

Ki Seitzei

Mystics, Rationalists and Fringes on Clothes

You shall make yourself twisted threads on the four corners of your garment with which you cover yourself.

Dvarim 22:12

Mystics dress in white gowns and burn incense. We rationalists wear business suits, and designer shirts and ties. But why is it that some of us can be so confused by, and indifferent to, talk about demons, angels and Heaven?¹⁴³

There are seven commandments that are considered by our Sages to be as important as the entirety of the Torah. One of them is “tzitzis.” Tzitzis are the fringes that a male Jew is obligated to affix to his four-cornered garment, should he choose to wear one. Although most clothing is no longer made with four corners, Torah-observant Jews wear special undershirts of four corners colloquially called “tzitzis,” so as not to miss the grand opportunity to perform this mitzvah.

But what is behind this mitzvah? Why is it worthy of being dubbed as valuable as the entire Torah?

Tosafos¹⁴⁴ tells us that these strings are similar to the brand of a slave, which informs the world that he is enslaved to his master alone. The Midrash,¹⁴⁵ however, paints a very different-sounding picture of this mitzvah: “A parable – A man has fallen overboard at sea, and is in grave danger! The captain extends him a line and tells him, ‘Grab a hold, don’t let go, for letting go of this line is forfeiting your very life.’” “Grab onto my commandments,” says G-d; “letting go of them is forfeiting your very life.”

A glorious picture! Our tzitzis are our very lives, connecting us to G-d, our Captain, Who is waiting for us to join Him on the deck, and be saved from the turbulence of life’s raging tempests. He beseeches mankind to simply embrace Torah values and He will then pull His end of the cord. Man wearing his tzitzis is showing that he is just a tug away from an audience with the Divine Presence. How very different from the Tosafos’s image of the Torah adherent as a branded slave is this Midrash!

Man is a composite of spirit and earth. He is caught in a tug-of-war between his earthly impulses and his spiritual aspirations. There are two parts to his job on this Earth. He must

143 The content of this chapter is based upon chapter 4 of the *sefer Hamitzvos HaSebkulos* of the saintly Rav Shlomo Wolbe, z”l.

144 Menachos 43b

145 Dvarim Rabbah 17:6

firstly learn not to be beholden to the calls of his animalistic physical side, and he must also learn to attach to the spiritual. Man must brand himself and show that he is not enslaved to the physical, but rather, answers to a much higher calling. He must then also begin to grasp at and hold onto the line extended to him from the Master of the universe, Who is beckoning to him, and inviting him to take his rightful place on the deck of the ship.

There are two genres in classic Jewish scholarship explaining the meaning of mitzvos. *Sefer Hachinuch* explains the more basic and rational reasons for the commandments. This explains the branding of the person, how the mitzvos ensure that he simply not drown in the ocean of the physical world. Others, such as the Radvaz, in his *Metzudas Dovid*, explain the more mystical significances of the commandments. This provides explanations as to how the mitzvos then attach man to his Maker and bring him close to Hashem.

Rationalism and mysticism are both accurate and true. The rationalist explains how the mitzvos affect the physical world, and why they elevate a man above it. The mystic explains how it is that the mitzvos bring one into a spiritual world, and teach us “spiritual physics,” explaining how those mitzvos bring us close to G-d. Every Jew is both a mystic and a rationalist. He lives an existence of the tangible intermingled with the spirit. Those who wear tzitzis have access, on their very person, to a message that encompasses the entire mission of man in this world. There is mysticism in the rational, and rationalism in the mystical. This is the secret of tzitzis.