

Parshat Shelach Lechah 5778

The symbolism of the ציצית Ask anyone to tell you the most obvious Jewish symbol and the likely reply will be the Magen David or Star of David - it appears in so many places from Ark curtains to Israeli flags. However, its specific association with Jews or things Jewish is relatively recent, a matter of centuries and the more you look into it for deeper Jewish significance, the less is to be found.

In contrast, the Chumash mandates several signs that say much more about the Jew and his/her mission. The emblem with possibly the most to offer is that of ציצית, the prime source for which is this week's פרשה. ציצית is really a whole system of symbols; there is a massive literature on the subject (e.g. commentaries *ad loc* on חומש and מס' מנחות, 43a-44a); this short piece merely offers a few perspectives and some context.

Rashi commences his analysis looking at the simple meaning of ציצית, relating ציצית to a fringe that sticks out, but soon he brings in a further connotation, that of looking through something to an item [מציץ מן החרכים, peeping from the outside in], an allusion to the Beloved (HaShem) [שיר השירים 2:9] looking through the gaps to see his treasured Israel. Several of the Rabbis focus on the theme of the need for constant reminders.

The מדרש רבה presents a parable: A man is drowning in the sea; the helmsman [of a passing boat] throws a rope to him and tells him to hold tight to the end of the rope. If he holds on he will live, if not he will be lost. HaShem thus extends a lifeline (the מצות - all incorporated symbolically in the mitzvah of ציצית) for Israel to grasp and keep alive.

The threads of the ציצית are לבן ('white') and תכלת. The לבן, pure simple white threads, represent pure, straightforward faith and adherence to the מצות (see *ad loc* נתיבות שלום); these apply at all times, even when the תכלת has been lost.

The Seforno describes the great power of these simple white threads, when seen as the badge of service (the 'כבלא דעבדא' - see שבת 57a) of those in the service of HaShem. They are treated with great affection and kissed in homage to the Master.

Several מפרשים focus on the תכלת, the special 'blue' thread derived from the chalozon sea creature, the resulting dye being either the blue of the sky at midday, or at midnight. The key aspect, (see מנחות 43b) is that תכלת is 'דומה לים' (like the sea); the sea is 'דומה לרקיע' (like the sky) and the colour of the sky resembles 'כסא הכבוד', G'd's throne, from below which the souls of Man are hewn. Such an exalted vision clearly infuses the מצוה of ציצית with beauty and spiritual power of huge proportions.

Ramban notes that the תכלת thread wraps round the other threads and envelopes them, giving them purpose and direction or תכלית. (Incidentally it is the eighth thread,

this number itself having great significance as emblematic of the supra-natural order of existence)

Rav Yitzchak Arama, in his commentary, the עקידת יצחק, sees תכלת as a mean between the extremes of light and dark, representing the correct, middle way for Man to pursue.

Kli Yakar elaborates on the analogies of דומה לרקיע and דומה לים etc. The sea sticks to its boundaries and allotted task in Creation and dares not overstep the mark, so it is identified with מדת היראה, the attribute of fear in Divine service. In contrast, the Heavens, in joy, represent עבודה מאהבה, the attribute of serving HaShem through love; this in turn brings Man to cleave to Him, that closeness portrayed through 'כסא הכבוד'.

A further arresting image considered by the Kli Yakar is that of the מצות as a garment that wraps the soul. This daring image is extended by the Mystics to G'd Himself, as it were (see Psalms 104:2) with the whole of Creation merely His 'cloak'.

The problem of mistaking appearance for reality is a unifying theme that runs throughout our פרשה. The Rashi cited can be seen neatly to 'compare and contrast' the pure and true way in which HaShem looks out for Israel and the unsatisfactory perspective of Israel, whose eyes follow its heart, seeing that which its heart motivates it to see (אחרי עיניכם before אחרי לבבכם).

At the beginning of the פרשה, the Jewish people are standing on the threshold of ישראל, similar to ארץ, similar to אדם and חוה near גן עדן. חוה's crucial error was to follow her fancy that the עץ הדעת was תאוה לעינים and נחמד להשכיל, desirable to the eyes and pleasant to realise, rather than accepting the Divine injunction as absolute. For the מרגלים, the urge לתור את הארץ, perverted their mission such that they misread the sight of the huge fruits and dead local inhabitants, to conclude, grotesquely, that ארץ אוכלת יושביה היא, it was a land that consumed its inhabitants. The timing of the episode was ענבים, ימי ביכורי ענבים, the time of the first fruits of grapes, which, according to one view (see שלי"ה) was the fruit of the עץ הדעת.

Of the spies, only יהושע and כלב realised the terrible nature of the error - and they *tore their clothes*. Moshe had to plead with HaShem, quoting much of the פסוק (קל רחום וכי) of which it is said HaShem, as it were, wrapped himself in a טלית, like a חזן, to recite the words of supplication (ר"ה 17b).

The remedy was the mitzvah of ציצית - a constant reminder of our election to be servants of HaShem, with the same blue thread that was found on the ציץ of the גדול - there for us to see that everyone can be a משכן for the שכינה. © Stuart D Rosen June 2018