

Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

Parashat SHELACH

"You Shall Not Explore After Your Heart and After Your Eyes"...

By Rav Amnon Bazak

A. INTRODUCTION

At the end of parashat Shelach, we find the mitzva of tzitzit (Bamidbar 15:37-41). At first glance, the placement of this unit seems strange: how is the subject of tzitzit related to the story that precedes it? In this shiur, I shall attempt to prove that the mitzva of tzitzit is indeed directly connected to the events of the parasha, including the sin of those who desired meat and the episode of the spies. Furthermore, the mitzva of tzitzit is prescribed as a way of repairing the damage caused by these sins.

B. "AND WE WERE IN OUR OWN EYES LIKE GRASSHOPPERS"

Several expressions that appear in the parasha of tzitzit are closely reminiscent of the beginning of the parasha – the story of the spies:

The purpose of dispatching the spies was "to EXPLORE (la-tur) the land... TO EXPLORE the land of Canaan" (13:16-17). This expression is repeated over and over throughout the parasha; we read, for example, "AND THEY EXPLORED (va-yaturu) the land" (13:21); "They returned from EXPLORING (mi-tur) the land" (13:25). Out of a total of thirteen times that this verb appears in the Torah, eleven are included in this parasha. This unusual expression occurs also in the parasha of tzitzit: "You shall not EXPLORE AFTER (lo taturu acharei) your hearts..." (15:39), and this is the only time in the Torah that the word is used metaphorically.

The spies are commanded, "YOU SHALL SEE the land" (13:18). This expression, too, is repeated several times in this parasha (see below). Again, we are reminded of the same expression as it appears in the parasha of tzitzit: "YOU SHALL SEE IT..." (15:39).

The command, "You shall not explore after YOUR HEARTS nor after YOUR EYES" (15:39) mentions the same two symbolic organs that appear in the story of the spies. In our parasha, we read, "We were IN OUR EYES like grasshoppers, and so we were IN THEIR EYES" (13:33); and in the description of the sin in parashat Devarim we find: "Our brethren melted OUR HEARTS" (Devarim 1:28).

The prohibition mentioned in the parasha of tzitzit concerns exploring after the heart and the eyes, "after which you STRAY" (15:39). God uses the same expression to define the sin of the spies: "Your children will wander in the desert for forty years and will bear [the consequences of] your STRAYING" (14:33).

In light of these parallels, it appears that the mitzva of tzitzit was given to Israel as a "tikkun" (repair) for the sin of the spies. What, in fact, was the sin of the spies? Clearly, they cannot be held guilty for conveying the facts, for that was precisely the purpose of dispatching them. The crux of their sin lay, rather, in the non-objective judgment of their "heart" concerning that which their "eyes" had seen. Facts are clear to everyone, but their assessment is subject to human interpretation.

It is interesting that the spies use the word "we saw" only in relation to the negative points that they note: "We also SAW there the children of Anak ... and all the people WE SAW in it are people of great stature. And WE SAW the Nefilim..." (13:28-32). It is specifically with a view to countering this report that Yehoshua and Kalev insist, "But you – DO NOT BE AFRAID of the people of the land, for they are bread for us; their defense has left them and God is with us, DO NOT BE AFRAID OF THEM" (14:9). The sin of the spies therefore lay in their "seeing," which was unbalanced, lacking in faith and trust – as expressed in their decisive statement: "We shall not be able to go up against this people, for they are stronger than we" (13:31.)

Yehoshua and Kalev, in contrast, beg the nation not to accept this Godless, external evaluation and not to fear the people of the land, but rather to view their future with faith in God. Their way of viewing leads to faith: "Their defense has left them...." It is apparently no accident that, following the debacle of the spies' report, Moshe uses the expression, "They have heard that You, God, are amongst this people, that You, God, are seen FACE TO FACE (literally: 'eye to eye'), and that Your cloud stands over them, and that by a pillar of cloud You go before them by day, and by a pillar of fire at night" (14:14). Even the gentiles see "eye to eye" that God dwells in the midst of the land; it is only the perverted vision of Bnei Yisrael themselves that prevents them from understanding this.

It seems, then, that it was in response to this sin that Bnei Yisrael were given the mitzva of tzitzit. Tzitzit are meant to serve as a reminder in daily life of the mitzvot commanded by God, Who took Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt, and of the fact that Am Yisrael is a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation".

Upon the corners of his garment, which accompanies him wherever he goes, a person is commanded to place a blue thread. What is the significance of this thread? The closest that Bnei Yisrael came to perceiving a vision of God is described in Sefer Shemot (24:10): "They saw the Lord of Israel, and beneath His feet was like sapphire work, and like the very heaven for clearness." Chazal famously comment:

"The text is telling us that anyone who fulfills the mitzva of tzitzit is considered as though he had a vision of the Divine, for 'tekhelet' [the blue dye used to make the blue thread] is like the sea, and the sea is like the sky, and the sky is like the Throne of Glory, as it is written: 'Above the firmament that was over their heads was like the appearance of sapphire stone, the image of a Throne' (Yehezkel 1:26)." (Sifri, Bamidbar parasha 115)

This also explains the extensive use of tekhelet in the construction of the Mishkan – the dwelling place of the Shekhina.

Hence, the blue strand is meant to remind a person, each and every moment of his life, of God:

"AND YOU SHALL SEE IT AND YOU SHALL REMEMBER all of God's mitzvot and you shall perform them, and you shall not explore after your hearts and after YOUR EYES, after which you stray; in order that YOU MAY REMEMBER and perform all of My commands, and that you may be holy to your God".

More specifically, contemplation of the tzitzit brings a person to adopt a perspective of faith in God in every situation, and to remember Him – which causes him to refrain from exploring after his eyes and from leading his heart astray. Contemplation of tzitzit therefore symbolizes the complete opposite of the circumstances that brought about the sin of the spies.

Rashi appears to note this connection. In Midrash Tanchuma (Shelach 15), we read: "You shall not explore after your hearts' – the heart and the eyes are the agents of the body; they lead the body astray." But when Rashi quotes this midrash, he changes its language slightly: "The heart and the eyes are SPIES (!) of the body; they introduce him to sin: the eye sees, the heart desires, and the body performs the transgressions".

Indeed, it was going after the heart and the eyes that led to the sin of the spies. Would the spies have sinned in this way had they gone off to the Land wearing tzitzit?

C. "YOU SHALL BE OUR EYES"

The key words that we have tracked so far bring us back to an earlier stage in the narrative. What was the root of the sin of the spies? Perhaps the root of the problem is to be found in a brief episode described in parashat Beha'alotekha (addressed at length in last week's shiur.)

The preparations for the journey towards Canaan are being completed; the order of the camp has been established, the cloud has already arisen from above the Mishkan. Suddenly, the Torah recounts a conversation between Moshe and Chovav ben Re'uel:

"Moshe said to Chovav, son of Re'uel the Midianite, Moshe's father-in-law: 'We are journeying to the place concerning which God said, "I will give it to you." Go, then, with us and we shall be good to you, for God has foretold good for Israel'.

And he said to him: 'I shall not go; rather, to my land and to my birthplace I shall go'.

And he said: 'Please, do not leave us, for since you have come to know our encampment in the desert, you shall be our eyes. And it will be, if you go with us, then that good that God will bestow upon us – we shall bestow upon you.'" (10:29-39)

This short unit raises an obvious question: Did Chovav agree to Moshe's request? Why does the Torah omit his response?

The glaring omission of Chovav's response would seem to emphasize that the point of this story is not the result, but rather the request itself. Perhaps there is something problematic about this appeal to Chovav. Moshe's first approach sounds like nothing more than a friendly proposal: "Go with us and we shall be good to you;" it may simply reflect gratitude for Yitro's assistance to Moshe in establishing the nation's legal system. However, after Chovav refuses this initial invitation, Moshe repeats his request that Chovav join them – this time making it sound more like a plea – because the nation needs Chovav's help, since he is familiar with the desert: "Please, do not leave us, for you have come to know our encampment in the desert, and you will be our EYES".

This request, which would seem to create dependence on a mortal, is a sharp contrast to the surrounding events. In the chapter preceding this conversation we are told, "When the cloud would arise from above the Tent, then Bnei Yisrael would journey; and in the place where it would rest – there Bnei Yisrael would rest. By God's word Bnei Yisrael would journey, and by God's word they would rest" (9:17-18). In Eretz Yisrael it is proper for the nation to be led by natural means, based on human effort. But in the desert, Am Yisrael lived an extraordinary, abnormal existence, made possible only by the direct and miraculous intervention of God, "Who led you in the great and terrible desert – a place of snakes, serpents and scorpions, and thirst - for there is no water, and He brought forth water for you from the rock; Who fed you with manna in the desert – something that your forefathers had never known" (Devarim 8:15-16). If God's pillar goes before the nation, what need have they for mortal eyes?

Similarly, we can understand the juxtaposition of the conversation between Moshe and Chovav, and the verses that follow immediately thereafter:

"They journeyed from God's mountain a distance of three days, and the Ark of God's Covenant journeyed before them on the three-day journey, to SEEK OUT (or EXPLORE – latur) rest for them. God's cloud was upon them by day as they journeyed from the camp." (10:33-34)

Whether or not Chovav accompanied them, God's Ark continued to lead the nation. This is therefore the final appearance of the root "tur," which we have not yet addressed. The Torah appears to be teaching us that Am Yisrael has no need for the "EYES" of Yitro, since it is God's Ark that goes TO SEEK OUT (explore) rest for them. It is difficult to ignore the connection between the formulation of these verses and the purpose of the mitzva of tzitzit: "You shall not EXPLORE (taturu) after your hearts and after YOUR EYES... I am the Lord your God Who took you out of the land of Egypt".

Hence it may have been this appeal by Moshe that – inadvertently – catalyzed the lack of religious perspective in the "seeing" of Bnei Yisrael which, to some extent, characterized the beginning of their history as a nation. Perhaps when Bnei Yisrael heard Moshe asking Chovav to "be our eyes," they internalized the perception of the desert period from an earthly point of view, which damaged their faith in God's leadership of the nation. The linguistic similarities between the sections serve to emphasize the connection of content between them.

D. "ONLY THE MANNA"

In between the conversation of Moshe and Chovav and the episode of the spies we find the story of the "complainers," and once again we encounter the same expressions. The crying of Bnei Yisrael arises from their selective memory:

"The mixed multitude that was in their midst desired a desire, and Bnei Yisrael, too, cried over again, saying: Who will feed us meat? We REMEMBER the fish that we ate in Egypt for free; the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic. But now our soul is dried up, there is nothing except for this manna BEFORE OUR EYES." (11:4-6)

Once again we encounter a secular way of SEEING, leading Bnei Yisrael to REMEMBER the tasty meals that they ate in Egypt, but not the back-breaking labor and servitude from which God redeemed them. This perspective causes them to scorn the miraculous heavenly gift of manna – "except for this manna before our eyes" – concerning which the Torah immediately comments, "The manna was like coriander seed, and ITS APPEARANCE WAS LIKE THE APPEARANCE (literally, 'its eye was like the eye') of bedellium." The repeated use (three times in the space of two verses) of the root "a-y-n" (eye) expresses the idea that everything depends on one's perspective. It is no surprise, then, to note Moshe's reaction to this sin: "God's anger burned greatly, and it was evil in Moshe's EYES" (11:10.)

Here again we may speculate as to whether Bnei Yisrael might have acted differently had they been wearing garments decorated with blue thread. Perhaps the tzitzit would have reminded them not of the fish that they ate in Egypt, but rather of all of the mitzvot of God Who took them out of Egypt. Perhaps then they would not have strayed after their eyes so as to regard the manna with such ingratitude, but instead would have noticed that "its appearance was like the appearance of bedellium".

E. SUMMARY

The first part of Sefer Bamidbar describes a very difficult period for Am Yisrael. The generation that left Egypt stumbles into one grave sin after another. The fundamental lack of faith, already so apparent in Egypt, continues to accompany the nation in its desert wanderings. The story of those who desired meat and the sin of the spies are two important episodes in this negative process, which ended with the decree that none of this generation would see the Land. As we have seen, to some extent the beginning of this process may be discerned in the brief invitation extended by Moshe to Chovav which, unintentionally, strengthened Bnei Yisrael's materialistic view of their situation in the desert.

The mitzva of tzitzit was given to Am Yisrael after these sins. Perhaps tzitzit was prescribed as an aid to help the next generation fare better in the tests where their fathers had failed. The principal aim of the tzitzit is to remind a person at all times of God and of His commandments, and thereby to avoid the symptoms of lack of faith that arise from forgetting God. In light of this, we may perceive profound significance in the teaching of Chazal: "The mitzva of tzitzit is considered equal to all the mitzvot in the Torah" (Nedarim 25a.)

)Translated by Kaeren Fish(

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