

Parsha Ponders

Shelach | June 8, 2023 | 19 Sivan 5783

Avoiding theft¹

דבר אל-בני ישראל ואמרת להם ועשו להם ציצת על-כנפי בגדיהם לדרתם ונתנו על-ציצת הכנף פתיל תכלת

Speak to the Children of Israel and tell them: Make for yourselves *tzitzis* on the corners of your garments, for all generations, and place on the *tzitzis* of the corners a blue thread²

An interesting episode in the Torah is known as the war between the four kings and the five kings. During this battle, Avraham's cousin Lot is kidnapped. When Avraham rescues him and the king of Amalek, the king offered Avraham all the spoils of war. Avraham strongly refused, not even taking a thread or a shoelace for himself³. Rashi explains⁴ that his reasoning was he didn't want to benefit in any way from theft. Our Sages tell us⁵ that in reward for this value system, Avraham's descendants were rewarded with the blue thread of *tzitzis* and the leather straps of *tefillin*. At first glance, this is hard to understand. What does a desire to avoid theft have to do with *tzitzis* and *tefillin*? Why are these the two *mitzvos* Avraham was rewarded with?

One can suggest that upon inspection, both of these *mitzvos* have some connection to theft. With both *mitzvos* it's possible to con and deceive people. The blue thread of *tzitzis*, known as *techeiles*, is only valid if it comes from a special sea creature known as the *chilazon*⁶. Due to its rarity, the cost to produce *techeiles* dye was exorbitant⁷. As a result, con artists were selling a cheap imitation known as *kela ilan*, commonly translated⁸ as the indigo plant, pretending it was *techeiles*⁹. While the two dyes are indistinguishable¹⁰, one does not fulfill their *mitzvah* with *kela ilan*. We see then that the *mitzvah* of *tzitzis* has some connection to stealing.

We find something similar with *tefillin*. Our Sages tersely tell us¹¹ that you can't trust someone wearing *tefillin*. What does that mean? Con artists were known to wear *tefillin* so people would trust them. There's a story with someone who deposited his money with someone wearing *tefillin*, and when he later came to collect it, the person denied ever receiving money. The depositor lamented that he didn't know the guy personally to trust him enough, but the *tefillin* implied he was a G-d fearing Jew. We see that the *mitzvah* of *tefillin* also has some connection to theft.

Our Sages teach us¹² that someone who refrains and doesn't transgress gets reward as if they have fulfilled a *mitzvah*. If so, when someone properly fulfills these two *mitzvos*, *tzitzis* and *tefillin*, and they don't con the masses like those that did so in the past, their reward is double. They get rewarded for the *mitzvah*, and they also get rewarded for not tricking people and stealing from them. It fits perfectly then that Avraham, who was particular about not benefitting in any way from theft, should be rewarded with specifically these two *mitzvos*¹³.

Good Shabbos

¹ Based on [Lev Aryeh](#) to [Chullin](#) 88b s.v. בשכר שאמר

² [Numbers](#) 15:38

³ [Genesis](#) Chapter 14

⁴ [Rashi](#) to [Chullin](#) 89a s.v. אם מחוט

⁵ [Chullin](#) *ad. loc.*

⁶ [Tosefta Menachos](#) 9:6

⁷ See [Maharam](#) to [Bava Metziah](#) 61b s.v. תוס' ד"ה שתולה, who says *techeiles* is היקר בתכלית היקר

⁸ [Aruch](#) § אילן קלא

⁹ [Bava Metziah](#) *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ *Ibid* implies only Hashem can tell the difference. In fact, the blue dye produced from the *Murex Trunculus* (now known as the *Hexaplex trunculus*), a sea-snail in the Mediterranean Sea, is chemically identical to the dye produced from the indigo plant. Some use this as proof that the *Murex Trunculus* is the famed *chilazon*. Although, ironically, some use this exact point as proof that the *Murex Trunculus* **cannot** be the *chilazon*. See [Menachos](#) 42b. Some even go so far as to suggest that the *Murex Trunculus* is *kela ilan*, seemingly based on the [Ben Yehoyada](#) to [Bava Metziah](#) *loc. cit.*, although that wouldn't fit with the [Aruch](#)

¹¹ [Yerushalmi Berachos](#) 2:3, [Pesikta Rabbasi](#) § 23, and [Midrash HaGadol](#) to [Exodus](#) 20:7, brought by [Tosafos](#) to [Shabbos](#) 49a s.v. כאלישע

¹² [Makkos](#) 3:15

¹³ Cf. [Toras Chaim](#) to [Chullin](#) *loc. cit.* for an alternative approach