"*Tetzaveh*: *tzitz*, *tzitzit*,and a kingdom of priests"

By Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

'The apparel oft proclaims the man' (*Hamlet*, act 1, scene 3).

The Torah describes in detail the distinctive garments of the priests and High Priest. Wearing them was to invest those spiritual leaders and exemplars with 'glory and splendour' (Ex. 28:2) - to 'proclaim the man,' and to reflect the glory of the God before whom they ministered.

The people of Israel were similarly designated by God as 'a kingdom of priests' (Ex. 19:6), and, hence, the ordinary folk were also invested with a distinctive item of clothing in the form of the attachment of *tzitzit* (tassels) upon their four-cornered garments (See Nu. 15:37-41). One of its threads was to be dyed blue (*techelet*), the colour symbolic of nobility, which was intended to symbolise the perennial summons to dignified and noble living that was expected to characterise a nation of priests. That the priesthood was perceived as a spiritual 'monarchy' is reflected in the reference to *keter kehunah*, 'the crown of the priesthood' (Mishnah *Avot* 4:13).

While the basic root-meaning of the noun *tzitzit* is 'dubious' (Brown, Driver, Briggs, *Lexicon*, p.851), a semantic association with the High Priest's *tzitz*, 'head band' - tied around his forehead, like a crown, and displaying a golden frontlet on which was inscribed the words *Kodesh LaShem*, 'Sanctified to God' (Ex. 28:36) - is unavoidable. That, after all, is the precise objective of the tzitzit as an outward sign upon our clothing: *And you shall see them and remember all the commands of the Lord…and you shall be* ***holy (kedoshim) to your God*** (Nu. 15:39-40). Thus, the wearing of tzitzit all day long – with some displaying the threads visibly over their outer garments as was the case in antiquity – was intended to remind us of those mitzvot that were intended to guide our decisions and motivate our conduct as we go

out and about in pursuit of our workaday and leisure activities. The use of the word *kedoshim* in the context of this outward sign is a powerful message that holiness is to be equally demonstrated in our interpersonal relations as it is within the rituals of Temple, Synagogue and home.

Those interpersonal mitzvot may be divided into two main categories: those promoting integrity, and those serving as a deterrent against immorality.

In the case of the former, the Torah states that God brought the flood [primarily] 'because the earth was filled with *chamas* (lit. 'violence': Gen. 6:11), which the sages interpret as *gezel*, 'robbery' (See Rashi *ad loc*.), but which exemplifies the wider pursuit of integrity in all aspects of our business and professional lives. Among the numerous examples of this are the prohibitions of lying (Lev. 19:11), withholding a worker's wage (v. 13), setting someone up for a fall (v.14), ignoring the call of someone in danger, distress, or pain (v.16) and of possessing divers weights and measures with which to deceive a purchaser.

Significantly, the Talmud states that the very first question we will be asked when we enter the next world is, 'Did you conduct your business with integrity?' (Talmud ***Shabb.*** 31a).

But integrity is a double-sided coin. It is not only a matter of doing the *right* thing, but also of doing the *righteous* thing! And hence the oft-repeated prescription to give practical and generous support to 'the stranger, orphan and widow' (See Ex. 22:20-23; Deut. 14:28-29; 16:9-14, 24; 17-22), surely the most natural expression of loving one's neighbour as oneself.

The classical formulation is:

> *If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need… So, beware - lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, 'The seventh*

> *year, the year of release* [of all debts] *is at hand' - and you begrudge your poor brother and give him nothing, and he cry out to the Lord against you, for it shall be accounted as sin among you. You shall surely give to him, and your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the Lord your God will bless you in all your works and in all to which you put your hand. For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore, I command you, saying, 'You shall open your hand wide to your brother, to your poor and to the needy in your land'* (Deut. 15:7-11).

Isaiah eloquently fleshes out the broader ramifications of the Torah's philosophy of philanthropy, giving priority to ethics and sensitivity over ritual, and elevating the fight for freedom and human rights to the level of a divine fiat:

> *Is this the fast I have chosen: a day for a man to deny himself, to bow his head like a reed, and to spread out sackcloth and ashes? Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the Lord? Isn't this the fast that I have chosen: to break the chains of wickedness, to untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and tear off every yoke? Isn't it to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the poor and homeless into your home, to clothe the naked when you see them, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?* (Is. 58:6-7)

The second of our guiding principles is also inferred derived from the phrase *Kedoshim tih'yu*, 'Be holy' (Lev. 19:2) – that leitmotif of Jewish identity - which the sages define as the duty of 'alienating oneself' (*perushim tih'yu*) from immoral people, behaviour, and situations.

We say each morning, in the *Elohai neshamah* prayer, 'the soul that You gave me is pure.' It is the encrustation of sin that furs up our ethical and moral arteries and prevents our innate purity from coursing through our hearts and souls. And hence the path to *kedushah* ('holiness') and *toharah* ('purity') lies in our determination to banish those primary seductive

tendencies of deception and immorality. It is not coincidental that (the final) two of the six 'Orders of the Mishnah' bear those two names: *Kodashim* and *Tohorot*!

God gave us the challenge of being 'a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Ex. 19:6). And thus, as we don our *tzitzit* each day, we are called upon to focus our minds exclusively on holiness as exemplified by the message indelibly inscribed on the *tzitz* which was bound around the forehead of the leading priest, and of making ourselves, to the best of our ability, 'Holy to God' and 'a kingdom of priests.'

The idea that the wearing of tzitzit may serve as a curb against immorality is illustrated by a famous story in the Talmud (much abridged here) of a wealthy Torah student who was especially zealous about the mitzvah of wearing tzitzit:

> One day, a friend told him about the most beautiful harlot one could ever dream of encountering and gave him her address in a nearby seaside town, with the caveat that her hire was the enormous sum of four hundred gold dinars. He became so intrigued and fixated with visiting her that he had the money sent to her and a time arranged for their liaison.
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> When he arrived, he was led into a chamber with a golden bed with steps of gold leading up to it, upon which she lay naked. Overcome with desire, he pulled off his robe, and, in doing so, the tzitzit attached to them struck him forcefully across his face. He immediately cooled down and shamefully began to reflect on the unworthiness of what he was about to do, which prompted him to recoil, jump down from the bed, and sit on the ground. She followed him, demanding that he tell her what blemish he saw in her. He responded that she was indeed flawless and supremely beautiful. He proceeded, however, to explain to her the power of the moral message of his

tzitzit, and how, in the Torah portion, the expression 'I am the Lord your God' occurred twice, indicating both the reward for responding to its moral summons, as well as the punishment for ignoring it. "My four tzitzit have just appeared to me," he declared, "and testified against me as four witnesses for the prosecution!"

The harlot demanded that he write down the details of his name, address, and the name of his Yeshivah teacher. She then sought an interview with Rav Chiyya, his teacher, and petitioned him to instruct her and accept her as a convert. When he probed her motive, and she revealed what had occurred at her home, and how overwhelmed she had been by the piety, self-restraint, and remorse of his student, Rav Chiyya accepted her and blessed their union. Thus, the bedding she had originally spread for him for a forbidden purpose she subsequently spread for a sacred one (Tal. *Men*. 44a-b).

This uninhibited vignette must be regarded as authentic, as it is hardly credible that the editors of the Talmud would have attached the name of such a revered Talmudic sage to this episode had that not been the case. It certainly reveals Rav Chiyya's tolerance, open-mindedness, and understanding of human nature, as well as his recognition of the redemptive power of *teshuvah.*

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One objective of blessings is to spiritualise the most basic of human activities and to give expression to our gratitude to God for our worldly benefits and pleasures. And hence the blessing of *Shehecheyanu* over the wearing of new clothes. That garments may serve as stimuli to spiritual thought and action is also reflected in the symbolic association of each

item of dress we put on in the morning with one or other of the *Birkot ha-Shachar* – the blessings recited at the beginning of the daily Morning Service:

> Upon [starting] dressing, one recites *Baruch…malbish arumim* ('Blessed be He who clothes the naked')
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> …
>
> Upon putting on one's shoes, one recites *Baruch… she'asah li kol tzorki* ('Blessed…who has provided me with all my needs') [shoes being a basic necessity].
>
> Upon tying on one's belt, one recites *Baruch… ozer Yisra'el bigvurah* ('Blessed…who girds Israel with strength').
>
> Upon putting on one's headgear, one recites: *Baruch…oteir Yisra'el b'tif'arah* ('Blessed…who crowns Israel with glory).
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> (Talmud *Ber.* 60a-b)

Hasidic custom went so far as to introduce an extra item of clothing, called 'a gartel,' meaning 'belt' or 'sash,' to create a tangible separation between the upper and lower parts of the body when reciting prayers. The *Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayyim* 91 (2)) relates this to the verse, *Hikkon likrat Elokecha,* ('Prepare to meet your God, O Israel': Amos 4:12), and the donning of such an item is viewed as symbolic of such preparedness.

Non-Chasidic members of the Charedi community believe that putting on one's jacket and wearing one's hat is required to demonstrate such preparedness and awe for prayer and for the recitation of *Birkat ha-Mazon.*

'The apparel - most definitely - proclaims the man!'

Shabbat shalom,

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