

WHAT'S THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE "WOOD-CHOPPER" AND TZITSIS?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 685, Art Museums. Good Shabbos!

The parsha contains the story of the "wood chopper," who was a Sabbath desecrator. (There is a disagreement in Tractate Shabbos as to which form of forbidden labor he performed). Inasmuch as the punishment for Chillul Shabbos was not yet known, he was put in confinement until Hashem clarified for Moshe that the punishment was stoning. The punishment was indeed carried out: "The entire assembly removed him to the outside of the camp; they pelted him with stones and he died, as Hashem had commanded Moshe." [Bamidbar 15:36].

Immediately following that story, the Torah continues with the section relating to the mitzvah of wearing Tzitsis on four cornered garments. We may ask - what is the significance of this juxtaposition?

There is an interesting insight mentioned in the Tanna D'Bei Eliyahu. When Moshe saw the Shabbos desecration of the wood chopper, he told Hashem: "During the week, Jews wear Tefillin and that serves as a reminder for them to observe the mitzvos. On Shabbos, when they do not wear Tefillin, they forget to keep Your commandments." G-d responded to Moshe by telling him that He was going to give a new mitzvah that applied every day of the week and would also serve as a reminder of the mitzvos - the mitzvah of wearing fringes on the corners of one's garments.

The Orach HaChaim HaKodesh writes that this idea fits in well with the fact that the parsha of Tzitsis is introduced with the phrase "Vayomer Hashem el Moshe laymor" (And G-d SAID to Moshe) instead of the far more customary introductory phrase "Vayedaber Hashem el Moshe laymor" (And G-d SPOKE to Moshe). The word "vayomer" connotes a softer, more conciliatory, type of communication than the harsher "vayedaber".

According to the Tanna D'Bei Eliyahu, this fits in beautifully. Moshe had a complaint, so to speak, against the Almighty. Hashem was responding to Moshe's objection with a new mitzvah that would "solve his problem" - the mitzvah of Tzitsis.

However, there is a technical problem with this nice homiletic idea. In order for the wood chopper to be liable to stoning, the person had to be warned that he was in violation of the Shabbos and subject

to a capital penalty. It is not possible for him to have merely "forgotten" the commandment. If he truly forgot the commandment, it would be a "shogeg" and for an unintentional violation of the Shabbos, one merely brings a sin offering, rather than being stoned. According to one opinion in the Gemara, the violator must actually respond, "I am doing this act on condition that I am given the death penalty!" So what kind of argument did Moshe Rabbeinu advance about the poor wood chopper who was not wearing Tefillin and therefore forgot about the mitzvah of Shabbos? Furthermore, what was Hashem's response to Moshe? If the explicit warning did not stop him from sinning, how will wearing Tzitsis stop him from doing such sins in the future?

The answer is, yes. Such is the power of mitzvos. When someone warns a potential sinner that "If you do this you will be subject to the death penalty," he is appealing to the person's sense of logic. Sometimes, for whatever reason, logic does not sway people. However, a mitzvah has a power which is spiritual and mystical and metaphysical in nature. Such is the power of mitzvos to prevent a person from sinning.

This is akin to the famous Chazal on the pasuk concerning the reason for the loss of the Land of Israel "Me they abandoned and My Torah they did not observe." [Yirmiyahu 16:11] The Medrash in Eicha Rabba interprets the Almighty to be saying: "If only Me they would have abandoned, but kept yet my commandments then the Light of the commandments would have returned them to the proper path." There is an innate mystical power in mitzvos that has an effect on a people's souls to prevent them from committing sins and to put them on the correct path to further observance.

This was Moshe's "complaint" to the Almighty: The wood-chopper was not doing any mitzvos at that moment. He was not wearing Tefillin. Had he been wearing Tefillin, it would have been different. The Almighty told Moshe, "You are right! I need to give another mitzvah that is constant so that people should always be aware and have that mystical reminder / incentive to keep the rest of Torah as well."

This is reminiscent of a rather graphic Gemara in Tractate Menachos [44a]:

It was taught in a Baraisa: You never have a small mitzvah written in the Torah whose reward is not paid generously in this world; and in the world to come - I do not even know how great it will be!

Go out and learn from the mitzvah of Tzitsis. There was an incident with a certain man who was careful about the mitzvah of Tzitsis. He heard that there was a harlot in the cities by the sea that took four hundred golden dinars for her fee. He sent her the four hundred golden dinars and made an appointment. When his time came he arrived and sat by the doorway. Her maidservant went in and told her "that man who sent you four hundred golden dinars has arrived and is sitting by the doorway. The harlot said, "Let him enter." He entered. She prepared seven beds for him, one above the other, six of silver and one of gold and between each pair of beds there was a silver ladder and the uppermost one was of gold.

She ascended and sat atop the uppermost bed unclothed. He too began to ascend in order to sit opposite her, unclothed. However, his four Tzitsis proceeded to pelt him upon his face. He slipped down the ladders and sat on the ground. And she too slipped down the ladders and sat on the ground.

She said to him, "By the Master of Rome I swear that I will not leave you until you tell me what flaw you saw in me." He replied "By the Divine Service, I swear that I have never seen a woman as beautiful as you. However, there is one mitzvah that Hashem, our G-d, has commanded us and Tzitsis is its name. Regarding this mitzvah, the phrase 'I am Hashem your G-d' is written twice in the Torah. One inform us 'I am He who will ultimately exact punishment from the corrupt,' and the other one inform us 'I am He who will ultimately give reward to the righteous'.

At this moment, these four fringes appeared to me like four witnesses (that would attest to the sin I was about to commit). She said to him, I will not leave you until you tell me your name, the name of your city, the name of your teacher, and the name of the Academy where you study Torah. He wrote this information and put it in her hand.

She arose and divided all her possessions. She gave one third to the government officials, one third to the poor, and one third she took in her hand. She divided all her property this way except for those linens, which she brought with her and she came to Rav Chiya's Beis Medrash. She said to him "Rabbi, give instructions on my behalf that they should make me a convert." He said to her, "My daughter, perhaps you have set your eyes upon one of the students?" She took out the written note from within her hand, gave it to him (and related the entire incident, persuading him that she was converting for the sake of Heaven -- Rashi). (After she converted) Rav Chiya told her, "Go and collect your acquisition" (i.e - marry the student you encountered in your home). Those linens that she had arranged for him illicitly, she now arranged for him permissively.

This is the reward for (observing the mitzvah of Tzitsis) in this world; and for its reward in the world to come, I do not even know how great it will be!

What is the point of this Gemara? The point of this Gemara is the power of mitzvos -- the fact that "their Light can return one to the proper path". Only one thing can stand in the way of a person's burning desire and that is the power of mitzvos, the power of Torah.

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