**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Rabbinic Tales: In the Talmud and in Chasidut**

**By Rav Dr. Yonatan Feintuch**

**Shiur #31: The Story of the Harlot and the *Tzitzit* (1)**

**The story**

The third chapter of *Massekhet Menachot* discusses the laws of *tzitzit* and *tefillin*. The *sugya* on *tzitzit* comprises both halakhic and aggadic elements, including the following story:

It is taught in a *baraita* that Rabbi Natan says: There is no mitzva, however minor, that is written in the Torah, for which there is no reward given in this world; and in the World-to-Come I do not know how much reward is given. Go and learn from [an incident concerning] the mitzva of *tzitzit*.

There was a man who was punctilious in his observance of the mitzva of *tzitzit*. He heard that there was a prostitute in one of the cities of the sea who took four hundred gold coins as her payment. He sent her four hundred gold coins and fixed a time to meet with her. When it was his time, he came and sat at the entrance to her house.

The maidservant of that prostitute entered and said to her: That man who sent you four hundred gold coins came and sat at the entrance. She said: Let him enter. He entered. She arranged seven beds for him, six of silver and one of gold. Between each and every one of them was a ladder made of silver, with the top one made of gold.

She went up and sat naked on the top, and he too went up to sit naked facing her, [but] his four *tzitzit* [fringes] came and slapped him on his face. He dropped down and sat himself on the ground, and she also dropped down and sat on the ground. She said to him: “I swear by the *gappa* of Rome that I will not allow you to go until you tell me what defect you saw in me.”

He said to her: “I swear by the Temple service that I never saw a woman as beautiful as you. But there is a mitzva that the Lord, our God, commanded us, known as *tzitzit*, where it is written twice: ‘I am the Lord your God’ (*Bamidbar* 15:41) – hinting [respectively]: ‘I am the One’ Who will punish those who transgress My *mitzvot*, and ‘I am the One’ Who will reward those who fulfill them. Now, my *tzitzit* appeared to me as four witnesses who will testify against me.’

She said to him: “I will not allow you to go until you tell me: What is your name, and what is the name of your city, and what is the name of your teacher, and what is the name of the study hall in which you studied Torah?”

He wrote [it all] and placed it in her hand.

She arose and divided up all of her property, one-third to the government, one-third to the poor, and she took one-third in her possession, in addition to the beds.

She came to the study hall of R. Chiya and said to him: “My teacher, instruct your students concerning me and make me a convert.” R. Chiya said to her: “My daughter, perhaps you set your sights on one of the students?” She took the note from her hand and gave it to R. Chiya. He said to her: “Go take possession of your purchase.”

Those beds that she had arranged for him in a prohibited fashion, she now arranged for him in a permitted fashion. This is the reward given to him in this world; with regard to the World-to-Come, I do not know how much reward he will be given. (*Bavli, Menachot* 44a)

The story is a *midrash* of sorts on the verses setting forth the mitzva of *tzitzit*, which include the root *z-n-h* (“to stray”; the word *zona* – harlot – is derived from this root). The main verses read as follows:

Speak to Bnei Yisrael and you shall say to them that they shall make for themselves fringes [*tzitzit*] on the corners of their garments, throughout their generations, and they shall affix a thread of sky blue on the fringe of each corner. This shall be fringes for you, and when you see it, you will remember all the commandments of the Lord to perform them, and you shall not wander after your hearts and after your eyes, after which you go astray [*zonim*]. So that you shall remember and perform all My commandments and you shall be holy to your God. I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt to be your God; I am the Lord, your God. (*Bamidbar* 15:38-41)

An earlier and slightly different version of the Talmudic story appears already in the Tannaitic midrash *Sifri Bamidbar* (later on, we will compare the version in the *Sifri* to that in of the *Bavli*). In the *midrash*, the story is appended to the closing words of the *parasha* – “I am the Lord your God” – and in the Gemara, too, the story focuses on these words (“….where it is written twice: “I am the Lord your God”…), but in view of the content of the story, it seems to also be meant as an elaboration of the verse, “And you shall not wander after your hearts and after your eyes, after which you go astray [*zonim*].”

**Commentary on the story itself**

Much has been written on this story, in different forums, and I will not discuss here all its details and all the various exegetical approaches.[[1]](#footnote-1) Instead, I will weave together some of the main ideas that have been expressed, with an emphasis, inter alia, on the connection of the story to its context in the Talmudic *sugya*, and its reading in that context.

The story has a clear structure, comprising two well-defined parts. The first part describes the man’s journey. It is he who is active, as expressed in the range of verbs used in connected with him: he hears, he sends money, he fixes a date, he travels, he sits at the entrance, he enters, he ascends to the top bed, he falls. The second part focuses on the woman as she takes the initiative, effecting a radical change in her life: she demands the man’s identity details, takes action to part with her previous life (selling, dividing, etc.), follows the man, and approaches R. Chiya, his teacher, asking to be converted so that she and the man can marry.

Goshen-Gottstein demonstrates[[2]](#footnote-2) that in the story as it appears in the *Sifri*, various literary devices support this division of the story – for example: verbs based on the root *y-sh-v* (to sit) in the first half, as opposed to verbs based on the root *a-m-d* (to stand) in the second; and recurring numbers in each part (4 and 7 in the first part, 3 in the second). In the *Bavli*’s version, which takes a slightly different form, some of these devices have not been preserved. However, the division into two parts is still clear in terms of both theme and form.

What theme emerges from this two-part structure? What story is the narrator in the Gemara seeking to tell? These questions have occupied many scholars. With such a rich, complex plot, it is difficult to identify one specific point that represents the focus of the narrative, leading to a lack of consensus.

One way to define the theme of a story is by considering its turning point, which may be a central axis around which the story is built. But in our case, although it is clear that the story has two parts, locating the turning point is not a simple task. Is it the moment the man becomes aware of his *tzitzit*, and falls to the ground? Or the moment when the woman decides to change her life around? What is it exactly that causes her to turn her back on her entire world, leaving it all behind to follow the scholar to a new life? As we shall see, different commentators have answered these questions in different ways.

Some have posited that the focus of the story is the man’s overcoming of his passion. Harvey,[[3]](#footnote-3) for instance, writes that “a powerful urge” leads the man to this prostitute. To borrow the terms of the verses that set forth the mitzva of *tzitzit*, he “wanders after his heart” to the isles of the sea, and “after his eyes” to the uppermost golden bed. Thus, the midrashic story embraces the metaphor contained in the verse (“And you shall not wander after your hearts and after your eyes, after which you go astray [or: ‘prostitute yourselves’]”) in the literal, concrete sense – although the simple reading of the verse does not necessarily refer to prostitution per se, but rather to “straying” after other gods.[[4]](#footnote-4) The man’s ability to overcome his sexual urge and forgo the act after being reminded of the *tzitzit*, which in turn reminds him of his loyalty to God, so impresses the prostitute that it causes her to abandon her identity, her status, her profession and financial security, and to follow the scholar in order to convert.

Others maintain that the focus of the story is the idea of reward for performing the *mitzvot*, which appears several times in the story.[[5]](#footnote-5) The man also mentions it explicitly:

There is a mitzva that the Lord, our God, commanded us, known as *tzitzit*, where it is written twice: “I am the Lord your God” (*Bamidbar* 15:41) – hinting, “I am the One” Who will punish those who transgress My *mitzvot*, and “I am the One” Who will reward those who fulfill them.

The framework of the story (its introduction and its conclusion) likewise highlights this point. According to this reading, it is what the man says about the reward for *mitzvot* that upends the prostitute’s world, causing her to decide to trade what the material world has to offer for the reward promised to those who observe the *mitzvot*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

A third interpretation, offered by Kosman,[[7]](#footnote-7) places the power of the mitzva at the center of the story. According to Kosman, in the earlier parallel of the story, in the *Sifri* *Bamidbar*, the *tzitzit* play a more minor role: the man simply encounters his *tzitzit* as he removes his clothing. But in the version in the *Bavli*, the *tzitzit* had already been removed and they rise up, in a seemingly miraculous manner, and strike the man’s face. Based on this comparison, Kosman draws a distinction between the *Sifri*, where the focus is the man’s overcoming his passion, and the *Bavli*, where the focus is the mitzva – specifically, *tzitzit* – and its power. The tremendous power of the mitzva is expressed through the description of the supernatural rising up of the *tzitzit* to strike the man’s face. The prostitute is so deeply impressed by the power of the mitzva to protect those who observe it that she initiates the turnaround in her own life.

**The mitzva of *tzitzit* and the broader context of the story in the *Bavli***

All three interpretations cited above ignore the context of the story in the *sugya*, seeking its meaning solely from within the story itself, as a closed, complete unit. A different view, proposed by Marcus,[[8]](#footnote-8) is based on a broader view of the story in its context. His interpretation also takes an interesting angle on the question of why it is specifically the mitzva of *tzitzit* that holds such great power in this story. In order to understand his explanation, we need to first look at a section of the *sugya* that precedes the story, which contains a series of aggadic *beraitot*. The following is the fragment that Marcus quotes, with italics indicating the words that he views as significant for the story’s interpretation:

Our Sages taught: Beloved are Israel, being that the Holy One, blessed be He, surrounded them with *mitzvot*: *tefillin* upon their heads and *tefillin* upon their arms, tzitzit upon their garments, and a *mezuza* at their doorways, and concerning them David declared (*Tehillim* 119:164), “Seven times a day I praise You, for the laws of Your righteousness.” [Two *tefillin*, plus four fringes, plus the *mezuza*, yield a total of seven.]

When David entered the bathhouse and saw himself standing naked, he said, “Woe is me, that I stand naked of *mitzvot”* – but upon remembering the circumcision of his flesh, he was reassured. After emerging, he gave praise over it, as it is written (*Tehillim* 12:1), “[A psalm] unto the musician upon the eight-stringed harp, a psalm unto David” – concerning circumcision, which was given [as a commandment to be performed] on the eighth [day]….

R. Eliezer ben Yaakov said, Anyone who has *tefillin* upon his head and *tefillin* upon his arm and *tzitzit* upon his garments and a *mezuza* at his entrance – all are reinforcements against him sinning, as it is written (*Kohelet* 4:12), “but a three-fold cord is not quickly broken,” and it is written (*Tehillim* 34:8), “an angel of God encamps round about those who fear Him, and delivers them.”

It is taught: R. Meir would say, “How is *tekhelet* [the blue dye for tzitzit] different from all other sorts of dyes? Because *tekhelet* is reminiscent of the sea, and the sea is the color of the sky, and the [color of the] sky recalls the Throne of Glory, as it is written (*Shemot* 24:10), ‘and beneath His feet was the like of a paved work of sapphire stone, and the like of the very heaven for clearness,’ and it is written (*Yechezkel* 1:26), ‘the likeness of a Throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone.’”

It is taught: R. Meir would say, “The punishment for not attaching white strings is greater than the punishment for not attaching strings of *tekhelet*. To what may this be compared? A king of flesh and blood who commanded two of his servants: To one, he said, ‘Bring me a seal of clay.’ To the other, he said, ‘Bring me a seal of gold.’ Both were negligent and did not bring the seals. Which of them will have a greater punishment? It must be him to whom the king said, ‘Bring me a seal of clay’ and he did not bring it.”

It is taught: R. Meir would say, “A person is obligated to recite one hundred [*me’a*] blessings every day, as it is written, ‘And now, Israel, what [*ma*] does the Lord your God require of you?’” (*Devarim* 10:12).

On Shabbat and Festivals, [when the prayers contain fewer blessings,] R. Chiya, son of R. Avya, made an effort to fill this quota with blessings on spices and sweet fruit.

It is taught: R. Meir would say, “A man is obligated to recite three blessings every day, and these are they: ‘Who did not make me a gentile’; ‘Who did not make me a woman’; and ‘Who did not make me an ignoramus.’” R. Acha bar Yaakov heard his son reciting the blessing, “Who did not make me an ignoramus.” He said to him: “Is it proper to go that far?” His son responded, “What blessing should one then recite? If you say, ‘Who did not make me a slave’ – that is the same as a woman.’” [To which R. Yaakov responded:] “‘A slave is less than a woman.”

The Sages taught: This *chilazon* – its body resembles the sea, its form resembles a fish, it emerges once in seventy years, and with its blood one dyes wool the color *tekhelet*; therefore it is expensive. (*Menachot* 43b-44a)

Marcus notes that one of the recurring ideas in this collection of beraitot is that the mitzvot are an enveloping, beautifying wrapping with which God surrounds Israel: “Beloved are Israel, being that the Holy One, blessed be He, surrounded them with mitzvot...” We might also cite R. Meir’s teaching that one must recite a hundred blessings each day – a great many of which are blessings over mitzvot. When a person recites so many blessings over the course of the day, the blessings themselves also come to surround him. Among these, the blessing over tzitzit, with the blue-dyed string, stands out prominently. Tekhelet is a prestigious decorative dye that recalls the Divine Throne of Glory, thus invoking the Divine Presence. The beraita that concludes the collection also mentions the great rarity and value of tekhelet. In other sources, too, we find that tekhelet symbolizes royalty and splendor[[9]](#footnote-9)– for instance, tekhelet appears in Tanakh and elsewhere in the context of royal garb. The tekhelet in the tzitzit, according to Marcus, serves to turn a Jew’s clothing into royal garments. When a Jew regards himself as the son of the King, he is reminded of the obligations that this status confers upon him – the commandments.

According to Marcus, the scholar’s interest in the prostitute arises not only from arousal of his sexual urge, but also – and principally – from his general enticement with the cultural world of which she is a part: Rome with its majesty and splendor (as expressed in the description of her quarters) and, within this sparkling material world, also prostitution. The *tzitzit*, according to Marcus, as molded in the successive elements of the *sugya* leading up to the story, is part of the alternative that the Torah offers to the attraction of Rome: garments with royal blue dye and with a distinctive Jewish identity. They also recall the broader world of the *mitzvot*, which express the special status of Am Yisrael as the children of royalty. This alternative that the Torah offers, according to this story, is not a world that suppresses or rejects material luxury; rather, it is a world which experiences the physical as part of a system of *mitzvot* and of the status of “observers of the commandments” as royalty. Thus, aspects of the material world are illuminated in a positive light when they are part of a life of holiness: for example, splendor – as expressed, for example, in the *tzitzit*; or sexuality – as expressed in the conclusion of the story with the consummation of the lawful and legitimate union between the couple, upon the same bedding, with the same splendor, and with the same powerful desire.

In the next few *shiurim* I will propose some further thoughts on the structure of the story and its exegesis, and on the relationship between the story and its context. Some Chasidic teachings will also be introduced into the discussion, following which we will return to the story and the *sugya*.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

1. Summaries of the main points may be found in W.Z. Harvey, “The Pupil, the Harlot and the Fringe Benefits,” *Prooftexts* 6 (1986), 259-264; A. Goshen-Gottstein, “*Mitzvat Tzitzit, ha-Zona, ve-ha-Sippur ha-Darshani*,” *Machshevet Chazal* (5750), pp. 45-58; A Kosman, “*Le-Parshanut ha-Sippur al ha-Talmid, ha-Zona ve-ha-Tzitzit*,” *Mo’ed* 16, pp. 61-74. For further reading, see Y. Markus, “*Tzitzit ke-Siman Zehut – Nituach ha-Sippur al Ba’al ha-Tzitzit ve-ha-Zona al pi Hekshero ha-Sifruti ha-Rachav*,” *Netu’im* 19 (5774), pp. 107-230. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See footnote 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See reference in footnote 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Harvey (ibid.) adds that the *midrash* embodied in the story may also be an elaboration on the words, “and you shall be holy (*kedoshim*) unto your God,” in the context of the *kiddushin* (marriage) between the prostitute and the scholar, in the wake of seeing the *tzitzit* and accepting “all the commandments of the Lord.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For instance, Goshen-Gottstein (above, footnote 1) notes that the word *sachar* (reward) and the number 4, which appear in connection with both the payment to the prostitute and the reward for the mitzva, create a contrast between them, with the reward for the mitzva, which is numerically smaller, turning out to be much greater than the rewards of prostitution. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Goshen-Gottstein’s exposition of the centrality of the teaching about the reward for the mitzva is convincing in relation to the version of the story as it appears in the *Sifri Bamidbar*, which may be viewed as focused on the verses about *tzitzit*. But the story as it appears in the Gemara may have a different focus, determined by its context, and/or by the specific way in which it is molded by the redactors of the *Bavli* (which, as noted, is slightly different from the source in the Midrash), as we shall see below. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See above, footnote 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See reference in footnote 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See Marcus’s references, ibid., p. 116 and footnote 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)