

PARSHAT SHLACH - BIRKAT HACHODESH

June 20, 2020 – 28 Sivan 5780

Annual (Numbers 13:1-15:41): Hertz p. 623

Haftarah (Yehoshua 2:1-24): Hertz p. 635

Torah Portion Summary

Moshe sends 12 spies, one from each tribe, to scout the land of Canaan and bring back a report of the conditions the Israelites will find there. After 40 days the spies return, bringing their report of the good land and samples of its produce. However, 10 of the spies, all but Yehoshua and Caleiv, insist that the Canaanites are too powerful for the Israelites to conquer. The people panic when they hear the 10 spies' conclusion and declare that they want to return to Egypt. Caleiv and Yehoshua try to change their minds, pointing out that with God on their side the Israelites need not fear the inhabitants of the land. God's patience finally is exhausted. He tells Moshe He will wipe out the people and start over. But Moshe argues on behalf of the Israelites, insisting that the Egyptians and Canaanites would interpret such an act as a sign that God is powerless to bring the people into the land. God relents, but He declares that the generation of the Exodus will die in the wilderness; it will be their children who will possess the land. When the Israelites learn their fate, they decide that they now are prepared to fight for the land. Despite Moshe's warning that God will not be with them they attempt an attack, and they suffer a crushing defeat at the hands of the Amalekites and the Canaanites. God gives Moshe more instructions about how sacrifices are to be offered once the people have settled in the land. God also explains how amends are to be made for accidental or unwitting sins committed by the entire community or by individuals. A man who is found gathering wood on Shabbat is brought before Moshe and Aaron. God tells Moshe that he is to be executed. The parsha concludes with God's command that the Israelites attach *tzitzit*—fringes – to the corners of their garments as a constant reminder of all of God's commandments.

I. Speak to the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land to which I am taking you and you eat of the bread of the land, you shall set some aside as a gift to the Lord: as the first yield of your baking, you shall set aside a loaf as a gift; you shall set it aside as a gift like the gift from the threshing floor. You shall make a gift to the Lord from the first yield of your baking, throughout the ages. (Numbers 15:18-21)

1. Regarding bread: one of the three special mitzvot assigned to women is the law of challah, removing a token amount of dough (the size of an olive) from a yeast batter, and throwing it into the oven fires while reciting the proper blessing. This is a residual practice, symbolic of ancient Temple rites of gift offerings to God from nature's bounty. (Blu Greenberg, *How to Run a Traditional Jewish Household*, p. 111)
2. The observance of the commandment to take challah, because we believe that all that human beings have is derived from the Lord and that therefore the first portion of whatever human beings possesses must be given to the Lord as an offering of gratitude, constitutes the most effective repudiation of paganism. It gives the lie to the erroneous notion that "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me" (Deuteronomy 8:17), which is the most heathen idea of all. As the Psalm has it: "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands" (115:4). Their idolatry is that they regard the silver and gold they possess as having been obtained by their own might, by "the work of men's hands." These are the "idols" that are destroyed by the observance of the commandment to take challah from every mass of dough that is prepared. (Avnei Ezel--Rabbi Alexander Zusia Friedman, 1897-1943, Poland)
3. A person should taste nothing before uttering a blessing. Since "The earth is the Lord's and all that it holds" (Psalms 24:1), a person embezzles from God when he makes use of this world without uttering a blessing. (Tosefta Berachot 4:1)

Sparks for Discussion

While the Temple still stood, residents of the land of Israel were required to separate a portion of each batch of dough (known as challah) and give it to the *kohanim*. Since that time, Jews, both inside and outside of Israel, have maintained the practice of removing a small portion of each batch of dough. Why? *Avnei Ezel* explains that we need constant reminders that what we have comes from God. Do you agree? How do you remind yourself of God's role in your life?

II. The Lord said to Moshe as follow: Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages; let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner. That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge. Thus you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God. I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I, the Lord your God. (Numbers 15:37-41)

1. "Look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them." Another [baraita] taught: This mitzvah is equal to all the mitzvot together. Another taught: Looking leads to recalling and recalling leads to observing. (Talmud Menachot 43b)
2. This precept applies to everyone who has a four-cornered garment, that he should wear it continually and not take it off, in order to remember. Those who wear a tallit during prayers do so because they recite the Shema, which contains the chapter on tzitzit. But, in my opinion, it is much more necessary for him to wear tzitzit during the rest of the day and not merely during prayers, in order to remember not to err and commit a sin at all times, since during prayers he will in any case do no sin. (Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra, 1092-1167, Spain)
3. Once a man who was very careful about the commandment of tzitzit heard about a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted four hundred gold coins for her hire. He sent her four hundred gold coins and appointed a day with her... When he came in she prepared for him seven beds, six of silver and one of gold; and between one bed and the other there were steps of silver, but the last were of gold. She then went up to the top bed and lay down upon it naked. He too went up after her in his desire to sit naked with her, when all of a sudden the four fringes (*tzitzit*) of his garment struck him across the face; whereupon he slipped off the bed and sat upon the ground. She also got down from the bed and sat upon the ground and said to him, "I will not leave until you tell me what blemish you saw in me." He replied, "never have I seen a woman as beautiful as you are; but there is one commandment that God has commanded us, it is called *tzitzit*, and with regard to it the expression "I am the Lord your God" is written twice, signifying, I am He who will exact punishment in the future and I am He who will give reward in the future. The *tzitzit* appeared to me as four witnesses". (Talmud Menachot 44a)
4. The physical experience of wearing a *tallit* is a visceral one, and it has been enhanced through creating beautiful designs for *tallitot* (plural for *tallit*). For many the *tallit* has gained greater personal significance because a specific *tallit* was made or bought by a loved one. In some cases, a *tallit* has been passed down from generation to generation. Some people use a special *tallit* as the chuppah at their weddings. Like many ritual objects, the *tallit* can grow to mean more than the original ritual could have ever imagined.
5. The mitzvah of putting on a *tallit* has become the very uniform of the adult Jewish male in prayer, and many women have chosen to add this mitzvah to their repertoire. While members of different streams of Judaism actually begin wearing the *tallit* at different times of their adult life, it is the *tallit* that has become the most noticeable symbol of Jewish prayer. By wearing *tzitzit* as an undergarment and on a *tallit* we remind ourselves regularly of what it means to be a part of a people that is involved in the commandments God has set before us. (Rabbi Yochanan Stein, United Synagogue's New Jersey Region, 2001)

Sparks for Discussion

Some men, and a few women, wear a *tallit katan*, a rectangular garment with *tzitzit* attached, under their clothes throughout the day. Why? In the story about the man who visited the harlot, seeing his *tzitzit* had an immediate and powerful impact on his behavior. Do you find this realistic (not the specifics of the story, but the man's response to seeing his *tzitzit*)? Are there other objects or techniques that can help a person turn away from sin or bad behavior? Rabbi Stein points out that the experience of owning and wearing a *tallit* encompasses much more than the specifics mentioned in our passage. How do you feel when you put on your *tallit*? What does it mean to you? If you do not (yet) wear a *tallit*, how do you imagine it would affect your prayer experience?