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# White and Blue of Tzitzit

**The Parasha opens** with the *chet hameraglim*, the sin of the spies:

“Send men... and they shall spy out the Land of Canaan... and (addressing those chosen for the task) you shall see the Land for what it is” (13:2, 18).

Two key words: *veyaturu* - and they shall spy out, and *u-re-eetem* – you shall see.

**The Parasha closes** with the *mitzva* of *tzitzit*:

“You shall see them and remember G-d’s *mitzvot*. You shall not stray after your own hearts and after your own eyes after which you go astray” (15:39).

Same two key words: *ve-lo taturu*, and the identical *u-re-eetem*.

It may be suggested that performing the *mitzva* of *tzitzit* contains a deeper meaning, which does connect us to the *chet meraglim*. That helps us to not make the same mistake as the *meraglim* did in reporting on the Land,

and in not going the way *Am Yisrael* behaved when they heard what the *meraglim* told them.

Let’s first consider the *mitzva* of *tzitzit*. As an approach, the Gemara (Sotah 17a) offers the following insight into the *techeilet* (blue wool) in *Parashat Tzitzit*. Each of the *tzitziot* on the four corners of the garment has four threads, tied and doubled. Three of the threads are *lavan* (white) and one - the longer one - is *techeilet*. *Techeilet*, the Gemara suggests, communicates the sea which, like the sky, spiritually connects with the *kisei hakovod*, G-d’s celestial throne: the higher, the infinite, the beyond human perception, the beyond human understanding, and the unbound by time and space. We can also say that the *lavan*, in contrast to the *techeilet*, suggests clarity, purity, and accessibility.

The Torah tells us *ure-item otam u-zechar-tem et mitzvot hashem*: you shall see them and remember G-d’s *mitzvot*. ‘Them’ includes both the *techeilet* and the *lavan* threads. The *lavan* tells us to access the accessible: study Torah, practice the *mitzvot*, and keep what you learn clear in mind, incorporating it into your behaviour and mental operating system. The *techeilet* reminds us that there exists very much more than we can see, sense, or perceive, which we cannot access as we are only human. The limits of human understanding and human ingenuity

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do not extend to the infinite. This applies even to observable phenomena. For example, the simplest cell in a banana skin. Everything new we find out about cells opens another dozen questions that until then were not even conceived.

Let's now turn to the *chet hameraglim*. Moshe told the men *u-re-eetem et ha'aretz ma hi* – see the land for what it is. Make a brief assessment about the practicalities of conquest. As Rashi explains, if the cities are walled they are likely to be weaker as their defence depends on their city fortifications. If these cities are unwalled and open, the inhabitants are likely to be stronger as they rely and trust on their own strength. But he did not tell them *le-ragel*, to actually spy out the land as sleuths do, although elsewhere, (D'varim 1:24) the Torah reports that's what they did.

It was one thing to see the land and work out the logistics of conquest following Moshe's guidelines. They would then *u-re-eetem*, see and obtain a general impression of the Land of Canaan which was possible in a reasonable time frame. Like the *lavan* of the *tzitzit*, learn what could be learnt by touring. That would be enough; G-d would take care of the rest when the time would come. But it was quite another thing to raise that to the level of espionage which, unbidden, the *meraglim* had done. They did not know Canaanite culture, their way of looking at things. For example, they thought that they were like mere grasshoppers in the eyes of Canaan's giant inhabitants. Yet following Egyptian pursuers dying in the Red Sea only a year previously, they had all been singing out loud "The people heard, they trembled... the inhabitants of Canaan fairly melted" (Shemot 15:14-15).

As the *techeilet* symbolises, there were lots

they didn't understand and couldn't have understood as they didn't grow up among them. The *meraglim* thus looked too hard and got it wrong instead of following Moshe's instructions. Instead of keeping in the region of the *lavan* which was represented by the samples of fruit they brought back, they "strayed after their own hearts and after their own eyes" into what they drew the wrong, panic-inducing conclusions. As the *techeilet* implies, a little supposed knowledge of what you don't understand, but are certain that you do, is dangerous...

It is the *lavan* that symbolizes our ideal day-to-day life. It is the *techeilet* that communicates G-d's Infinity that accommodates our aspirations. It is their combination that prompts us that things are not always as they seem, and that we often have to be patient, to give things time to unfold, instead of immediately dismissing a challenge or rejecting a suggestion. ■



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