

WHY JEWS HAVE CHUTZPAH

Category: Devarim, Ki Setzei

People often complain that Israelis are too aggressive. Where does this behavior come from, and how does it “tie-in” to the mitzvah of Tzitzit?

Why Tzitzit?

People born in Israel are often called “Sabras.” Where does this name actually come from? It’s the name of a fruit that grows in Israel, with sharp, prickly thorns on the outside, but soft and sweet inside. Some might say that Israelis are like that too—rough on the outside, but soft and kind within.

In fact, there are those who would argue that this description applies not only to Israelis but to Jews in general. Compared to other nations, Jews can sometimes come across as tougher or pricklier. But why is that?

This week’s Torah portion teaches about the mitzvah of tzitzit, the fringes that are attached to a four-cornered garment. Why is this particular mitzvah significant? The third paragraph of the Shema tells us that “You will see it and remember all of G-d’s commandments.” The idea is that when we see the tzitzit, we are reminded of all the mitzvot.

But how does this mitzvah of tzitzit serve as a reminder for all the mitzvot more than any other mitzvah?

One well-known explanation is brought by Rashi (Menachot 43b). He points out that the numerical value (gematria) of the word *tzitzit* equals 600. If you add the eight strings and five knots of the tzitzit, you get 613, which of course corresponds to the 613 mitzvot.

However, based on this explanation, in order for tzitzit to serve as a reminder of the mitzvot, you’d need to be a serious Torah scholar! You’d have to know Hebrew, understand gematria (that each letter represents a number), and also be aware of the eight strings and five knots—this hardly seems like the simple meaning of “*you will see it and remember*”, which implies that just seeing the tzitzit immediately brings all the mitzvot to mind.

Rashi offers another interpretation: The word *tzitzit* is related to the Hebrew phrase “*metzitz min hacharakim*” (Song of Songs 2:9), which refers to G-d watching over us, peeking through the cracks, so to speak. The *tzitzit* remind us that G-d is always looking out for us, which naturally makes us think of His commandments. Yet, even with this explanation, you’d still need to be somewhat scholarly to get the full connection.

There’s another explanation found in the Talmud in Menachot. Back when the Temple stood, one of the *tzitzit* threads was dyed *techeilet*, a sky-blue color. The Talmud says that this blue resembles the sea, which in turn resembles the sky, which in turn resembles the Divine Throne. In this way, the blue thread reminded people of G-d Himself. But what can we do, it’s been two thousand years since we’ve had *techeilet*?!

A different explanation is brought in the Code of Jewish Law (Laws of *Tzitzit*, chapter 24, paragraph 1): Just like someone might tie a string around their finger or belt to remind themselves of something important, the *tzitzit* serve as a physical reminder. The five knots represent the Five Books of the Torah, and the four corners remind us that no matter which direction we turn, we are bound by G-d’s commandments.

All of these explanations are undoubtedly valid and true. But they are still somewhat complex for a child learning the simple meaning of the verse “*you will see it and remember*”, which seems to suggest that just looking at the *tzitzit* should immediately remind us of all the mitzvot in a straightforward way. After all, when a person looks at his *tzitzit*, what does he see? Strings!

Connection

What is the purpose of a string? A string’s role is to tie things together, to connect two separate items.

Now, let’s apply this to mitzvot. What does the word *mitzvah* mean? If you ask the average person on the street, they’ll probably tell you that a *mitzvah* is a good deed, like helping an elderly woman cross the street or giving charity.

But there are mitzvot that don’t exactly fit that description. Take, for example, the *mitzvah* of *brit milah* (circumcision). It’s not what most would call a “good deed.”

Just ask the baby! Or consider the mitzvah of shaking the lulav—it's a mitzvah, but it doesn't seem to involve doing something nice for someone else. The same goes for eating matzah on Pesach; it's a mitzvah, but does it fall under the category of a "good deed"? There are many more mitzvot that don't seem to fit into this simple definition.

Chassidus explains that the word *mitzvah* actually comes from the root *tzavta*, which means connection or bond. Through a mitzvah, we create a connection between ourselves and the infinite G-d. When a person fulfills a mitzvah, they are linking and bonding G-d with the physical world.

For example, when someone puts up a mezuzah on their doorpost, they are connecting their home to G-d. When a child makes a blessing on their food, they are connecting that food to G-d, recognizing that the food comes from the Creator who provides for them. When a person gives charity, they are connecting their personal finances to G-d.

In this way, we see that mitzvot are like strings that connect the world to G-d. So when a Jew sees the strings hanging from their garment, they are reminded of all the mitzvot, whose ultimate purpose is to link and bond G-d with the physical world.

Chutzpah in the Face of Challenges

But in order to thread the string into fabric or anything else, you first need to make a hole in the material. To make that hole, you use a needle. A needle is sharp, and with its point, it pierces the fabric, allowing the thread to pass through.

The Rebbe explains that the Jew is like the needle, whose job is to make a "hole" in the fabric of the material world, to create space for the mitzvah to enter. The world, by its nature, isn't always eager to embrace a mitzvah. So, just like a needle has to be sharp and pointed to get the job done, the Jew has to possess a certain boldness to bring mitzvot into the physical world. (See *Hisvaaduyos* 5749, Vol. 4, p. 183).

This is why Jews tend to have a bit of "chutzpah"—a sense of boldness or stubbornness—because without it, they wouldn't be able to introduce mitzvot into

everyday life. To live as a Jew in this world, you need a little bit of chutzpah.

Take, for example, someone who's hesitant to put a mezuzah on their office door because they don't want to draw attention. Employees or colleagues might pass by, ask questions, or even challenge them, and this person may feel uncomfortable or unprepared to explain themselves. So, instead of dealing with it, they might choose not to put up the mezuzah at all.

Or consider another scenario: a Jew attends a party where the food isn't kosher. They don't want to eat the non-kosher food, but at the same time, they don't want to make a scene. So, they might say they're vegetarian, allergic, on a special diet, or that they just ate before coming.

The point is, to survive all the challenges that come with being a Jew, you need a fair amount of chutzpah. That's why Jews are often compared to "Sabras"—the tough, prickly fruit with the soft inside. They are the needle that threads the Divine into the world. Yes, sometimes they may poke or even hurt themselves along the way, but without that sharpness, they wouldn't be able to persevere.

Really, we're all Sabras.