

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Shelach

Tzitzis and Creation

לְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי וְהֵייתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם

*So that you may remember and perform all My commandments and be holy to your God.
(15:40)*

COMPLETING CREATION

One of the foundational principles of Torah is the idea that Hashem has created the world in an imperfect state, leaving it up to man to bring it to perfection, thereby granting maximum merit and elevation for man himself. It is with reference to this task that the pasuk in Tehillim¹ states, “וְהָאֲרֶץ נָתַן לְבְנֵי אָדָם – *And the earth, He [Hashem] gave to man,*” that is, Hashem gave man the earth in order to bring it to completion. Similarly, commenting on the word “בְּהִבְרָאם – *when they were created,*”² stated with reference to the heavens and the earth, the Midrash³ comments: “אל תקרי ‘בְּהִבְרָאם’ אלא ‘בְּאִבְרָהָם’ – *Read not ‘when they were created’ but rather ‘with Avraham’!*” What are we meant to gain from reading the word in this way? The message of the Midrash is that contained within the word “בְּהִבְרָאם” is the idea that, through their actions, individuals such as Avraham can be instrumental in completing the creation.

Although it is up to man to perfect the world, Hashem instilled the potential for that perfection within the laws of nature themselves. This idea is reflected in the name “שֶׁ-דִּי,” which the Gemara⁴ expounds as meaning “שֶׁ-דִּי – *That He [Hashem] said to His world, ‘Enough!’*” That is to say, Hashem has endowed Creation with “enough,” i.e. sufficient means for a perfect world, which can then be actualized through the deeds of man. Thus, when we find descriptions of extraordinary material blessing in the generations of the righteous,⁵ these do not represent miraculous *departures from* the laws of nature, but rather *maximizations of* those laws in response to the actions of those righteous people.

1 115:16.

2 Bereishis 2:4.

3 Bereishis Rabbah 12:9

4 Chagigah 12a.

5 See e.g. Taanis 23a regarding the generation of Shimon ben Shatach.

GOD'S DEEDS, MAN'S DEEDS AND THE MITZVAH OF MILAH

The idea of man's role in completing Hashem's world was the basis of an exchange between R' Akiva and the wicked Roman general, Turnusrufus, as related by the Midrash.⁶ The general inquired: "Whose deeds are greater, those of God or of man?" His intent with this question was to impugn the mitzvah of *milah*, whereby man alters his physical body as presented to him by Hashem. The general was arguing: 'if this is how God has created you, how can you presume to improve on His deeds?' R' Akiva replied: "Man's deeds are greater!" In response to the general's amazement at this reply, R' Akiva elaborated: "God creates wheat kernels, which man then takes and turns into bread. Which is better?" With this analogy R' Akiva meant to demonstrate from common experience that Hashem created the world in an unfinished state, leaving it up to man to bring it to completion.

Indeed, this idea may help us understand an exchange recorded in the Midrash⁷ regarding the *milah* of Avraham. R' Levi there states that it was Hashem who performed the *milah* for Avraham. In response to this statement, R' Abba exclaimed, "You are a liar and a falsifier!" This sharp reply is most unusual. Chazal debate and dispute each other throughout the Gemara and Midrash, yet rarely do we find one opinion calling the other a liar! What is behind this harsh response?

The Meshech Chochmah explains that R' Abba reacted in this way because he felt R' Levi's opinion was not only incorrect, but was in fact *antithetical* to what the mitzvah of *milah* is all about! After all, if the point of mitzvah of *milah* is specifically for man to perfect the body that Hashem has given him, then it makes no sense whatsoever to say that it was Hashem Who performed the *milah* for Avraham, for that undermines the very purpose of the mitzvah.

In this regard, the Meshech Chochmah further points out that throughout the course of the parsha dealing with Avraham's *milah*, the name "Elokim" is used.⁸ This name is associated with Hashem as Creator of the world, a process which Avraham was participating in – and completing – through the mitzvah of *milah*. Immediately upon having undergone *milah*, Hashem is referred to with the *Shem Havaya*,⁹ which represents a higher level of Divine interaction and reflects the level of completion to which Avraham had elevated himself.

THE FABRIC OF CREATION

Creation is referred to allegorically as a garment. Even concerning light, the most elevated of physical creations, the pasuk states¹⁰ "עֵטָה אֹרֶךְ כְּשֵׁלֶמָה" – *Envelopes with light as with a garment.*" The Midrash¹¹ elaborates:

מהיכן נבראת האורה? נתעטף בה הקב"ה כשלמה והבהיק זיו הדרו מסוף העולם עד סופו

From whence was light created? The Holy One, Blessed be He, wrapped Himself in it like a garment and radiated the glow of His splendor from one end of the world to the other.

6 Tanchuma, Tazria sec. 5.

7 Bereishis Rabbah 47:11.

8 See e.g. Bereishis 17:3, 9 and 23.

9 Ibid. 18:1.

10 Tehillim 104:2.

11 Bereishis Rabbah 3:4.

What is the meaning behind this analogy? The Meshech Chochmah explains that Creation assumes a function similar to clothing. Just as clothing covers the person so that one sees only the garment, so, too, Creation “conceals” Hashem, leaving it up to man to recognize Him as Creator.

All of this will give us an entirely new appreciation of the mitzvah of *tzitzis*. As we have discussed, Creation itself has been left incomplete, with man charged with the mission of completing it. Putting the above two ideas together will shed new light on a statement of the Gemara in maseches Chagigah:¹²

בשעה שברא הקב"ה את העולם היה מרחיב והולך כשתי פקיעות של שתי, גער בו הקב"ה והעמידו

When the Holy One, Blessed be He, created the world, it was expanding like two rolls of thread, [whereupon] the Holy One, Blessed be He, admonished it and contained it.

As something created by Hashem, the world – represented by material from which clothing is made – was naturally expanding towards perfection. Hashem “admonished it,” and kept it in an imperfect state in order to allow for man to complete the process of creation.

As such, the Torah commands that we attach *tzitzis* at the edges of our garments, reminding us of man’s role in completing the “garment” of Creation. The *tzitzis* are tied to the corners of the garment, reflecting the fact that every aspect of the world has mitzvos which can serve to “tie” and connect it to Hashem.

PERFECTION WITH A TWIST

This idea will additionally give us insight into an element within the mitzvah of *tzitzis*, the blue *techeiles* thread which is intertwined with the white threads. Chazal¹³ state that the color of *techeiles* represents Hashem’s Glory. Elsewhere,¹⁴ the Gemara informs us that even when a person chooses to act correctly, he needs Divine assistance in order to overcome his yetzer hara. Hence, the thread of *techeiles* that is intertwined with the white threads represents the Divine assistance that accompanies a person as he seeks to tie matters of this world to their Source.

As part of the mitzvah of *tzitzis*, the Torah commands: “וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֵת כָּל מִצְוֹת ה' – וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם – *And you shall see it and remember all the commandments of Hashem and perform them.*”¹⁵ The Meshech Chochmah’s explanation of this mitzvah should hopefully give us a greater appreciation of what it is we are seeing when we look at the *tzitzis* and how doing so can lead us to remember the mitzvos and perform them.

12 12a.

13 Midrash Tehillim perek 24.

14 Kiddushin 30b.

15 Bamidbar 15:39.