

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Sh'lach Lecha
June 17, 2023 *** 28 Sivan, 5783

Many of us were looking for a way to pray together, to learn together, and to share bonds of friendship. Out of this need Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, was born. Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals. Come see what we are all about. At Kol Rina we seek to nurture a milieu in which members are invested in the vitality and sustenance of the community. People are supported and encouraged in their learning and growth, developing new skills through participation. The environment is informal and intimate, experiential and experimental. It is a grass-roots community with a collaborative spirit and a pioneer mentality.

Shelach in a Nutshell

Moses sends twelve spies to the land of Canaan. Forty days later they return, carrying a huge cluster of grapes, a pomegranate and a fig, to report on a lush and bountiful land. But ten of the spies warn that the inhabitants of the land are giants and warriors “more powerful than we”; only Caleb and Joshua insist that the land can be conquered, as G-d has commanded.

The people weep that they'd rather return to Egypt. G-d decrees that Israel's entry into the Land shall be delayed forty years, during which time that entire generation will die out in the desert. A group of remorseful Jews storm the mountain on the border of the Land, and are routed by the Amalekites and Canaanites.

The laws of the menachot (meal, wine and oil offerings) are given, as well as the mitzvah to consecrate a portion of the dough (challah) to G-d when making bread. A man violates the Shabbat by gathering sticks, and is put to death. G-d instructs to place fringes (tzitzit) on the four corners of our garments, so that we should remember to fulfill the mitzvot (divine commandments).

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Joshua 2: 1-24

This week's haftarah tells the story of the spies that Joshua sent to scout the city of Jericho, prior to the Israelites' invasion of the Holy Land, a point in common with this week's Torah reading, which discusses the twelve spies that were sent by Moses years earlier to explore the Holy Land.

Joshua sent two spies to Jericho, where they lodged at an inn located in the city's walls, operated by a woman named Rahab. Their presence was quickly discovered by the king who sent for Rahab and asked her to turn in her guests. Rahab responded that her guests had already left the city -- when actually she had hidden them on her rooftop.

"And she said to the men, I know that G-d has given you the land, and that your terror has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away because of you. For we have heard how G-d dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt; and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites that were on the other side of the Jordan, Sihon and Og, whom you completely destroyed."

At Rahab's request, the two spies assured her that she and her family would not be harmed during the conquer of Jericho--provided that she would tie a scarlet thread and hang it from her window. This would be a symbol that this home is a safe haven. Rahab helped the men escape via a rope she lowered from her window and told them how to hide from possible pursuers. The spies escaped safely and returned to report to Joshua. *(all nutshells borrowed from chabad.org)*

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Two Kinds of Fear: Shelach Lecha by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shelach-lecha/two-kinds-of-fear/>

One of the most powerful addresses I ever heard was given by the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, on this week's parsha: the story of the spies. For me, it was nothing less than life-changing.

He asked the obvious questions. How could ten of the spies have come back with a demoralising, defeatist report? How could they say, we cannot win, the people are stronger than us, their cities are well fortified, they are giants and we are grasshoppers?

They had seen with their own eyes how God had sent a series of plagues that brought Egypt, the strongest and longest-lived of all the empires of the ancient world, to its knees. They had seen the Egyptian army with its cutting-edge military technology, the horse-drawn chariot, drown in the Reed Sea while the Israelites passed through it on dry land. Egypt was far stronger than the Canaanites, Perrizites, Jebusites and other minor kingdoms that they would have to confront in conquering the land. Nor was this an ancient memory. It had happened not much more than a year before.

What is more, they already knew that, far from being giants confronting grasshoppers, the people of the land were terrified of the Israelites. They had said so themselves in the course of singing the Song at the Sea:

The peoples have heard; they tremble;
Pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia.
Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed;
Trembling seizes the leaders of Moab;
All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away.
Terror and dread fall upon them;

Because of the greatness of your arm, they are still as a stone.Ex. 15:14-16

The people of the land were afraid of the Israelites. Why then were the spies afraid of them?

What is more, continued the Rebbe, the spies were not people plucked at random from among the population. The Torah states that they were “all of them men who were heads of the people of Israel.” They were leaders. They were not people given lightly to fear.

The questions are straightforward, but the answer the Rebbe gave was utterly unexpected. *The spies were not afraid of failure, he said. They were afraid of success.*

What was their situation now? They were eating manna from heaven. They were drinking water from a miraculous well. They were surrounded by Clouds of Glory. They were camped around the Sanctuary. They were in continuous contact with the Shechinah. Never had a people lived so close to God.

What would be their situation if they entered the land? They would have to fight battles, maintain an army, create an economy, farm the land, worry about whether there would be enough rain to produce a crop, and all the other thousand distractions that come from living in the world. What would happen to their closeness to God? They would be preoccupied with mundane and material pursuits. Here they could spend their entire lives learning Torah, lit by the radiance of the Divine. There they would be no more than one more nation in a world of nations, with the same kind of economic, social and political problems that every nation has to deal with.

The spies were not afraid of failure. They were afraid of success. Their mistake was the mistake of very holy men. They wanted to spend their lives in the closest possible proximity to God. What they did not understand was that God seeks, in the Hasidic phrase, “a dwelling in the lower worlds”. One of the great differences between Judaism and other religions is that while others seek to lift people to heaven, Judaism seeks to bring heaven down to earth.

Much of Torah is about things not conventionally seen as religious at all: labour relations, agriculture, welfare provisions, loans and debts, land ownership and so on. It is not difficult to have an intense religious experience in the desert, or in a monastic retreat, or in an ashram. Most religions have holy places and holy people who live far removed from the stresses and strains of everyday life. There

was one such Jewish sect in Qumran, known to us through the Dead Sea Scrolls, and there were certainly others. About this there is nothing unusual at all. But that is not the Jewish project, the Jewish mission. God wanted the Israelites to create a model society where human beings were not treated as slaves, where rulers were not worshipped as demigods, where human dignity was respected, where law was impartially administered to rich and poor alike, where no one was destitute, no one was abandoned to isolation, no one was above the law and no realm of life was a morality-free zone. That requires a society, and a society needs a land. It requires an economy, an army, fields and flocks, labour and enterprise. All these, in Judaism, become ways of bringing the Shechinah into the shared spaces of our collective life.

The spies feared success, not failure. It was the mistake of deeply religious men. But it was a mistake.

That is the spiritual challenge of the greatest event in two thousand years of Jewish history: the return of Jews to the land and state of Israel. Perhaps never before and never since has there been a political movement accompanied by so many dreams as Zionism. For some it was the fulfillment of prophetic visions, for others the secular achievement of people who had decided to take history into their own hands. Some saw it as a Tolstoy-like reconnection with land and soil, others a Nietzschean assertion of will and power. Some saw it as a refuge from European antisemitism, others as the first flowering of messianic redemption. Every Zionist thinker had his or her version of utopia, and to a remarkable degree they all came to pass.

But Israel always was something simpler and more basic. Jews have known virtually every fate and circumstance between tragedy and triumph in the almost four thousand years of their history, and they have lived in almost every land on earth. But in all that time there only ever was one place where they could do what they were called on to do from the dawn of their history: to build their own society in accord with their highest ideals, a society that would be different from their neighbours and become a role model of how a society, an economy, an educational system and the administration of welfare could become vehicles for bringing the Divine presence down to earth.

It is not difficult to find God in the wilderness, if you do not eat from the labour of your hands and if you rely on God to fight your battles for you. Ten of the spies, according to the Rebbe, sought to live that way forever. But that, suggested the Rebbe, is not what God wants from us. He wants us to engage with the world. He wants us to heal the sick, feed the hungry, fight injustice with all the power of law, and combat ignorance with universal education. He wants us to show what it is to love the neighbour and the stranger, and say, with Rabbi Akiva, "Beloved is humanity because we are each created in God's image."

Jewish spirituality lives in the midst of life itself, the life of society and its institutions. To create it we have to battle with two kinds of fear: fear of failure, and fear of success. Fear of failure is common; fear of success is rarer but no less debilitating. Both come from the reluctance to take risks. Faith is the courage to take risks. It is not certainty; it is the ability to live with uncertainty. It is the ability to hear God saying to us as He said to Abraham, "Walk on ahead of Me" ([Gen. 17:1](#)).

The Rebbe lived what he taught. He sent emissaries out to virtually every place on earth where there were Jews. In so doing, he transformed Jewish life. He knew he was asking his followers to take risks, by going to places where the whole environment would be challenging in many ways, but he had faith in them and in God and in the Jewish mission whose place is in the public square where we share our faith with others and do so in deeply practical ways.

It is challenging to leave the desert and go out into the world with all its trials and temptations, but that is where God wants us to be, bringing His spirit to the way we run an economy, a welfare system, a judiciary, a health service, and an army, healing some of the wounds of the world and bringing, to places often shrouded in darkness, fragments of Divine light.

[Always Something There to Remind Me by Abigail Uhrman](#)

<https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/always-something-there-to-remind-me/>

Over the course of this past year, I have had the honor of working with a remarkable team to evaluate Foundation for Jewish Camp's [Yashar Initiative](#). Through the generosity of the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, the Yashar Initiative supports capital improvement projects at Jewish summer camps to increase accessibility and foster greater inclusion of individuals with disabilities. As part of our work, we have interviewed a number of camp professionals. Of particular interest to us is the impact of camps' Yashar project/s on camp culture: In what ways have the capital improvement/s influenced inclusion at their site?

The grant has yielded many positive outcomes. One particularly striking data point is the way in which the capital improvements have given camps "something to talk about" vis-à-vis inclusion. Having a fully accessible building and/or newly paved roads and widened doorways offers camps a unique opportunity: these projects are visible expressions of their inclusion commitments and serve as springboards for conversation. For all the camps in our study, inclusion is foundational to how they understand their mission and the environment they strive to create. And now, when camps speak to their campers, staff, families, and other stakeholders, they have something tangible they can point to that represents the significance of inclusion and the ways in which they are investing in realizing this value in their camp communities.

Yet not all reminders have to be so grand. This week's parsha, Shelah Lekha, explores something small and often hidden from view that serves a similar purpose. God gives B'nai Yisrael the mitzvah of tzitzit. In [Numbers 15: 38–39](#), God says to Moses:

דַּבְּרָא אֶל־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲמַרְתָּ לָהֶם עֲשׂוּ לָהֶם עֲשׂוּ לָהֶם סִצִּית עַל־כַּנְּפוֹת הַכֹּהֵן פְּתִיל תְּכֵלֶת:

Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages; let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner.

וְהִזְתֶּם לָכֶם לְצִצִּית וְרָאִיתֶם אֶת־מִצְוֹת ה' וְהוֹעַצְתֶּם אֶת־לִבְבְּכֶם וְאַחֲרֵי עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר־אַתֶּם זֹנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם:

That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of Adonai and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge.

In the same way that the Yashar projects are physical reminders of camps' inclusive values and powerfully shape camp culture, tzitzit function to remind B'nei Yisrael of their covenantal relationship with God and encourage them to fulfill the mitzvot that God has commanded. Like camps' newly accessible spaces, tzitzit are ever-present symbols that, at their best, help B'nei Yisrael recall their most precious values and activate their capacity to realize these ideals.

The Biblical verses hint at a couple particularly important messages that the tzitzit are meant to impart: *At the end of verse 38, God specifies that the tzitzit include tekhelet, a cord of sky-blue wool. The Gemara in [Sotah 17a](#) asks: "What is different about sky-blue from all other colors such that it was specified for the mitzva of ritual fringes?" Rabbi Meir explains: "It is because sky-blue dye is similar in its color to the sea, and the sea is similar to the sky, and the sky is similar to the Throne of Glory . . . The color of sky-blue dye acts as an indication of the bond between the Jewish people and the Divine Presence."* The fringes and the tekhelet in the threads are visible reminders of God and our Godliness. In this way, they aim to communicate that we have sacred purpose and should strive to live lives of meaning and integrity. At the same time, they symbolize our connectedness. The tekhelet is intricately tied with a bundle of other threads: we have responsibilities to each other, and we have an obligation to build holy community. Per the Sotah text, the tzitzit and tekhelet impel us to look out towards the sea and up towards the sky and the Thone of Glory—to think expansively about our personal and communal purpose and work to fulfill our full potential. The mitzvah of tzitzit also come with a warning:

וְלֹא־תִתּוּרוּ אַחֲרֵי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרֵי עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר־אַתֶּם זֹנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם:

Do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge.

It is all too easy to be led astray. Whether motivated by fear, jealousy, passion, or pain, our “hearts” and “eyes” can prevent us from making good choices and being our best selves. It is no coincidence that the tzitzit are commanded on the heels of the story of the meraglim, the twelve scouts sent to survey the land. Of the twelve scouts, ten came back with a negative assessment while only two, Yehoshua and Calev, were hopeful about B’nei Yisrael’s prospects. Why the different accounts? One explanation is that the ten were paralyzed by fear. They saw bounty and goodness, but fear—of their enemies, the unknown, battle, etc.—distorted their perception. In this way, the tzitzit are presented as a corrective to this challenge: they are to serve as a reminder for us to see the world as it is and not allow our emotions to taint our perspective and obscure possibility.

There is an oft-cited story in the Talmud [Menahot 44a](#) about a man whose “four ritual fringes came and slapped him on his face,” prompting him to change course and recommit himself to a life of Torah and learning. Recent research has confirmed that the experience of the man in this story is not uncommon. Based on the work of psychologist Ara Norenzaya and others, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks explains that “what makes the difference to our behavior is less what we believe than the phenomenon of being reminded, even subconsciously, of what we believe.”^[1]

Tzitzit is but one example of this in Jewish life, and like summer camps’ newly accessible buildings and grounds, there are likely many other “reminders” that might be instructive: What else do we have at our disposal that might serve a similar purpose? What tools and symbols might we use to help us act in accordance with our “better angels?” (*Abigail Uhrman is Assistant Professor of Jewish Education at JTS*) ^[1] <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shelach-lecha/assembling-reminders/>

[Sh'lach-Lecha: One Small Step, One Giant Leap by Rabbi Eliza McCarroll](https://truah.org/resources/eliza-mccarroll-shlach-lecha-moraltorah2023/)
<https://truah.org/resources/eliza-mccarroll-shlach-lecha-moraltorah2023/>

Here in Toronto, we have an organization called **Ve’ahavta**. It is Jewish Toronto’s response to hunger, and my congregation recently made an agreement to send volunteers to assist in staffing their vans every second Thursday night. The vans drive food and supplies to different locations in the city where there is a known need, whether it is a shelter in Scarborough or an underpass downtown. Since arriving at my congregation a year ago, one of the most meaningful experiences I have had was our clergy team taking the first shift to launch this initiative.

I have to admit: I was nervous; I hadn’t done anything like this before, and I didn’t know whom we would meet or what kind of situations we might get ourselves into.

Put differently, we stood at the precipice of the unknown, as did our ancestors in Parshat Sh'lach-Lecha, which opens by stating:

Send agents to scout the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelite people; send one participant from each of their ancestral tribes, each one a chieftain among them. (Numbers 13:2)

Rashi, in his comment on this same verse, teaches that God had already conferred with Moses back in the Book of Exodus to assure him that the land was good, and that indeed it was the land “flowing with milk and honey.” (Exodus 3:17) We would have expected, then, that with God on their side, and with assurances from the Divine of the guaranteed success of the mission, the spies would return with glowing reports.

On that note, it is worth mentioning that the spies *are* deeply impressed with the land, gathering grapes and pomegranates and figs and bringing them back to Moses to display the fruitful bounty of the land. (Numbers 13:23-27)

Yet their fear of war with the Anakites, a nation stronger and tougher than the Israelites, sours the spies on their task. (Numbers 13:28) Ultimately, it took a push to overcome their fear. It took a leap of faith.

Thank God for Caleb, who proclaims: “We can surely do this!” (Numbers 13:30)

Thank God also for Joshua, who declares: “Do not be afraid!” (Numbers 14:9)

Both the Ramban (13th century Spain) and Sforno (16th century Italy) conclude from this episode that if we want the soil of our land to live up to our hopes for it, we must hold to our faith — whether that is in God, in the land itself, or, in our case, the conviction of the cause(s) we are working for — and believe that we will reap the fruits of our labor. In other words, nothing good happens without a lot of hard work and effort, and the sheer will to turn dreams into reality.

With Ve'ahavta, I overcame my nerves with faith in my colleagues and our mission. And I'll admit I didn't anticipate how truly sweet these fruits would be. It was profoundly powerful to be able to have such an immediate and tangible impact on people in need, despite my initial nerves. Our team walked away feeling grateful for the patience, openness, and strength amidst adversity we saw in and food in the fridge.

To be clear, this is not to toot our own horn, but to highlight that, in spite of our nerves — in working with new partners, in serving new people, in venturing into unfamiliar territory — we are so glad that we took the step forward, in the name of something bigger than ourselves. As a result, the seeds are now planted for other groups within our synagogue to partake in this mitzvah.

May this (very) small step result in a giant leap. (*Rabbi Eliza McCarroll has served as the Assistant Rabbi at Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto, Canada since June 2022.*)

[Shlach: Very, Very Good by Miriam and John Schlackman](https://www.growtorah.org/bamidbar/2022/06/24-shelach-very-very-good)

<https://www.growtorah.org/bamidbar/2022/06/24-shelach-very-very-good>

Parshat Shlach centers around the idea of coming into the Promised Land. Scouts, often referred to as “spies,” are sent ahead of Bnei Yisrael to preview the land of Israel which has been promised as our eternal inheritance. Ten of the twelve spies bring back a discouraging report: while the land does flow with milk and honey, it is also home to terrifying giants and, undefeatable enemies.[1] Only two of the spies, Calev ben Yefunah and Yehoshuah bin Nun, come back with a different report: “No”, they tell us, the land is not only “very good,” but is in fact very, very good; Tov Meod Meod.[2]

Bnei Yisrael, influenced by the negative report of the ten spies, lost all faith in the land. “We’ll never make it,” they wailed, “Let’s just give up, and go back to Egypt!”[3] This attitude was their downfall. Indeed, the whole generation is sentenced to die in the wilderness for their inability to have enough courage and value the beauty and promise of the land above the seemingly insurmountable challenge leading to it. But Calev and Yehoshua are strengthened by the land, using its goodness as their guiding principle and asking the people to respond with courage and faith in its environment.

But the parsha does not end there. After the catastrophe of the spies, the Torah suddenly leaps to a new topic - the process of the korbanot when we do enter the land.[4] In other words, although we may err, despair, and fail, the ultimate promise of fulfillment is not withdrawn. The ultimate nature of reality, the Torah affirms, is one of joy, celebration, and gratitude. Fulfillment waits for us once we wake up and live up to our potential. It awaits our recognition of the true wondrous nature of Hashem’s world.

On the sixth day of the creation of the world, Hashem says that the completed work of Creation is “very good.”[5] Sforno tells us that the sixth day of creation is called “very good”, instead of simply “good”, like all the other days, because it is the tachlit, the completion and coming to fruition of all the other details that came into being before it.[6]

To the positive spies, the land was not just “very good,” but was “very, very good.” The Torah hints to us that, in some way, the fulfillment coming from our “entering into the land,” in every sense, is better, richer, and deeper than the fulfillment that Hashem experienced when he looked out on the new, pristine creation.

When the world was created and completed, it was perfect. We hadn’t eaten from the forbidden fruit or built the Golden Calf, and certainly had not pumped toxic waste into our waterways or warmed the atmosphere. And yet, the land that the spies scoped out was potentially even better, in its imperfections. It is only as creation stumbles and staggers to its maturity, that we gain the knowledge that Calev and Yehoshua had - the world is indeed very, very good.

Although our environmental crisis seems drastic, and the climate projections may seem discouraging, like Calev and Yehoshua, we need to be guided by courage,

and by the knowledge that despite everything, our land is still very, very good.[7] The juxtaposition of the story of the spies and the instruction for the korbanot reminds us not to despair at what we have done to the planet thus far. Although the damage we have done requires bigger and more urgent solutions each day, it is never too late for us to wake up. It is never too late to change our behaviors, both personally and globally. [1] See Bamidbar 13:27-29 and 31-33 [2] Bamidbar 14:7 [3] This was the lament of the Israelite audience to the spies. See Bamidbar 14:10 [4] See Bamidbar 15:1 and on. [5] Bereisheit 1:31 [6] Ovadiah ben Jacob Sforno, Italian scholar and commentator, 13th-14th cent, comment on Bereisheit 1:31. [7] For the climate projections, see the IPCC report. For a good article on climate anxiety, see here. As stated in the suggested action, but worth restating: the goodness of the land is a constant process of appreciation, but you can start by looking at some of GrowTorah's Mah Rabu moments. *(Miriam Schlackman lives, learns and loves Torah at a deep level. She has a Masters degree in Jewish Studies and another, pending, in Jewish Education. She is a committed environmentalist. John Schlackman has been involved with Canfei Nesharim almost since its formation. He organised a number of our Shabbatonim and was our 'man in England' before getting married and moving to Israel last year. He currently serves as webmaster for jewcology.org)*

Invisible People: Haftarah by Verd Hollander-Goldfarb

My son is not one to learn by sitting in class, but he has a knack for finding the people worth learning from. That is how in 7th grade he learned one thing very clearly from his principal: There are no invisible people. So, he would stop to thank the bus driver and the street cleaner and ask the guard how he was doing. This week's haftarah is about an invisible woman. We may not think so from reading this chapter, but that is exactly what the Tanakh wants to alert us to. A person is only invisible if they are not recognized in our social narrative. If the story would have been written by a historian, the focus could have been on the shrewdness of the spies, or on the effective intelligence services the king of Jericho deployed. Rahab would have been a footnote.

Rahab was a person whose life was directed by necessity. Being defined as a whore is not a compliment in society and is usually reserved for those who have not had other options. We discover that Rahab has a family: parents, siblings, nieces, and nephews. But they do not take care of her, just the opposite: she is the one that looks for a way to save their lives in the impending disaster that she believes is coming. This may well have been the regular modus operandi – the family relies on Rahab for its survival, economic or otherwise. And while Rahab could have taken the opportunity to break out of this cycle of carrying her family (which is thriving at her expense), we discover that Rahab is a woman with a large heart. She could have saved her own life without going out of the way for those who seem to not find it in them to care for her.

The town's people in Jericho seem to accept her life as a fact, not as a comment on society's failure. When they need her, they know where to find her, the rest of the time she lives in a dwelling that abuts the city wall, a vulnerable location. When the king needs information he finds Rahab and orders her to surrender the people because "to spy the whole land they came!" (Joshua 2:2). He demands patriotism from a woman whom society did not invest in when she needed it.

The Tanakh turns the story on its head. Rahab is the hero for not doing what is expected of her. She is shrewd and thoughtful, taking the side that seems right to her, not based on what is expected. She proves that she cannot be bought, contrary to what is expected from a woman in her position.

When the spies return to Joshua they do not report about the terrain and the land as the spies in the parashah did. They quote Rahab's words of great faith as the key to conquering the land. To the spies she was not invisible. *(Vered Hollander-Goldfarb teaches Tanach and Medieval Commentators at the Conservative Yeshiva and is a regular contributor to Torah Sparks, FJC's weekly message on the weekly Torah portion. She received her M.A. in Judaic Studies and Tanach from the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University and studied at Bar-Ilan University and the Jewish Theological Seminary. Before making aliyah, Vered taught at Ramaz School and Stern College in New York.)*

[Spies and Tzitzit: Camels and Death by Ilana Kurshan](https://www.exploringjudaism.org/torah/sefer-bamidbar-book-of-numbers/parashat-shlach/parashat-shlach-dvar-torah/spies-and-tzitzit/)

<https://www.exploringjudaism.org/torah/sefer-bamidbar-book-of-numbers/parashat-shlach/parashat-shlach-dvar-torah/spies-and-tzitzit/>

Our parashah is bookended by the story of the spies and the commandment of tzitzit. **What connects spies and Tzitzit?**

At the beginning of the parashah, God instructs Moshe to send twelve spies to scout out the land of Canaan; ten of them return and distress the people with their negative report, and as a result, God decrees that over the course of the next 38 years, the entire generation will die out in the wilderness.

At the end of the parashah, God instructs Moshe to tell the people to make fringes on the corners of their garments to serve as a reminder to observe God's commandments.

These bookended passages are linked by the verb la-tur, to scout out or search after (as [Rashi on Numbers 13:25](#) and others have noted). Just as the spies were sent to scout out (v'ya-turu) the land, the mitzvah of tzitzit is intended to remind us not to search after (ta-turu) the lustful urges of our hearts and eyes.

Tzitzit and Spies: A Talmudic Connection

But the Talmud also conjoins the story of the spies and the mitzvah of tzitzit in the context of a strange, unusual rabbinic travelogue, offering insight into the purpose of the mitzvot and the way they can shape our lives.

In the fifth chapter of tractate Bava Batra 73b-74a, amidst a discussion of the laws governing the sale of ships and other moveable property, the Talmud embarks on a long digression in which the late-third-century Babylonian sage Rabbah bar bar Hannah recounts his fantastic adventures at sea and in the desert.

Rabbah bar bar Hannah is guided by an Arab who points out various sites along the way, playing Virgil to his Dante. At one point the Arab says to Rabbah bar bar Hannah and his travel companions, "Come, let me show you the dead of the wilderness." He shows the travelers the corpses of the wilderness generation, those whose death was decreed as punishment for the episode with the spies. Upon seeing the dead bodies resting on their backs all around him, Rabbah bar bar Hannah observes that the knee of one of the corpses is elevated.

The corpse is so enormous that the Arab guide is able to ride his camel underneath its knee while holding his spear upright—perhaps an allusion to the wilderness generation's all-too-credulous belief that the people of the land were like giants.

Rabbah bar bar Hannah leans in and cuts one corner of the dead man's garment affixed with tzitzit, at which point he finds himself paralyzed; he cannot take another step. The Arab says to him, "Perhaps we are stopped because you took something from the dead? Return it, as we know that one who takes something from the dead cannot walk."

The rabbi returns the corner of the dead man's garment and they proceed on their journey.

In the continuation of this passage, the sages denounce Rabbah bar bar Hannah for cutting off the dead man's tzitzit. They assume that Rabbah bar bar Hannah was motivated by a desire to bring these fringes before a rabbinical court, thereby settling once and for all the dispute between the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai over how many threads need to be conjoined in the fringes (see Menachot 41b).

[A Tosafot Connection](#)

But the Tosafot on Bava Batra 74a take this story in a different direction, questioning whether Rabbah bar bar Hannah's testimony is evidence that the dead are supposed to be buried with tzitzit affixed to their garments.

The Tosafot cite a story in tractate Berakhot in which Rabbi Hiya and Rabbi Yonatan were once walking through a cemetery when Rabbi Yonatan's tzitzit began dragging on the ground.

Rabbi Hiya told him to lift them up so that the dead would not think that Rabbi Yonatan was mocking them, since the dead are not obligated in mitzvot and thus do not wear tzitzit.

The Tosafot resolve the apparent contradiction between the two stories—why did the dead man of the wilderness generation wear tzitzit, while the dead men in the cemetery did not—by explaining that only the members of the wilderness generation were buried with their tzitzit, because of the unusual way in which they died: Every Tisha b'Av in the desert, a voice would instruct every individual to dig his or her own grave and sleep in it, then in the morning, the voice would proclaim, “Let the living separate from the dead,” as only some would rise. When the Israelites got into their graves, then, they were still wearing their tzitzit. However, ordinarily a person is not buried with tzitzit because, as the Tosafot quote from the Talmud in Niddah 61b, “Once a person dies, he is free from the mitzvot.”

The obligation of commandments

The notion that the dead are no longer obligated for the commandments is all the more true of tzitzit, which are a sort of meta-commandment that serve to remind us to fulfill all the other mitzvot. The midrash (Tanchuma on Numbers 15:37) invokes the analogy to a person who was drowning at sea, when a helmsman on a passing boat extended a rope to him, urging him, “Grab this rope and do not let go, for if you let go, you will lose your life.”

In the same way, God extends the tzitzit fringes to us and tells us that as long as we adhere to the commandments, we will remain alive. The tzitzit are a reminder of the mitzvot that sustain us and allow us to draw close to God in this world; once we are dead, we have no need for them anymore.

Over time it became customary to wrap the dead in a tallit, but to cut off the tzitzit prior to burial.

As the midrash teaches, the dead no longer have any need for the lifeline that tzitzit represents. But tzitzit is not just a lifeline, but also an opportunity. So long as we are alive, we still have the chance to draw closer to God and to elevate ourselves through the performance of God's commandments; once we die and our souls are restored to God, we lose that chance.

I was reminded of this teaching a few months ago when running in the Jerusalem half-marathon.

At the end of the race, my legs were heavy and tired and I was so tempted to slow down and take it easy for the last few kilometers. But I could see the finish line off in the distance, and I knew that once I crossed it, I would have ample time to rest.

Now, while the race was still on, I had the chance to run as fast as I could and achieve my best time.

Death is the ultimate finish line

The conjoining of the story of the wilderness generation fated to die with the life-affirming mitzvah of tzitzit reminds us that so long as we remain alive on this earth, we still have the chance to keep pushing ourselves to perform the mitzvot that enable us to live a full life. (*Ilana Kurshan teaches Talmud at the Conservative*

Yeshiva. She is the author of If All the Seas Were Ink (St. Martin's Press, 2017) and Why is This Night Different From All Other Nights (Schocken, 2005). She has a degree in History of Science from Harvard and in English literature from Cambridge, and has worked in literary publishing both in New York and in Jerusalem – as a translator, a foreign rights agent, and as the Books Editor of Lilith Magazine. Since October 2020, Ilana has been a regular contributor to Torah Sparks, FJC's weekly parashat hashavuah blog.)

Yahrtzeits

Ilisia Kissner remembers her father Jack C. Snyder on Thursday June 22nd.