

Torah Thoughts Shelakh Lekha

5779:

Mark Twain once said that human beings are the only creatures that can blush, or need to. What he meant, of course, was that unlike the animals, our actions are often a source of embarrassment, and rightly so. One of the purposes of crafting a life in the light of religious traditions is to develop a healthy sense of restraint, learning to pull back from the things that would cause us to blush.

One way to inculcate our religious values is through the constant verbal repetition of those values. In daily prayer, the Shema is at the core of such a repetition, and in this week's parshah we find the source for the third paragraph of the Shema, which is known as *Vayomer*, after its first word. *Vayomer* speaks of the *tzitzit*, the ritual fringes worn today on a *tallit* and in antiquity on daily garments. Those fringes are meant to remind us of God's expectations of us, and just as seeing them every day served as a reminder to our ancestors to exercise restraint, repeating the words about the *tzitzit* today reminds us of the same values.

By striving to avoid behaviors that would cause shame to God or ourselves, we can create lives imbued with sanctity. *Vayomer* points out that looking at the *tzitzit* will help us to recall the commandments "so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge." Living a life of righteousness does not only include refraining from inappropriate forms of sexuality, but also, as is probably meant here, refraining from lusting after pagan gods. I suspect that few of our members do that literally (any Baal worshippers in the congregation?), but the underlying caution remains: We must restrain ourselves from behaving in ways that fly in the face of Jewish tradition and values, not only to avoid our own later blushing, but also to prevent God from 'blushing' on our behalf. Imagining God as a watchful parent, we should behave in ways that show we have heeded that parent's teaching.

Shabbat shalom.