

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT TETZAVEH

This year's Parashat HaShavua series is dedicated
in loving memory of Dov Ber ben Yitzchak Sank z"l.

THE TZITZ

By Harav Yaakov Medan

I.

And you shall make a plate (*tzitz*) of pure gold, and engrave upon it, like the engravings of a signet, "Holiness to the Lord." And you shall put it on a blue lace, that it may be upon the mitre; upon the forefront of the mitre it shall be. And it shall be upon Aharon's forehead, that Aharon may bear the iniquity of the holy things, which the children of Israel shall hallow in all their holy gifts; and it shall be always upon his forehead, that they may be accepted before the Lord. (*Shemot* 28:36-38)

The connection between the *tzitz* and the *mitzva* of *tzitit* is evident both from the similarity between their names and from the lace of blue found in each of them. The *tzitit* serves as a reminder of God's commandments, and the *tzitz* comes to bear "the iniquity of the holy things" and to bring about God's favorable acceptance of the sacrifices, even if mishaps occurred while they were being offered.

What is the "iniquity of the holy things"?

For what [mistake in sacrifice] does the *tzitz* lead to pardon? Concerning blood, flesh, and fat, which become unclean, whether by mistake or willfully, whether by accident or voluntarily, whether [the sacrifice] was offered up by an individual or by the entire community. (*Yoma* 7a)¹

An offering that contracted ritual impurity must be burned, and it is forbidden to offer it on the altar. But if it was offered on the altar, the *tzitz* effects pardon, so that it is favorably received by God. A similar phenomenon is the atonement achieved by the goat sin-offering, whose blood is brought into the Holy of Holies, where the High Priest sprinkles it upon the *kaporet* and before the *kaporet*.

And he shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the uncleanness of the children of Israel and because of their transgressions in all their sins; and so shall he do for the *Ohel Mo'ed*, which remains among them in the midst of their uncleanness. (*Vayikra* 16:16)

According to halakhic tradition,² this goat sin-offering atones for the sins of defiling the Temple or the sacrificial offerings, which includes the entry of a ritually unclean person into the Temple.

It is difficult to accept the possibility that two such central elements in the sacrificial service – the *tzitz* upon which is engraved the name of God and the goat sin-offering whose blood is brought into the Holy of Holies – relate only to atonement for defiling the sacrifices and for an unclean man entering the Temple. It may be assumed that these cases of impurity were not that common. It seems that the Halakha is teaching us that the ritual impurity of the Temple and the sacrifices reflects a fundamental problem in the relationship between God and His people in many areas. These problems wear away at the sanctity of the Temple and lead to its impurity and the impurity of the sacrifices. The Torah says something of the sort in the *tokhacha* (passages of rebuke):

And I will not smell the savor of your sweet odors.
(*Vayikra* 26:31)

The *tzitz*, which effects pardon for sacrifices offered in a state of ritual impurity so that they should be accepted favorably and as a sweet odor, and the goat sin-offering whose blood is sprinkled inside the Holy of Holies, which achieves atonement for the defilement of the Temple, lead to God dwelling among the people of Israel in the midst of their uncleanness and despite their sins.

In this way the *tzitz*, is similar to *tzitit*, which also addresses a fundamental problem – forgetting God's commandments, which leads a person to stray after his own heart and his own eyes.

II.

Chazal clarify another role of the *tzitz*:

The *tzitz* achieves atonement for impudent deeds, for here it is written: "And it shall be upon Aharon's forehead," and there it is written there: "And you did have a harlot's forehead" (*Yirmeyahu* 3:3). (*Arakhin* 16a)³

What is this impudence referred to here, and how does the *tzitz* achieve atonement for it?

Impudence is the opposite of shame. It entails doing something that a person should be ashamed to do, but not being ashamed of it; one does it knowingly and publicly:

He used to say: The impudent is [destined] for Gehinnom, and the shame-faced is [destined] for the Garden of Eden. (*Avot* 5:20)

This is apparently the meaning of the verse, "And you did have a harlot's forehead; you did refuse to be ashamed" (*Yirmeyahu* 3:3), cited by the *gemara* in *Arakhin*. The prophet rebukes the harlot for refusing to be ashamed, despite the fact that harlotry is an activity about which one ought to be ashamed. Below we will offer a different way to understand this verse.

Usually, Halakha associates impudence with a person who is prepared to lie through his teeth. A person is ordinarily ashamed of any lie that he utters, and in particular when the listener knows that it is a lie:

¹ We have brought only one *baraita* regarding this issue. The discussion concerning the atonement achieved by the *tzitz* is replete with disagreements that extend across many passages in the Talmud.

² See *Shevuot* 2a-b; 7b; 8a-b; and especially 12b.

³ And similarly *Zevachim* 88b.

For Rabba said: Why does the Torah say that one who admits part of his opponent's claim must take an oath? Because there is a presumption that no one would take up such an impertinent attitude towards his creditor [as to give a complete denial to his claim]. (*Bava Metzia* 3a and elsewhere)

For R. Hamnuna ruled: If a woman said to her husband, "You have divorced me," she is believed, for there is a presumption that a woman would not take such an impertinent attitude toward her husband [and make such a false assertion]. (*Yevamot* 116a and elsewhere)

We learn from the words of Rabba⁴ that if a person admits to part of a claim brought against him, it is clear to us that the plaintiff is indeed his creditor; the dispute between them is limited to the sum of the debt. The Torah imposed an oath upon the defendant on the assumption that he would not dare to swear falsely to his creditor, but will rather speak only the truth. But if he is impudent, he will be impertinent toward his creditor and lie even under oath!

We learn something similar from R. Hamnuna. A married woman is ashamed to say in the presence of her husband that she is not his wife because he has divorced her if that is not true. But if she is impudent, she is liable to utter this lie.

Let us go back to the bold-faced harlot referred to by Yirmeyahu. In Yirmeyahu's prophecy as well, it seems that the woman's impudence expresses itself in her bold-faced lies and in her claim that she had never engaged in harlotry. The people of Israel who deny their sins are likened in this prophecy to that woman. Here are a few select verses from that same prophecy:

How can you say, "I am not polluted, I have not gone after the Ba'alim"? See your way in the valley; know what you have done. (*Yirmeyahu* 2:23)

As the thief is ashamed when he is found, so is the house of Israel ashamed: they, their kings, their princes, and their priests, and their prophets. (2:26)

Yet you say, "Because I am innocent, surely His anger has turned from me." Behold, I will enter into judgment with you, because you say, "I have not sinned." (2:35)

And you did have a harlot's forehead; you did refuse to be ashamed. (3:3)

The harlot in Yirmeyahu's parable claims that she had not been defiled, that she had not sinned, but time after time she is caught like a thief, "as the thief is ashamed when he is found." The woman lies without shame.

This is the *sota* mentioned in the Torah. She betrays her husband and commits adultery with another man, and when her husband brings her to be examined in the *Mishkan* or the Temple, she swears by the name of God (by stating "Amen, Amen") that no other man had relations with her. The water that causes the curse, in which God's name is found, attests to her guilt or innocence. If she lied with her oath, the water will exact punishment from her.

The *tzitz*, on which God's explicit name is engraved, atones for impudence, which might be a false oath taken in His name. God's pure name engraved on the *tzitz* atones for the name of God that was desecrated with a false oath. The simple understanding is that the *tzitz* does not atone for the person who took the false oath, but rather for the people of Israel in whose

midst God's name had been desecrated – by presenting God's pure name.

We find that the *tzitz* played a similar role in the incident involving King Yannai and the Sages of Israel:

It once happened that King Yannai... Elazar son of Po'ira said to King Yannai: "O King Yannai, the hearts of the Pharisees are against you." "Then what shall I do?" "Test them by the plate between your eyes." So he tested them by the plate between his eyes. Now, an elder named Yehuda son of Gedidya was present there. He said to King Yannai: "O King Yannai! Let the royal crown suffice you, and leave the priestly crown to the seed of Aharon." For it was rumored that his mother had been taken captive in Modi'im. (*Kiddushin* 66a)

One of the Sadducee sages, Elazar son of Po'ira, told the king that the Pharisees had not accepted the fact that in addition to being the king, he also served as the High Priest. He suggested to the king that he clarify the matter by standing them before him while wearing the *tzitz* on his forehead. Standing before the name of God engraved upon the *tzitz*, the Sages would be forced to speak the truth. Standing them before the explicit name engraved on the *tzitz* was equivalent to having them swear by the name of God, like the priest who makes a *sota* swear by the name of God in the Temple. And, indeed, the Pharisee sages – Yehuda son of Gedidya and his colleagues – were compelled to tell the truth in front of the *tzitz*, namely that they did not accept his priesthood. They did this even though they knew that they were liable to pay for their words with their lives, which is what indeed happened.⁵

III.

The Temple is "the place which the Lord your God shall choose to cause His name to dwell there" (*Devarim* 12:11). Regarding two places in the Temple it is stated explicitly that God causes His name to rest there. The first is on the forehead of the High Priest:

And you shall make a plate (*tzitz*) of pure gold, and engrave upon it, like the engravings of a signet, "**Holiness to the Lord**"... And it shall be upon Aharon's forehead. (*Shemot* 28:36-38)

The second place is on the altar:

An altar of earth shall you make to Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt-offerings, and your peace-offerings, your sheep, and your oxen; in all places **where I cause My name to be pronounced**, I will come to You and I will bless you. (*Shemot* 20:21-22)

God put His name on the altar, and in this way the altar strengthens the oaths taken alongside it:

If any man trespasses against his neighbor and an oath is laid upon him to cause him to swear and the oath comes before your altar in this house. (I *Melakhim* 8:31)

The name of the Almighty that was placed on the altar is liable to be profaned if the person taking an oath is bald-faced

⁴ The *gemara* (ad loc.) understands the words of Rabba differently, and the Halakha is certainly in accordance with that understanding. But the principle that we attribute to him is correct even according to the *gemara*. We will not expand upon this point.

⁵ There is a (contrasting!) similarity between the *tzitz*, which brought the Pharisee sages to challenge Yannai's combining of the monarchy with the High Priesthood, and the *tzitzit*, which brought Korach to challenge the monarchy-High Priesthood combination of Moshe and Aharon. *Parashat Korach* immediately follows the Torah section dealing with *tzitzit*, and *Chazal* put into Korach's mouth the question to Moshe about "a garment that is entirely blue" (see *Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin* 10:1, and elsewhere).

and his mouth proclaims a lie. The desecration of the altar is liable to cause, openly or in hidden manner, that the offerings brought upon it will become impure. This will happen due to the absence of God's assistance, or because of the priests' contempt for their service on the altar that was desecrated with a false oath. The *tzitz* comes to atone for the altar and for the ritually impure sacrifices brought upon it, as well as for the impudence and brazenness that led to the desecration of God's name at the altar with a false oath.

The *tzitz* achieves atonement when it rests on the forehead of the High Priest,⁶ about which the prophet said:

The Torah of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not to be found on his lips... For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek Torah at his mouth.
(*Malakhi* 2:6-7)

The High Priest with the *tzitz* on his forehead is not impudent and he never lies. He achieves atonement through the name of God on his forehead for the impudence of the *sota* who swears falsely and for the impudence of every bald-faced man who takes a false oath in God's name.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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⁶ In accordance with the opinion of R. Yehuda in *Yoma* 7b; according to R. Shimon, the *tzitz* achieves atonement even when it is not on the High Priest's forehead.