

COVENANT AND CONVERSATION

THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA FROM THE CHIEF RABBI



שלח לך
Shelach Lecha

20th June 2009

כה סיון תשס"ט

Beyond the Fringe

There are two kinds of clothing. There are the clothes we wear to project an image... but there are other clothes we wear when we are alone, that may convey more powerfully than anything else the kind of person we really are.

Our sedra ends with one of the great commands of Judaism - *tsitsit*, the fringes we wear on the corner of our garments as a perennial reminder of our identity as Jews and our obligation to keep the Torah's commands:

G-d spoke to Moses, telling him to speak to the Israelites and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments for all generations. Let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner. That shall be your fringe: look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them, so that you do 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.

So central is this command, that it became the third paragraph of the Shema, the supreme declaration of Jewish faith. I once heard the following commentary from my teacher, Rabbi Dr Nahum Rabinovitch.

He began by pointing out some of the strange features of the command. On the one hand the sages said that the command of *tsitsit* is equal to all the other commands together, as it is said: "Look at it and recall *all the commandments of the Lord* and observe them." It is thus of fundamental significance.

On the other hand, it is not absolutely obligatory. It is possible to avoid the command of fringes altogether by never wearing a garment of four or more corners. Maimonides rules: "Even though one is not obligated to acquire a [four-cornered] robe and wrap oneself in it in order to [fulfil the command of] *tsitsit*, it is not fitting for a pious individual to exempt himself from this command" (Laws of *Tsitsit*, 3: 11). It is important and praiseworthy but not categorical. It is conditional: *if you have such a garment, then you must put fringes on it*. Why so? Surely it should be obligatory, in the way that tefillin (phylacteries) are.

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There is another unusual phenomenon. In the course of time, the custom has evolved to fulfil the command in two quite different ways: the first, in the form of a *tallit* (robe, shawl) which is worn *over* our other clothes, specifically while we pray; the second in the form of an *undergarment*, worn *beneath* our outer clothing throughout the day.

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Not only do we keep the one command in two different ways. We also make different blessings over the two forms. Over the tallit, we say: "who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to *wrap ourselves* in a fringed garment." Over the undergarment, we say, "who has sanctified us with His commandments, and

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commanded us *concerning the precept* of the fringed garment." Why is one command split into two in this way?

He gave this answer: there are two kinds of clothing. There are the clothes we wear to project an image. A king, a judge, a soldier, all wear clothing that conceals the individual

and instead proclaims a role, an office, a rank. As such, clothes, especially uniforms, can be misleading. A king dressed as a beggar will not (or would not, before television) be recognised as royalty. A beggar dressed as a king may find himself honoured. A policeman dressed as a policeman carries with him a certain authority, an aura of power, even though he may feel nervous and insecure. Clothes disguise. They are like a mask. They hide the person beneath. Such are the clothes we wear in public when we want to create a certain impression.

But there are other clothes we wear when we are alone, that may convey more powerfully than anything else the kind of person we really are: the artist in his studio, the writer at his desk, the gardener tending the roses. They do not dress to create an impression. To the contrary: they dress as they do because of what they are, not because of what they wish to seem.

The two kinds of *tsitsit* represent these different forms of dress. When we engage in prayer, we sense in our heart how unworthy we may be of the high demands G-d has made of us. We feel the need to come before G-d as something more than just ourselves. We wrap ourselves in the robe, the *tallit*, the great symbol of the Jewish people at prayer. We conceal our individuality - in the language of the blessing over the *tallit*, we "*wrap ourselves* in a fringed garment." It is as if we were saying to G-d: I may only be a beggar, but I am wearing a royal robe, the robe of your people Israel who prayed to You throughout the centuries, to whom You showed a special love and took as Your own. The *tallit* hides the person we are and represents the person we would like to be, because in prayer we ask G-d to judge us, not for what we are, but for what we wish to be.

The deeper symbolism of *tsitsit*, however, is that it represents the commandments as a whole ("look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord") - and these becomes part of what and who we are only when we accept them without coercion, of our own free will. That is why the command of *tsitsit* is not categorical. We do not *have* to keep it. We are not obligated to buy a four-cornered garment. When we do so, it is because we *chose* to do so. We obligate ourselves. That is why opting to wear *tsitsit* symbolises the free acceptance of all the duties of Jewish life.

This is the most inward, intimate, intensely personal aspect of faith whereby in our innermost soul we dedicate ourselves to G-d and His commands. There is nothing public about this. It is not for outer show. It is *who we are* when we are alone, not trying to impress anyone, not wishing to seem what we are not. This is the command of *tsitsit* as undergarment, beneath, not on top of, our clothing. Over this we make a different blessing. We do not talk about "*wrapping ourselves* in a fringed garment" - because this form of fringes is not for outward show. We are not trying to hide ourselves beneath a uniform. Instead, we are expressing our innermost commitment to G-d's word and call to us. Over this we say the blessing, "who has commanded us concerning the *precept* of *tsitsit*" because what matters is not the mask but the reality, not what we wish to seem but what we really are.

In this striking way *tsitsit* represent the dual nature of Judaism. On the one hand it is a way of life that is public, communal, shared with others across the world and through the ages. We keep Shabbat, celebrate the festivals, observe the dietary laws and the laws of family purity in a way that has hardly varied for many centuries. That is the public face of Judaism - the *tallit* we wear, the cloak woven out of the 613 threads, each a command.

But there is also our inner life as people of faith. There are things we can say to G-d that we can say to no one else. He knows our thoughts, hopes, fears, better than we know them ourselves. We speak to Him in the privacy of the soul, and He listens. That internal conversation - the opening of our heart to Him who brought us into existence in love - is not for public show. Like the fringed undergarment, it stays hidden. But it is no less real an aspect of Jewish spirituality. The two types of fringed garment represent the two dimensions of the life of faith - the outer persona and the inner person, the image we present to the world and the face we show only to G-d.

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If you rely on sight, you'll get it wrong.

Faith Lectures: Revelation: Torah From Heaven
26 March 2001

What did Abraham look like? Anyone know? Tall? Short? Fat? Red hair? What did Moshe Rabbenu look like? We haven't got a clue! You know that, as Eric Auerbach pointed out in a very famous essay he wrote called "Odysseus's Scar" which is in his book called "Mimesis". Homer is full of vivid descriptions of the surfaces of things. You see, when you read Homer.

But when you read Tenach, you don't see anything very much. The text is what he calls "fraught with background". Anything interesting is left out of the text and you have to supply it from your own imagination. The Jewish text, the biblical text, is fraught with background. Or let me give you a different point. In other words, the prohibition against graven images even applies to visual descriptions in Tenach. You never get a description of somebody unless it is strictly necessary for the narrative. When do you need to know that somebody is beautiful? When somebody might threaten to take his wife and kill him - or to explain how come they fell in love at first sight. So we discover that Sarah was beautiful; that Rivka was gemilut chassidim; that Rachel was beautiful. But beyond that, 'beautiful'? What does that tell you? We still don't know what colour was her hair.

In the "Sunday Times" this week, apparently Cleopatra was short, fat and ugly but she was seductive anyway. One way and another, Jewish culture is so non-visual that we don't know what anyone looks like. Walter J. Ong - who is not a person you may have read but who has written some wonderful books: one called "Orality and Literacy"; another even better called "The Presence of the Word" - points out that sight deals in surfaces whereas sound deals, at the literal and metaphorical sense, with interiors.

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What, for instance, do we see when we look at somebody? Obviously the most important thing we look at is their face. But what other clues do we have about their identity, their class, their lifestyle? Their clothes. Now, could you please, with the exception of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, give me a list of occasions where clothes appear and play a role in the book of Genesis?

Esau - Jacob dresses up in Esau's clothes. Joseph - the brothers take his cloak and spill blood on it and they say he has been torn by a wild beast. Joseph in Egypt - [interjection] - they dress differently? Well where do clothes occupy a central part of Jews in Egypt? The story of Joseph. You remember? When Potiphar's wife - Joan Collins! - tries to seduce him and she runs away and he has her dress in his hands - No, sorry! She is holding onto his garment and he runs away. And she says that see, this is proof that he tried to rape me. Any further example? Tamar dresses up as a prostitute.

Now what is common to all those four occasions? The answer is: clothes deceive! (a) It wasn't Esau; it was Jacob. (b) Joseph hadn't been killed by a wild animal. (c) Joseph hadn't attempted to rape Potiphar's wife. (d) Tamar was not a prostitute. All of those are used to deceive. Good, bad, it doesn't matter. All of those were used to deceive. Sight does not reveal the truth. It reveals the opposite of the truth.

Now what is the Hebrew for a garment? [Interjection: Begeid.] What is the Hebrew for betrayal? [Interjections.] Oshamnu, bagadnu! Now just look at that! The very word that means 'clothes' means 'betrayal! In Judaism, it is not what you see that tells you what there is. It is what you hear - and that is all. If you rely on sight, you'll get it wrong.

What are we supposed to look at to get it right? Tzitzit. Ure'item oto uzechatem. Yes? Tzitzit are about seeing. And does anyone know what is the beginning of the sedrah in which tzitzit function? [Interjection: Shlach lecho.] Shlach lecho - which is about the spies. And the same word is used. Yes? Ure'item et ha'aretz - that is the motif word. "And you will see" - that verb occurs only three times in the Torah, twice in this sedrah. It says about tzitzit - ure'item oto - "and you shall see them".

The spies saw and they drew certain conclusions. They were the wrong conclusions. You know what they saw? Listen to this. If you ever need a defence of taking Judaism seriously, here it is. You remember that among the many things that Moses told the spies to do, he said: Look at the cities. Uma he'arim asher-hu yoshev bahena habemachanim im bemivtzarim. Go and look at the cities and see if they are open or fortified. And they came back and they say, vehe'arim betzurot me'od - we saw extremely well-fortified cities. In Dvarim Moses adds the touch that they were fortified up to the very heavens. So what did they do? They concluded that if the cities are strong, therefore the people are strong. That was the conclusion.

You know what Rashi says? Im bemachanim heim yoshvim - if they live in open cities - siman hu shechazakim heim - it is a sign that the people are strong because they don't need to barricade themselves behind great defences. They are quite sure that if anyone attacks them they will win. If bemivtzarim heim yoshvim, siman hu shechalashim heim - this is a sign that they are weak if they live behind walls. Therefore, the spies saw - but what they saw wasn't there. They saw a strong people, but it was actually a people who were terrified.

And I just add, as my commentary on Jewish life, that I do not think that those who live behind high walls, a self-imposed ghetto, are necessarily the strongest Jews. The strongest Jews are those who are able to live without those high walls. Confident in their faith they can engage in dialogue with other people's faith - or other people's culture.

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