followed everyone else making fun of the new boy... Maybe I should have tried to stop them...”

“Perhaps tomorrow you could try to be specially nice to him,” said his father.

Suddenly Michael felt ready to go to sleep. He would sleep, and tomorrow he would try to put things right.

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