

PRIMARY REMINDER

by Rabbi Berel Wein

In the discussion of the commandment of tzitzit, which is the concluding subject matter in this week's parsha, the Torah warns us not to follow the dictates of our hearts' desires and the wants occasioned by our wandering eyes.

The rabbis (especially the Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin of nineteenth century Volozhin) who commented on this verse stated that the 'desires of our heart' refers to people who perform mitzvot but without any faith in their worth or in their Giver, and that 'after their wandering eyes' refers to those who view mitzvot that they personally observe through the prism of their eyes and understanding alone.

They are always willing to substitute either their desires or their intellectual rationalizations for the pure belief in God and the subservience necessary to serve the Eternal. Man's natural inclination to be independent of commands and orders of others, to do what man alone wishes to do irrespective of duty, tradition and ultimate consequences, always places man in opposition to this Jewish concept which stresses obedience and humility before our Creator.

The Torah allows us desires and rational thinking. But like every other facet of human behavior, these desires have to be channeled and disciplined. They are not meant to run wild and follow all of the changing whims and vagaries of human society in all of its ages and generations.

Performance of the mitzvot faithfully and in acknowledgement of the One Who commands those mitzvot to be performed becomes the foundation and anchor for the necessary disciplines that enhance Jewish life and make it eternal.

Otherwise, our hearts and eyes, our uncontrolled desires and uninhibited intellect and thoughts, will allow us eventually to go astray.

But, why is the commandment of tzitzit the ultimate method for teaching us these lessons of obedience, probity and faith? After all there are hundreds of other commandments that would seem to be proper to instruct us in the same fashion.

Here also the commentators to the Torah struggled to find a proper and meaningful explanation. The one that appeals most to me has to do with the form that the mitzvah takes. Even though the mitzvah applies only to four- cornered garments, a relative rarity in post-Talmudic times, Jews purposely wore such four-cornered garments in order to obligate themselves in the performance of

the mitzvah of tzitzit.

Thus, this is a mitzvah that was omnipresent in their lives - a garment that was constantly worn on their bodies. It was an item of self identity and a primary reminder of the yoke of mitzvot and Torah that the Jews accepted upon themselves and their generations at Mount Sinai.

Tzitzit is a mitzvah that numerically (through gematria) and in its form (its knots and strings) constantly reminds us of the 613 mitzvot that are the basis of our existence and the responsibilities in our lives and in this world.

Tzitzit is the sum total of all of the commandments - in fact of the very concept of commandments - that is the heart of Judaism and the nucleus of all Jewish life. Such is the methodology of Torah in all of our behavior and thoughts.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com