

We live in a cynical age. With more devices and tools than ever that purport to make us happier, healthier, and to make the world a better place, we find that it has somehow become harder than ever to remember what our obligations are at any moment. The endless apps, text messages, emails, and news alerts leave our minds reeling and losing focus on what is really important and what actually makes us feel fulfilled and happy.

Our parsha, Shlach L'kha, speaks to the lack of focus and negativity that such a deluge of information and emotions can cause. The parsha begins with a singular goal: scouting out the land of Israel in advance of its conquest. Prominent men from each tribe are appointed for the task and set off on their mission. And even though Moshe's briefing in advance of their mission seems to contain honest queries about its features that he hopes their mission will answer, it eventually becomes clear that this task was more about faith than simple assessment. When the men return, they go straight to people and voice their fears and anxieties, leading the entire people to panic and lose faith in the mission altogether.

This incident, along with the worshipping of the Golden calf, becomes one of the great failures of the Israelites in the wilderness, and the final straw for the generation that left Egypt. Moses convinces God not to destroy the people altogether yet again, but God's compromise is that this generation will wander 40 years in the wilderness so that they will all, except the faithful spies Joshua and Caleb, die off before entering the land.

Yet in our third triennial reading this week, we didn't actually read any of that story. What we did read was the commandment of wearing tzi-tzit on the corners of our garments. On the surface, there is seemingly no connection between this commandment and the story of the spies that preceded it. That is except for one solitary root word which the passages share: La-TUR (taf, vav, resh), meaning to scout out. This root occurs over and over in the tale of the spies, and then appears unexpectedly in the last passage of our parsha—in a verse that gives one reason for wearing tzitzit. It reads:

וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹת יְיָ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְלֹא-תִתְּוֵרוּ אַחֲרַי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרַי
עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר-אַתֶּם זֹנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם:

**And you will see it and recall all the commandments of the LORD
and observe them, so that you do not scout out after your heart and
eyes in your lustful urge.**

Rashi makes the connection between the root letters explicit in his comment on this verse, by comparing its use in tzitzit to one of the uses of the root “tur” used in the spies story. The connection between this verb and sin, interestingly, is bolstered by the fact that, unlike in the Torah’s spy story, this verb doesn’t appear a single time in our haftarah, where the mission is an unmitigated success; instead the verb “m’ragel” is preferred for spying. Rashi further explains that “the heart and eyes are the scouts for the body and act as agents for transgressions, the eye sees, the heart covets, and the body does the transgression.” For Rashi, then, the tzitzit are connected to the error of the spies but also go beyond that to include sins of desire. This leads us to ask: in what way was the spies’ sin, a transgression caused by desire? Was it not chiefly fear and mistrust that led them to err?

Indeed those elements seem to be a major part of their grave sin. But this stipulation in tzitzit about not spying or scouting adds another dimension to the usual explanation for their mistake. The spies not only did not believe that God could help them possess the land, but it would seem that perhaps they desired to see and believe in the worst possible outcome of the conquest. They did not enter their search with a hopeful outlook and with the support of all the miracles they had experienced from God thus far; but instead they desired to find the worst in the land—to strengthen their impulse for negativity and cynicism and spread that cynical, helpless outlook within their community.

Just as strong as other desires of the flesh, the desire to believe the worst in people or circumstances is a strong inclination that continues to act on us as human beings. We live in a culture of cynicism, where we expect the worst of our government, our leaders, strangers, and society as a whole. In a certain way, this view can be easily justified, especially in our time as we watch valued norms of our society stripped away daily. But this despair traps us in a cycle of laziness and comfort. It is, after all, much easier to go through life with this outlook—

keeping our hopes low never leaves us disappointed, never forces us to open our hearts to believe in something better, never pushes us to act. And yet, so much is lost to us when we refuse to believe in the best of people, to believe in a better future and fight for it—to hope, to love, to trust.

Tzitzit then are not solely symbols to remember to do the commandments of God and to refrain from inappropriate desire, but they are also something greater than that. They are signs of the hope that bind us to God through their carefully tied knots, when we could easily just give up and shut down. These signs of hope are indeed at the far corners of our garments, of our world; but as we put on the tallit each morning, we intentionally gather them together and hold them united as we express our faith in God's unity and redeeming power—affirming that even though hope and redemption may feel distant, they are always there for us to gather up, one thread at a time. In the midst of the dizzying information and worries of our day, the sight of the tzitzit remind us to focus on the good and believe in an even better world no matter what is happening—

to lift our heads beyond the despair and dare to believe and to try.

The spies lost sight of the good they saw on their mission and their belief in themselves, Moshe, and God. They fell into an easy trap and sought to have the community join them in despair. They did not have a lifeline available to take hold of to remind them of their true mission and break through their fear of failure. Tzitzit are meant to serve as that lifeline for us by showing us that we are bound to God, and therefore bound to hope and action over all else. We cannot go through this world scouting out what we see with a negative eye and an expectation of disappointment. If we do so, we lose the opportunity to see and bring a greater future to light, our own promised land. May God grant us the ability to focus on our greater task, hold tight to our tzitzit and to allow them to compel us to keep fighting for what is right.