

# To See, to Remember, to Do:

## Parashat Sh'lach L'kha

Just a few weeks ago, I experienced in front of my Congregation Shaarey Zedek family the first time my son, Caleb, wore the tallit (prayer shawl) as a Bar Mitzvah. I have experienced this moment with hundreds of children and their parents over my sixteen years in the rabbinate: that moment when children demonstrate their acceptance of Jewish adulthood by allowing their parents to drape the garment of modern design but ancient origin across their shoulders. It is a powerful moment of continuity for us all to watch.

And now, to have had that experience with my own child, I come to realize just how much the moment brings with it a sense of transcendent awesomeness (in the classical sense of the word). *L'dor vador nagid godlecha*: Generation upon generation let us proclaim God's greatness. Or, as Tevye sang ... "Tradition!"

It is interesting to note, however, that this first great act of Jewish adulthood is actually the recognition of the weakness of human self-discipline, and, in turn, the acceptance upon one's self the constant reminder to behave in a holy way.

We read of the commandment regarding ritual fringes in this week's Torah portion, Parashat Sh'lach L'kha. "The LORD said to Moses as follows: 'Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes (tzitzit) on the corners of their garments throughout the ages ... look at [the fringes] and recall all the commandments of the LORD and observe them ... I the LORD am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I, the LORD your God.'" (Numbers 15:37-41).

We chant the Hebrew of these verses every day, twice each day, as the third paragraph following the Shema; during its recitation, we even bring the fringes of the *tallit* to our lips to kiss them. We observe these verses every morning when we place the *tallit* over our shoulders, just as, for some of us, our parents did for us years before and just as many of us have done for our own children as well.

The *tallit* – and, more to the point, the *tzitzit* (fringes) at the corner of the prayer shawl – are there to serve as reminders: constant and perpetual reminders of God's hopes, dreams, and expectations of the Jewish People. The *tzitzit* are daily reminders to observe the *mitzvot*.

As we well know, throughout the biblical era God tried again and again to trust our ancestors to do what is right, what is good, what is holy. Time and again our ancestors failed. The laws of the *tzitzit*, the fringes, come, then, to serve as reminders that God has expectations of us. When we look upon the fringes, we are to see, to remember, and thus to do.

Because of our natural inclinations otherwise – because of the imperfections associated with our humanness, we are, here in our Torah portion this week, obligated to remember our obligations.

Just as the fringes are to remind our eyes, the prophets of old remind our ears: What is it that God wants of us? To do justice; to love kindness and compassion; and to walk humbly with God.

The mitzvah of *tzitzit* – the commandment to wear fringes – is a *mitzvah* that actually serves as a vehicle to achieving the other *mitzvot* which are God's broader aim. Indeed, without constant reminders that there is a Higher Power, we humans tend to slip into selfishness and laziness.

Our rabbis too learned these lessons of human weakness and, as a result, created "fences" around the Torah. For example, the Torah forbids us from boiling a baby goat in its mother's milk but says nothing about cheeseburgers. Our rabbis instituted the separation of all milk from all meat in order to ensure that we would not even come close – either in our laziness, our stubbornness, or in our self-assuredness, to violating the actual Torah law. Just at the *tzitzit* are reminders of all God's laws, so too does the prohibition against eating milk and meat remind us of the uniqueness and specialness of being a Jew.

We all need reminders and yes, even, probably constant reminders, of our obligation toward others and toward God. Without them, human nature is to turn inward, rather than outward; to take the easy path, rather than the challenging path; to take the low road, rather than the high road.

This Shabbat, may the fringes at the corner of our prayer shawls serve to remind us to perform simple acts of kindness and compassion toward others, such as dropping off a home-made challah for a senior; calling a loved one who might be shut in; or yes, even wearing a mask and maintaining physical distancing when in public. Additionally, may the *tzitzit* at the corners of our *tallitot* remind us of God's grander expectations that, as individuals and as a society, we do justice, love compassion, and seek always to walk humbly with our Creator.

Rebecca, Caleb and Ayal join me in wishing you a healthy and peaceful Sabbath:  
Shabbat shalom!

Rabbi Aaron Starr  
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