

PARASHAS SHELACH

Gentle Reminders

The universal image of the devout Jew is a praying figure wrapped in a *tallis*, but it is not the *tallis* that is significant. Rather, it is the long fringes on each of its four corners. At the conclusion of this week's Torah portion, we read that these fringes were to be dyed a particular shade of blue called *techeiles*. What was the significance of this particular shade of blue?

The Talmud explains: "Because *techeiles* is reminiscent of the sea, and the sea is reminiscent of the sky, and the sky is reminiscent of the Kiseh Hakavod, Hashem's celestial throne." Wearing *techeileth*, therefore, draws the mind to thoughts of Hashem and is a source of constant inspiration.

The questions immediately arise: Why do we need any memory devices at all to remind us of Hashem? Why doesn't the Torah simply command us to think of Hashem continuously?

Furthermore, why does the Torah choose *techeiles* which reminds us of Hashem in such a roundabout way? Why doesn't the Torah simply choose a color directly associated with Him?

The commentators point out that our natural tendency of people is to connect what we see with whatever is dear to our hearts. Thus, a businessman spotting a piece of paper on the ground will think of the problems of waste disposal, the new technologies, the investment opportunities in companies active in this field. A policeman spotting the same piece of paper will think of the littering laws, zero tolerance policies, litterbug fines. An environmentalist will think of the tree that was cut down to produce this piece of paper which was so casually discarded. The businessman, the policeman, the environmentalist may all have been walking along absorbed in totally unrelated thoughts. But that little deviation from the ordinary, the simple piece of paper lying on the ground, pulls each one out of his reverie and sets him off in his own individual direction along the route that is dear to his heart.

In this light, the commentators explain the rationale behind *techeiles*. The Torah does not make unrealistic demands of us. The Torah realizes full well that no matter how spiritual we want to be, no matter how much we would like think of Hashem, we still live in the mundane world. We have to earn a living and pay the mortgage and take care of the children, and we cannot realistically expect to keep our minds focused on Hashem at all times.

If, however, we truly yearn to be connected with Him, if we harbor a strong love for Him deep in our hearts, then a few gentle reminders here and there will bring Him squarely back into our thoughts. Therefore, the Torah does not simply command us to think of Hashem at all times. It is too much to expect of us amid the sea of distractions in which we live. Instead, the Torah tells us to keep a symbol with us at all times, a symbol which will remind us of Hashem with just a brief glance.

To accomplish this purpose most effectively, the Torah does not choose a symbol directly associated with Hashem. Rather, the Torah chooses a fairly simple symbol which can insinuate itself easily into the mad rush of daily life, a shade of blue that reminds us of the sea. But once the chain of thought is set in motion, our natural tendencies take over. That flash of blue sets us to thinking, and if there is a true love for Hashem deep in our hearts, our thoughts will naturally turn to Him. If the heart is set in a good direction, the mind is sure to follow. But the converse is also true.

A great sage was visiting an art gallery, and he saw a large red-faced man protesting vigorously in front of a colorful abstract painting.

"How can you display such lewd art?" the angry man yelled.

Intrigued, the sage drew closer and looked at the painting.

"My good fellow," he said. "This is a wonderful painting. It is a warm representation of a mother soothing a distraught child. The lewd images you see on the canvas are a reflection of the lewd images that occupy your own mind."

In our own lives, we are all caught up in the dynamics of our daily existence, continuously distracted by financial, familial, social, emotional and all sorts of other concerns that make up the fabric of our lives. Under these circumstances, it is very easy to forget about Hashem. But if He has a permanent place in our hearts, if deep down we recognize and acknowledge that life has no meaning without a strong relationship with Him, then we will inevitably find myriad symbols everywhere that will nudge us gently back on track and bring Him back into our thoughts.