**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT SHELACH**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Rashi, commenting to the beginning of Parashat Shelach (13:3), famously writes (citing *Chazal*)that all twelve scouts sent by Moshe to explore *Eretz Yisrael* were righteous at the time they embarked on their mission. This comment, of course, gives rise to the difficult question of how ten pious men could fall so quickly, to the point where just forty days later they questioned God’s ability to defeat the armies of Canaan. If they were, indeed, men of prominent religious stature, then how could they turn so evil within a period of under six weeks? Many writers have cited and discussed in this context the startling remark of the *Zohar* that these men, whom the Torah identifies as the leaders of their tribes (“*rashei alfei Yisrael*” – 13:3), realized that they would lose their positions once *Benei Yisrael* entered the Land of Israel. In *Eretz Yisrael*, the leadership structure would be fundamentally altered, and these leaders would no longer occupy positions of stature. They therefore devised a plan to dissuade the people from entering the land so they would remain in the wilderness and the leaders would retain their positions of prominence.

The *Zohar*’s comments, however, seem to only exacerbate the question. How could people described as “righteous” commit such a grievous crime against God and His people simply to retain their positions of leadership? How is it possible for pious men to plummet to such depths of arrogance and evil?

[The Klausenberger Rebbe](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=36052&st=&pgnum=255&hilite=) (without addressing this question directly) explained that the scouts assumed that nobody other than they were capable of leading. Their motives were sincere, as they believed their roles as tribal leaders were indispensable for the nation’s success. Once they viewed their positions in this light, they were prepared to do whatever was necessary to retain their leadership roles. Strange as it might sound, they betrayed God in their misguided effort to “save” His people. They felt so confidently that *Benei Yisrael* needed them in their leadership roles that they rejected the destiny that God had planned for the nation.

The Rebbe’s insight reminds us of the delicate balance that needs to be struck between bold confidence and humility. On the one hand, in situations where our involvement is truly needed and indispensable, we must proceed with conviction rather than excuse ourselves with false humility. But on the other hand, we must avoid presumptuously viewing our role as indispensable when it isn’t. If we fail to recognize our talents and potential, and the extent of the contribution we can make, then we will lazily sit at the sidelines rather than invest ourselves in areas where we can truly make a difference. But at the opposite extreme, as in the case of the *meragelim*, if we exaggerate our capabilities and potential, and view our work as more urgent than it really is, then we are liable to resort to illegitimate extreme measures. We must carefully assess our talents and the needs of *Am Yisrael* and be prepared to get involved where we can contribute, while at the same time keeping our work in perspective and not overstating the importance of our roles.

Sunday

Upon returning to the Israelite camp after their forty-day sojourn in Canaan, ten of the twelve scouts reported on the frightening size and military strength of the Canaanite people, concluding, “We were like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and this is how we were in their eyes” (13:33).

The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (35a) suggests proving from this remark that the scouts spoke untruthfully. Even if they justifiably felt like “grasshoppers” in relation to the giants they saw in Canaan, the Gemara reasons, they could not possibly have known how they were viewed by the Canaanites. The confident assertion that “this is how we were in their eyes” thus seemingly proves that the scouts were dishonest, presenting their speculations as verified facts. But the Gemara then refutes this proof, claiming that in truth, the scouts had good reason to believe that they were viewed as “grasshoppers” by the Canaanites. During the scouts’ sojourn, the Gemara tells, God brought a plague that killed large numbers of Canaanites, so that the natives would be preoccupied with funerals and thus not pay attention to the strangers traveling through the country. At one point, some Canaanites came to eat their meal after a funeral, and the scouts quickly climbed up trees to hide from their view. The Canaanites heard the rustling, and remarked to one another how they hear the sound of grasshoppers coming from the trees. Thus, technically speaking, the scouts did not lie, since the Canaanites did, in fact, refer to them as “grasshoppers.”

It emerges from the Gemara’s discussion that although the scouts did not technically lie, they were nevertheless incorrect. The Canaanites did not actually regard the scouts as “grasshoppers.” Rather, they mistook them for grasshoppers because they were preoccupied with their personal grief and did not care to investigate the source of the noises they heard. Their reference to the scouts as “grasshoppers” stemmed from a misunderstanding, which was itself a product of lack of knowledge.

Symbolically, the Gemara’s discussion perhaps provides instruction for dealing with other people’s insults and denigrating remarks about us. Very often, this results from a simple lack of knowledge. Few people truly know who we really are. They, like the Canaanites observed by the scouts, are too preoccupied with their own affairs to pay close attention to our true essence. As such, we needn’t pay much attention to their scorn and insults. Even when people treat and speak of us as “grasshoppers,” this is likely because they do not, and will not, truly understand us. While in some instances there will be some validity to negative comments made about us, many other times they are the result of misinformation and are not worthy of our attention.

The Kotzker Rebbe famously remarked that the crux of the scouts’ sin lay in this verse. It is when we pay too much attention to what others think and say about us that we lose our moral fortitude and confidence to do what we know is right. The Gemara’s account reminds us that as long as we are honest and objective in our self-assessment, nobody knows us better than ourselves, and therefore, only we have the final word on who and what we are and what we are capable of.

Monday

In trying to persuade *Benei Yisrael* that they were fully capable of conquering the Land of Israel despite the power of its inhabitants, Kalev and Yehoshua told the people, “…do not fear the residents of the land, for they are our bread” (14:9). The simple meaning of this metaphor is that the Canaanites were, in Kalev and Yehoshua’s assessment, as easy to defeat as food is to consume. Just as one eats his bread without having to worry about any opposition or resistance on the bread’s part, Kalev and Yehoshua firmly believed that with God’s help, *Benei Yisrael* would have no trouble whatsoever defeating the Canaanites.

The Maharsham (cited in [*Likutei Batar Likutei*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=4118&st=&pgnum=116&hilite=)), however, found a deeper meaning in Kalev and Yehoshua’s analogy. The term “*lechem*” (“bread”) generally refers to one’s basic sustenance, as opposed to luxuries. The basic difference between our basic necessities and the additional amenities we desire is that we are prepared to work much harder for the former than for the latter. If securing one’s basic needs demands a great deal of grueling work and exertion, he is prepared to invest whatever efforts are necessary. This is not the case when dealing with luxury. While many people are certainly prepared to invest work and effort to obtain luxuries, the extent of this effort is certainly far less than that which they would invest to secure their basic sustenance. And thus, the Maharsham suggests, when Kalev and Yehoshua compared the conquest of *Eretz Yisrael* to “bread,” they intended to convey the message that for them, this undertaking was a necessity. The nation’s possession and settlement of their homeland was a basic need, not a “luxury” that could be dispensed with if it seems too difficult. Kalev and Yehoshua insisted that the land could be taken with ease, but they also indicated that even if not, it must be done anyway. Settling *Eretz Yisrael* must be regarded as “*lechem*” – a basic national necessity, and not as an extra amenity to be enjoyed only when easily attainable.

We of course hope and pray that our efforts to study and observe the Torah proceed smoothly and without struggles or obstacles. Invariably, however, and perhaps even more often than not, this is not the case. The Maharsham’s insight, though said in specific reference to settling the Land of Israel, must be applied to the full range of Torah obligations, and should remind us to view them as “*lechem*” – a matter of necessity. Torah and *mitzvot* must be our priority not only when they are convenient and accessible, but even when they entail struggle and hard work, as they so often do. Once we recognize that the Torah is our “bread,” one of our basic life necessities, we will be more prepared to put in the effort that is needed to excel in its study and observance.

Tuesday

The final section of Parashat Shelach introduces the *mitzva* of *tzitzit* – the obligation to affix fringes to the corners of one’s four-cornered garment.

The Gemara in Masekhet Menachot (41a, 42b) cites a debate among the *Amoraim* regarding the nature of this obligation – specifically, whether or not it applies only when one wears a four-cornered garment. According to one opinion, the Torah requires affixing *tzitzit* to any four-cornered garment in one’s possession, even when he does not wear it, and it is simply sitting in the closet. The accepted view, however, regards *tzitzit* as a “*chovat gavra*” (literally, “an obligation upon the person”), meaning, as a requirement applicable only when one wears a four-cornered garment.

The *Shulchan Arukh* (O.C. 19:1) posits that this perspective on the *mitzva* of *tzitzit* also affects the recitation of the *berakha* which we recite over this *mitzva*. He writes: “*Tzitzit* is a ‘*chovat gavra*’…such that whenever one does not wear the garment, it is exempt from *tzitzit*. Therefore, one does not recite the *berakha* on making the *tzitzit*, for the *mitzva* is [fulfilled] only by its being worn.” Since the obligation requires *tzitzit* only when the garment is worn, the *berakha* is recited when one puts on the garment, and not when the *tzitzit* is tied onto the garment.

The *Magen Avraham* raises the question as to the distinction between *tzitzit* and *mezuza* in this regard. These two *mitzvot* appear to resemble one another: just as we are required to affix *tzitzit* onto garments that we wear, we are similarly required to affix *mezuzot* to the doorposts of the home in which we reside. And yet, the *berakha* over the *mezuza* is recited when one affixes the *mezuza* to the doorpost, whereas the *berakha* over *tzitzit* is recited not when the *tzitzit* are affixed to the garment, but rather when one wears the garment. Seemingly, we should either recite the *berakha* over *mezuza* at the time we move into the house, similar to the recitation of the *berakha* when putting on a *tallit*, or we should recite the *berakha* over *tzitzit* when tying the strings onto the garment, similar to the *berakha* recited when affixing the *mezuzot*.

The *Magen Avraham* answers that the difference between the two *mitzvot* lies in the practical difference in the way they are performed. We affix the *tzitzit* strings to the garment (or have somebody else affix the strings) before we put on the garment; we do not put the garment on and then affix the strings. *Mezuzot*, however, are affixed soon after we move into the home. As such, in the case of *mezuza*, the *mitzva* is fulfilled at the time it is affixed to the doorpost, and so the *berakha* is recited then, whereas the *mitzva* over *tzitzit* is fulfilled when one dons the garment with the *tzitzit* strings, and so he recites the *berakha* at that point.

It emerges from the *Magen Avraham* that in principle, these two *mitzvot* are, indeed, fundamentally parallel. If not for the practical matter that we customarily affix *mezuzot* after moving into a home, we would recite the *berakha* over *mezuza* when we move in, just like we recite the *berakha* over *tzitzit* when we put on the garment. Accordingly, the *Magen Avraham* writes that if one affixes the *mezuzot* to the doors of his new home before he moves in, then he does not recite the *berakha* at that point. Rather, when he moves into the home, he recites the *berakha*, “*Baruch Ata…asher kideshanu...ve-tzivanu* ***la-dur ba-bayit she-yeish bo mezuza***.” Since one fulfills the *mitzva* at that point, when he moves into the home, he recites the *berakha* then, just like we recite the *berakha* over *tzitzit* at the time when we put on the *tallit*.

The *Magen Avraham*’s ruling does not represent the consensus among the halakhic authorities, and tomorrow we will *iy”H* explore possible reasons to distinguish between the *mitzva* of *tzitzit* and the *mitzva* of *mezuza* in this regard.

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted the question raised by the *Magen Avraham* (19:1) as to why the *berakha* over the *mitzva* of *tzitzit* is recited when one dons his *tallit*, rather than when the *tzitzit* are affixed to the garment, whereas the *berakha* over *mezuza* is recited when the *mezuza* is affixed to the doorframe. Seemingly, the *berakha* over *mezuza* should be recited when one moves into his home, just as the *berakha* over *tzitzit* is recited when one puts on the garment. The *Magen Avraham* answers that indeed, one who affixes the *mezuzot* before he moves into the home does not recite the *berakha* at that point, and rather waits until he moves into the home, similar to the recitation of the *berakha* over the *mitzva* of *tzitzit*. However, since the common custom is to affix the *mezuzot* only after moving into a new home, the *berakha* cannot be recited when one moves into the home – as the *mitzva* is not yet being fulfilled – and it is thus recited when the *mezuzot* are affixed.

[Rav Asher Weiss](http://www.torahbase.org/%D7%9E%D7%A6%D7%95%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%A6%D7%99%D7%A6%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%97%D7%95%D7%91%D7%AA-%D7%92%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%90-%D7%95%D7%97%D7%95%D7%91%D7%AA-%D7%98%D7%9C%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%AA%D7%A9%D7%A2%D7%94/), however, suggests other reasons for this distinction between the *berakha* over *tzitzit* and the *berakha* over *mezuza*. Firstly, several sources indicate that *berakhot* over *mitzvot* are recited only before performing a “*ma’aseh mitzva*” – a concrete *mitzva* act. If the *mitzva*’s fulfillment does not coincide with the concrete action which it requires, then the *berakha* is recited before performing the action, even though the *mitzva* is not fulfilled at that moment. And in a situation where the *mitzva*’s fulfillment does not require any concrete action, no *berakha* is recited. Thus, for example, as Rav Weiss notes, Rabbi Akiva Eiger rules (responsa, 9) that one does not recite a *berakha* over the *mitzva* of *mezuza* if he moves into a house that already has *mezuzot*, or if he moves back into his home after spending an extended period away from home. Rabbi Akiva Eiger writes that in these two cases, one fulfills the *mitzva* of *mezuza* by moving into, or back into, the home, but he nevertheless does not recite the *berakha* because he does not perform a concrete *mitzva* act.

For the same reason, Rav Weiss explains, *Chazal* instituted the recitation of a *berakha* when affixing the *mezuza*, and not when one moves into the home. Since affixing the *mezuza* constitutes the “*ma’aseh mitzva*” – the *mitzva* act – it is then when the *berakha* must be recited. Moving into a home does not qualify as a *mitzva* act, and thus the *berakha* cannot be recited at that point. And herein, Rav Weiss writes, lies the difference between *mezuza* and *tzitzit*. The act of putting on a *tallit* constitutes a *mitzva* act, and thus the *berakha* over the *mitzva* of *tzitzit* was instituted to be recited at that point. When it comes to moving into a home, by contrast, although the *mitzva* of *mezuza* is, technically speaking, fulfilled at that point, the *mitzva* act is the affixing of the *mezuza* to the doorframe, and it is thus on that occasion when the *berakha* is recited.

Rav Weiss then suggests a more fundamental distinction between the two *mitzvot*, asserting that while they may appear similar, the respective definitions of these obligations in truth differ significantly from one another. When it comes to *tzitzit*, the *mitzva* is defined as an obligation to **wear** *tzitzit*. Wearing the *tzitzit* constitutes the essential definition of the *mitzva*, whereas the need for a four-cornered garment is a detail that limits its scope. The *mitzva* of *mezuza*, by contrast, is defined not as an obligation to live in a home with a *mezuza*, but rather to ensure that the home in which one resides has a *mezuza*. Here, the essential definition of the *mitzva* is that the home should have a *mezuza*, and the person’s ownership of the home is a peripheral detail. And for this reason, the *berakha* over *tzitzit* is recited when we put on the *tallit*, whereas the *berakha* over *mezuza* is recited when the *mezuza* is affixed to the doorframe. The *mitzva* of *tzitzit* is fulfilled at the time one puts on the garment, whereas the *mitzva* of *mezuza* is fulfilled when the *mezuza* is affixed to the door, and this accounts for the difference in the recitation of the *berakhot*.

Thursday

In the final verse of Parashat Shelach, the Torah concludes its discussion of the *mitzva* of *tzitzit* by reminding us about the Exodus: “I am the Lord your God who took you from the land of Egypt.” Rashi presents several reasons for this conclusion, including the explanation given by the Gemara in Masekhet Bava Metzia (61b), which interprets this verse to mean, “I am the One who distinguished in Egypt between the drop [that produced] a firstborn and the drop [that produced a child] who was not a firstborn, and I will, in the future, distinguish and punish one who affixes *kala ilan* to his garment and says it is *tekehelet*.” The Gemara views this verse as a warning against those who sought to avoid the expense entailed in obtaining *tekhelet* – the special dye with which one string *tzitzit* used to be dyed – by using the far cheaper *kala ilan* dye, which resembled *tekhelet*. The Torah warns that just as on the night of the Exodus God knew which Egyptians were their father’s firstborn, even in cases of those born out of wedlock who did not realize they were firstborns, He is likewise capable of determining which dye is *tekhelet* and which is a cheap imitation.

How might we explain the significance of this association between the firstborn of Egypt and the attempt to “deceive” God by using *kala ilan* in place of *tekhelet*?

The situation in Egypt, where boys who assumed they were firstborns in fact were not, and some who did not realize they were firstborn were, illustrates the fact that God knows us better than we know ourselves. There are many things about ourselves of which we are unaware but are clear and evident to the Almighty. And this might be the point of connection between the firstborns of Egypt and those who wear *kala ilan* instead of *tekhelet*. The Gemara perhaps utilized this case as a symbol for the broader phenomenon of people who convince themselves they are something they are not. Often, in an effort to feel accomplished and proud without having to invest the time and work needed to truly achieve, we substitute “*tekhelet*” – sacrifice and effort – with “*kala ilan*” – something cheap that outwardly resembles religious devotion. While this is sometimes done for the purpose of deceiving others, we at times use “*kala ilan*” in an effort to deceive ourselves, to feel “religious” and “spiritual” without having to put in the work that true religious devotion and spirituality requires. The Gemara here warns us that God is fully capable of distinguishing between a “firstborn” and a “non-firstborn” even when we aren’t. Even if we succeed in convincing ourselves of our own stature of greatness, that our “*kala ilan*” – the cheap, easy measures we take to appear and feel “religious” – are real and genuine “*tekhelet*,” God knows the difference between them.

If so, then the Gemara here reminds us of the need for brutal honesty in our religious commitment. It is easy to fool ourselves with “*kala ilan*,” with shallow and cheap expressions of religiosity that allow us to feel spiritually accomplished with relative ease. We must remember that *avodat Hashem* requires genuine “*tekehelet*,” hard work and sacrifice, for which there is absolutely no substitute.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted the explanation given by the Gemara (Bava Metzia 61b) for why the Torah in Parashat Shelach concludes its discussion of *tzitzit* by recalling the event of the Exodus. The Gemara, as cited by Rashi, explains: “I am the One who distinguished in Egypt between the drop [that produced] a firstborn and the drop [that produced a child] who was not a firstborn, and I will, in the future, distinguish and punish one who affixes *kala ilan* to his garment and says it is *tekehelet*.” People were tempted to save the expense of purchasing *tekhelet* – the special dye required for one of the *tzitzit* strings – by using instead the outwardly similar, but much less expensive, *kala ilan* dye. God warns such people that just as He was able to identify the firstborns in Egypt, even those who were conceived out of wedlock and thus did not know they were firstborns, he can also distinguish between genuine *tekhelet* and a counterfeit product.

Rav Shimon Moshe Diskin, in his [*Mas’at Ha-melekh*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=48069&st=&pgnum=283&hilite=), suggests an explanation for the connection drawn by the Gemara between counterfeit *tekhelet* and the plague of the firstborn. He notes that several verses earlier (15:39), the Torah explains the *mitzva* of *tzitzit* as intended to remind us of the *mitzvot*: “…you will see it and remember all the commandments of the Lord and perform them.” The *Sifrei* explains that the color of the *tekhelet* dye resembles the color of the sky, and thus viewing the *tekhelet* will remind us of our obligations to God. One might therefore have justified the practice of substituting *tekhelet* with a cheaper imitation, since both would have the same effect. As *kala ilan* outwardly resembles *tekhelet*, it would seem not to make any difference which material one uses as a reminder on his garment of God’s Heavenly Throne.

The Gemara therefore draws our attention to the plague of the firstborn, to the night when God once and for all forced Pharaoh to release *Benei Yisrael* by striking the firstborn children in his kingdom. On the surface, this result would have been achieved regardless of whether God had ensured to kill all biological firstborns and to spare the others. Pharaoh would, in all likelihood, have been no less shaken by the catastrophe that struck his kingdom if God had killed the presumed firstborns in each household, rather than kill only the true biological firstborns. Nevertheless, for reasons we can only speculate, God determined it was necessary to kill only those who were their biological fathers’ first children. The Gemara teaches that just as our limited human minds are incapable of understanding this decision, we similarly cannot assume to know the reasons behind all the Torah’s laws, such that we could make modifications which we deem appropriate. We cannot substitute *tekhelet* with *kala ilan* because God commanded us to use *tekhelet*, even if we think *kala ilan* could achieve the same desired effect, and this sense of humble, unquestioning submission must characterize our approach to all the Torah’s laws.