

SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

511 Ave. R Brooklyn, NY 11223-2093
Rabbi Moshe Shamah, Director

718 998 8171 Fax: 718 375 3263
Rabbi Ronald Barry, Administrator

בס"ד

Parashat Shelah-Lekha Part III On the Passage of Sisit

1. Meaning of *Sisit*

Parashat Shelah-Lekha concludes with the commandment of *sisit*. Fringes are to be attached to the corners of one's garment, constituting a type of insignia for the dress of G-d's people. A *petil tekhelet*, a cord colored with a long-lasting blue dye well-known in the ancient Near East, had to be integrated with the fringes of each corner. (The only other biblical attestation of such a commandment is in Deuteronomy 22:12, a regulation that clearly corresponds to ours. There, in a one-verse statement, the four corners of one's garment "with which you cover yourself" are specified, although the word "*sisit*" is not used and it does not speak of a *petil tekhelet*.)

What is the meaning of the word *sisit* and what does *tekhelet* represent? And what is the explanation of the several unusual expressions found in this short passage?

The following has been suggested concerning the word *sisit*. When Aaron's staff sprouted, one of the phrases used in describing it is וַיִּצְיָן צִיָּץ ("it produced blossoms" [Num. 17:23]). In temple ornamentation, פְּטוּרֵי צִצִּים (1 Kings 6:18) seems to mean "stalks of flowers." In Ezekiel 8:3, וַיִּקְחֵנִי בְצִיצַת רֹאשִׁי ("and took me by the *sisit* of my head") may refer to being taken by either his "braid," his "curl" or perhaps simply by the "hair" of his head, all of which can be seen as ornamentation of the head. In the other biblical attestation of the law concerning fringes (Deut. 22:12), the term employed is *gedilim*, a word also attested in temple ornamentation, גְּדִלִים מַעֲשֵׂה שְׂרָשְׁרוֹת לְכַתְּרַת (1 Kings 7:17). Fringes do indeed decorate a garment. Alternatively, some have seen the fringes as a "blossoming forth" from the garment's corners, themselves being the "flowers."

Despite the scholarly opinion supporting the above explanations, there appears to be much more to this topic.

The high priest's gold frontlet is called צִיָּץ (*sis*). Present-day scholars remain uncertain as to the explanation of this term. Some suggest that the frontlet was shaped in the form of a flower, others, that it had a floral design engraved on it, while another opinion views the *sis* as an "adornment" of its wearer.

However, *sis* also means to "look" or some nuance thereof. In Song of Songs 2:9, מִן הַחַרְצִים מְצִיץ translates as "peering through the lattice" (NJPS) and corresponds in that verse to מִן הַחַרְצִים מְשַׁבֵּחַ ("gazing through the window"). Rabbi S. D. Sassoon considered it most likely that the frontlet was called *sis* as a reflection of that article's function. It assisted the high priest in achieving his lofty purpose of focusing his vision on the higher world, in accordance with the common literary usage of "seeing" in a metaphoric sense. We may appreciate his interpretation by reflecting upon the following indications.

The *sis* was the holiest item of the high priest's furnishings, with the words קֹדֶשׁ לַיהוָה ("holy to Hashem") engraved on it (Exod. 28:36). The Torah terms it the "holy crown" (Exod. 39:30; Lev. 8:9). It was to be on the high priest's forehead at all times "to achieve acceptance for them [the Israelites] before Hashem" (Exod. 28:38.) The high priest was the spiritual leader of the nation; he was required to remain focused on his responsibility at all times. He was described as one who was officially expected on occasion to receive oracles from Hashem through the Urim and Thummim (Num. 27:21). Since he was

expected to achieve that lofty state the holy frontlet on his forehead is the article that should be thought of as the vehicle to help foster it. It was to assist him in concentrating his mental and spiritual energy so that he could catch a glimpse of the higher world of G-d's will. Through single-minded devotion to the state of sanctification, the high priest was expected to aspire to, and hopefully achieve, a level of divinely inspired vision, though not to the degree of the prophet. As the sages say, קְדוּשָׁה מְבִיאָה לִיְדֵי רוּחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ (“Sanctity leads to the holy spirit”), the “holy spirit” understood in the sense of the individual being the recipient of divine inspiration (b. ‘Abod. Zar. 20b).

Parashat Sisit immediately follows narration of the national backsliding. As we shall soon see, it appears that it subtly addresses that problematic situation. The term the Torah here chose for fringes is not *gedilim*, but a new coinage that contains the identical letters as the *sis*. Regardless of its root, the similarity in sound and spelling between *sisit* and *sis*, together with their being items of special wear that are reminders of higher purpose, strongly indicate a linkage between the two. We will cite additional support for assuming such linkage after we discuss *tekhelet*.

2. *Tekhelet* and *Petil Tekhelet*

Assyrian governors and prefects were לְרֵשֵׁי תְּכֵלֶת (“dressed in [royal] blue” [Ezek. 23:6]), or according to some, royal purple. *Tekhelet* is prominent in the description of the opulence of the royal Persian palace, חוּר כְּרִפָּס וְתְּכֵלֶת (“white fine cotton and blue” [Esth. 1:6]) and in Mordecai’s princely dress upon being elevated by the king, בְּלָבוֹשׁ מְלָכוּת תְּכֵלֶת וְחוּר (“royal garments of blue and white” [Esth. 8:15]). Recent discoveries have shown that in the ancient Near East the *tekhelet* used to dye fabrics, particularly wool, was an extremely expensive commodity; throughout the region only royalty and people of high standing wore *tekhelet* garments. In Torah society, *tekhelet* was mandated for several Tabernacle items – curtains, travel coverings for furnishings, and high priest garments. Sanctuary and priesthood were to be considered royalty. Thus, fringes with *tekhelet* provided each individual a regal sign emblematic of being a member of G-d’s priestly nobility, one who belonged to a מְמַלְכֶת כֹּהֲנִים (“a kingdom of priests” [Exod. 19:6]), and served as a reminder of attendant responsibilities.

A regulation regarding the high priest’s *sis* was that a *petil tekhelet* (blue cord) was always to be affixed to it, by which the frontlet was attached to his turban (Exod. 28:37; 39:31). In addition, the high priest’s breastplate, containing the *urim vetumim*, the vehicle designated for his receiving divine communication (Num. 27:21), was required to be attached to his *ephod* garment by use of a *petil tekhelet* (Exod. 28:28; 39:21). Besides the *petil tekhelet* mandated for *sisit* fringes there are no other citations of *petil tekhelet* in Scripture. Thus, together with consideration of the *sisit-sis* linkage previously discussed, it appears likely that the requirement to include a *petil tekhelet* within the fringes is specifically related to the high priest.

Immediately upon concluding the instructions for each Israelite to have a *petil tekhelet* among his fringes, the Torah states וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְצִיצֵת (“it shall be for you for *sisit*” [Num. 15:39]). What is the meaning of this three-word clause informing that when the blue cord was attached to the *sisit* it shall be a *sisit*? What else can *sisit* be other than *sisit*?* And what justifies the immediately following instruction asking that one “should look at it and recall all the commandments”? The “it” one is to look at is the *petil tekelet*, as the Hebrew pronoun referring to it *oto* (v. 39) is masculine and cannot refer to the feminine *sisit*. What does one see in the blue cord that prompts the recalling? (Extratextual reasons could of course be furnished, but one would expect an “internal” or natural explanation for such major linkage considering that literary clarification was not provided in the verse.)

Rashi’s interpretation does not answer our questions. He suggests that *sisit* (referring to the fringes) is derived from *sis*, meaning “look” (citing מֵצִיץ מִן הַהֲרָפִים), and is thus related to the portion of the verse that follows: one “should see it and recall all the *misvot*.” The Rashbam’s refinement, translating *vehaya lakhem lesisit* as saying, “It shall be to you for looking at,” recognizes the problem but is unconvincing as an answer, partly because it does not address the question of meaning.

And why is it that at *vehaya lakhem lesisit* there is a change in person from לָהֶם to לָכֶם (“them” to “you” [plural]), whereby Hashem begins addressing Israel directly in the second person, the tense in which the remainder of the paragraph is formulated?

3. The New Meaning of *Sisit*

It appears that the word *sisit* in *vehaya lakhem lesisit* is not to be translated as in its first two attestations in the passage, as “fringes.” Rather – once the fringes are enhanced with the blue cord and receive their deeper meaning – a new garment is created and *vehaya lakhem lesisit* is to be understood as an instruction that “it shall be for you,” that means to say, “it shall now be considered by you” something new that will be called *sisit*. Adding the ה to סִּיט makes *sisit* the sister article to *sis*, reflecting its meaning in the new coinage. The *petil tekhelet* converts the everyday garment worn by non-priests into a counterpart to the high priest’s holy crown with all that symbolizes.

In the continuation of the passage Hashem elaborates on the spiritual potency of this transformation, that adding the *tekhelet* created a vehicle that fosters holiness in everyday life outside the sanctuary. He instructs the Israelites: “Look at it [the *petil tekhelet*], and recall all Hashem’s *misvot*, fulfill them and not go about after your hearts and after your eyes which you have been wont to stray after; in order that you remember and fulfill all My *misvot*, that you be holy unto your G-d” (Num. 15:39-40).

As Nazirite law provides non-priests a channel to holiness in the world outside the sanctuary, one based on laws pertaining to the high priest and his holy status (see our study on *Parashat Naso Part I*), so too does *sisit*. It provides a furnishing for non-priests to promote holiness in their lives, a furnishing that is to be present on an ongoing basis and is linked to the high priest’s frontlet and *petil tekhelet*. As the high priest who properly fulfills his function hopefully gets a glimpse of the higher world – indicated in the term *sis* – so, too, the *sisit* implies, may a non-high priest aspire to such vision. In Israel, the *tekhelet* of royalty is placed in service of promoting the goal of “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6)

The change in mid-passage to refer to Israel in second person for the remainder of the section reflects the notable transformation in meaning and highlights the significance of what is being proclaimed. As Hashem instructs Israel regarding the lofty possibilities and expectations, He speaks to them more directly and intimately. We will elaborate on this further in the coming section.

4. Holiness and the Covenant

Verse 15:39a included elaboration of the function of the *sisit* and *petil tekhelet*: וְרָאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹת אֲתָם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם ה' (“when you see it you shall recall all Hashem’s commandments and fulfill them”). The second half of that verse provided a general application: וְלֹא תִהְיוּ אַחֲרֵי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרֵי עֵינֵיכֶם (“that you shall not go about after your hearts and after your eyes”). Verse 40 then contains an unusual and relatively lengthy repetition with apparently slight variation. It states: לְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי, (“in order that you recall and fulfill all My commandments”).

The differences, however, are significant. The later statement is more formal and direct than the preceding one. In it Hashem speaks of Himself in the first person whereas in the previous verse He spoke of Himself in the third person. The repetition evidently reflects the ongoing spiritual opportunity that *sisit* provides; one constantly sees it and should continually recall the commandments. G-d’s altering the references to Himself from third to first person highlights the expectation that the process will lead to ever-closer attachment to Him. Indeed, in the second formulation the process is described as leading to the crucial apex, “that you shall be holy unto your G-d” (v. 40b).

In the concluding verse of the paragraph (41), Hashem identifies Himself as, “I am Hashem your G-d who took you out of the land of Egypt to become your G-d,” a pronouncement that clearly invokes the Decalogue’s opening proclamation. Once again, as we have seen previously (in Leviticus 19 and at the end of Leviticus 25), the Holiness Code that was the denouement of the Leviticus program, is presented as linked to and enriching the covenant.

The sages chose *Parashat Sisit* to be recited morning and evening after the *shema' yisrael* and *vehaya im shamo'a* passages, creating an inseparable unit out of the three passages for the most central liturgical requirement stemming from the covenant. *Shema'* and *vehaya* assert and expound the foundational covenant concepts proclaimed at the beginning of the Decalogue, while *Parashat Sisit* articulates the expanded holiness imperative, which was attached to and enriched the basic covenant.

5. On the Location of *Parashat Sisit*

The *sisit* passage is located at the end of Numbers 15. It follows shortly after the narrative regarding the scouts (Num. 13–14) and immediately follows the episode of the Sabbath wood-gatherer who is put to death for violation of the Sabbath; it precedes the story of the rebellion of Korah and his cohorts (Num. 16). It appears possible that placement of *Parashat Sisit* is connected to all three, as follows.

A primary purpose for the giving of the *sisit* commandment is that אַתָּם אַחֲרַי לִבְבְּכֶם וְאַחֲרַי עֵינֵיכֶם (“And you shall not go about after your hearts and after your eyes that you are wont to stray after” [Num. 15:39b]). The two central verbs of that verse – אַחֲרַי and עֵינֵיכֶם – are unusual usages, and clearly were selected at this point because of their linkage to the preceding episode of the scouts. Israel was to scout the land and that act triggered the transgression; חָרַד was the key root of that narrative, attested twelve times (Num. 13:2, 16, 17, 21, 25, 32a, 32b; 14:6, 7, 34, 36, 38). The Israelites followed their hearts and eyes rather than G-d’s word, and our אַחֲרַי, which is to be the corrective, is, significantly, the thirteenth usage of the root in the fuller literary context.** In the scouts narrative, the transgression is termed עֵינֵיכֶם (Num. 14:33). It appears possible that “after your eyes,” (אַחֲרַי עֵינֵיכֶם), v. 39) reflects the sinful disposition of בְּעֵינֵינוּ כְּתִגְמוֹת (“and we were in our eyes like grasshoppers,” Num. 13:33), which expressed the scouts’ lack of trust in Hashem. The *sisit* commandment is designed to counteract those types of failings by maintaining one’s discipline and focus, leading to holiness.

In the Decalogue, the Sabbath is the only commandment explicitly associated with holiness and thus is the signifier of holiness in the covenant program. It is the only law elaborated at the conclusion of the section of Tabernacle instructions (Exod. 31:12-17). In that formulation its holy nature and its function as a signifier of the covenant, with the stipulation that its violators are to be put to death, are stressed. Just before the episode of the Sabbath wood gatherer, in the context of completing the sin-offering laws, the Torah emphasizes the sanctity of the covenant. It states that a defiant violator (“one with upraised arm”) reviles Hashem and is to be put to death (Num. 15:30-31). The wood gatherer case that

follows is by way of example. Intentionally violating the Sabbath, regardless of the fact that the actual violation in and of itself might otherwise be viewed as minor, signifies a rejection of holiness and scorns the covenant. The immediately following passage of *sisit* provides a reinforcement of the holiness imperative, expanding its domain, promoting consciousness of it even outside the sanctuary realm, and thereby prevents violations of the Sabbath that the wood gatherer represents.

The goal of the *sisit* commandment – that the whole nation is to be holy – is highlighted in the narrative that follows as the backdrop for the complaint of Korah and his cohorts. They argue, “the whole congregation is now holy, with Hashem in their midst, so why do you raise yourselves over Hashem’s congregation?” (Num. 16:3).

6. Availability of *Tekhelet*

In the Talmud we read about the difficulty of obtaining authentic *tekhelet* dye. The tradition taught that only the high-quality dye that was derived from the specific snail (the *h^{ilazon}*) was acceptable for the fringes, but it also warned that it was not readily available. An inferior blue dye of vegetable origin, much cheaper than traditional *tekhelet* but not as long-lasting, had become widely used in the region and was fraudulently being promoted as authentic *tekhelet*. It was extremely difficult to test for authenticity (*b. Menah. 42b-43a*).

The Mishnah codified אֵינָהּ מְעַכְבֶּת אֶת הַלֵּבָן, that the misvah of *sisit* could be fulfilled with the white fringes without *tekhelet* (*m. Menah. 4:1*). In *Numbers Rabbah 17* (prob. 9th century), we read, וְעַכְשָׁיו אֵין לָנוּ, אֶלָּא לָבָן שֶׁהִתְכַלֶּת נִגְנוֹ, that not long after the talmudic period *tekhelet* was no longer available.

In modern times much work has been done to identify the snail from which the dye for *tekhelet* may be extracted. Sound evidence points to the mollusk *murex trunculus* and some close relatives, found in limited areas of the eastern Mediterranean Sea adjacent to northern Israel, Lebanon and northern Syria. Extensive shell beds of this species, thousands of years old, have been found, each mollusk punctured at the spot that allowed the most efficient extraction of a yellowish glandular secretion that upon exposure to

the sun yields a purple dye, which, upon further exposure to the sun, becomes a blue dye. Ancient factories for processing the dye have been discovered in the immediate vicinity. It should be noted that without modern technology the process requires substantial skill and is extremely laborious, accounting for its preciousness in the ancient world.

Through the cooperative efforts of scholars and scientists it appears that the traditional *tekhelet* has been restored to use.

Endnotes

* The Sifre's comment on this phrase, that fringes on four corners constitute one misvah and are all required for its fulfillment, and similar *derashot*, are types of mnemonic devices or educational tools, clearly not the straightforward meaning of the verse.

** See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*.

©2010 Sephardic Institute