

## Always Something There to Remind Me

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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:

דְּבַר אֲלֵבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם וְעָשׂוּ לָהֶם צִיצִית עַל־כַּנְּפֵי  
בְּגָדֵיהֶם לְדֹרֹתָם וְנִתְּנוּ עַל־צִיצִית הַכָּנָף 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.

וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְצִיצִית וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֶת־כָּל־מִצְוֹת יְ-יְהוָה וְעָשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְלֹא־תִתְּוֹרוּ אַחֲרַי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרַי עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר־אַתֶּם זָנִים 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 Throne 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־תִתְּוֹרוּ אַחֲרַי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרַי עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר־אַתֶּם זָנִים 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.”<sup>1</sup>

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?”

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/shelach-lecha/assembling-reminders/>