

The Law of the Fringes: Tzitzit

How It Relates to You.

by Ya'acov Natan Lawrence

SHOFARS, DAVIDIC WORSHIP DANCE, PRAYER SHAWLS (*talit* or *tallit*), a Torah scroll and *tzitziyot* (plural for *tzitzit*—fringes or tassels) all have something in common: they are hallmark symbols of those who are returning to the Hebrew roots of their faith. When a Christian begins to discover their ancient spiritual roots, it's like coming home, or like a hand fitting into a glove. It's not long before they begin acting out their renewed faith in a highly demonstrable manner such as growing beards, wearing fringes, blowing shofars, keeping the Sabbath and biblical feasts. Outsiders may view this as mere religious fanaticism and exhibitionism, but to the saint who truly feels that he has returned to his spiritual roots, these things are symbols of a faith that is more than superficial in nature. They represent a connectedness to his spiritual family tree, to the nation of Israel and eventually to the God of Israel, YHVH Elohim, the originator of that faith, family tree and nation.

As a wedding ring symbolizes the covenantal agreement between spouses, so the blue fringes worn on the corners of one's garments are an outward symbol of one's spiritual commitment and devotion to the Elohim of Israel through obedience to his instructions in righteousness as found in the Torah portion of the Scriptures.

Indeed, it is not because of a man-made tradition, but because of a direct command in the Torah that re-deemed Israelites wear *tzitziyot*, for we read in Numbers 15:37-41,

And YHVH spoke unto Moses, saying, "Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes [Heb. *tzitziyot*] in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribbon of blue. And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of YHVH, and do them; and that you seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you use to go a whoring, that you may remember, and do all my commandments, and be set apart unto your Elohim. I am YHVH your Elohim, which brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your Elohim: I am YHVH your Elohim."

In the eyes of YHVH, this command is serious enough that he repeated it again in Deuteronomy 22:12,

You shall make you fringes upon the four quarters [Heb. *kanaph* meaning "wings"] of your garments, wherewith you shall cover yourself.

Let's discuss what is said in these two passages.

The command to wear *tzitziyot* is for the children of Israel (Num 15:37). Technically, the term *children of Israel* in Hebrew is literally *the sons of Israel*. Because of this fact, many rabbinic Jews take the position that the wearing of *tzitzitot* is for men only. However, throughout the Torah, the term *children of Israel* is used as an inclusive term referring to *all* the Israelites of *all* genders, not just to the men. For example, *all* the children of Israel left Egypt, not just the men (Exod 12:51). *All* the children of Israel heard and agreed to follow the Ten Commandments (Exod 19:3, 6, 8; 20:22); therefore, these commandments were for *all* Israel, not just the men. The same is true of the biblical feasts and dietary laws (Lev 23:2; 11:2). Many more examples could be given.

The Israelites are to make fringes (Heb. *tzitziyot*, Strong's H6734) on the four borders or corners (Heb. *kanaph*, meaning "wings, mantle or skirt") of their garments. The word *tzitzit* (צִיִּצִית *tzadik-yud-tzadik-tav*) means "tassel or lock [of hair]". These tassels were to hang down from the four corners of one's garment. Interestingly *The Stone Edition Chumash* notes that the Hebrew word *tzitzit* is related to the word *hetzeytz* (הִצִּיֵּץ *hey-tzadik-yud-tzadik soffit*) meaning "to peer at something intently with sparkling eyes" (p. 817). The only place this word is used in the Scriptures is in the Song of Songs 2:9. Here the beloved (a metaphorical and prophetic picture of Yeshua) is peering, gazing or peeping with sparkling eyes of love through the window at his bride (the redeemed saints). What does this teach us? The wearer of *tzitziyot* should not just simply be wearing them out of ritualistic duty or for religious show. Rather, one should gaze intently and admiringly at their *tzitziyot*, while considering the deeper, spiritual significance of them, even as one might think of the deeper implications of their wedding ring.

Next, let's consider the significance of the blue thread. Out of each corner fringe is to be a ribbon (cord or thread) of blue (Heb. *techeilet*). According to one Levitical Jewish expert I know, in ancient times to fulfil the *tzitzit* command, the Israelites simply let the regular hand-woven threads of a garment extended past the corners of the garment to form a tassel. Into these, the Israelites would weave a blue thread to form a corner tassel. This can be seen in some of the ancient clothing artifacts uncovered in the Qumran archeological excavations. Nowadays one blue thread is woven into three strands of white thread. All four threads (three white and one blue) are somehow woven or tied into the four corners of one's garment. In *The Stone Edition Tanach*, Numbers 15:38 reads "a thread of turquoise wool." The word *wool* is not in the Hebrew, and is a rabbinic insertion. Likely wool was used, since that was a readily available source of yarn. However, the Israelites also wore linen (from flax) garments, so we can't assume that wool was the only potential source of *tzitzit* thread.

The Hebrew word for blue as used in our Numbers 15 passage is not the generic Hebrew word for blue, but rather indicates a specific type of blue. It is a turquoise, sky or cerulean-type blue.

There is debate among the Jewish sages as to the source of that blue. Some say it derives from a sea squid, and some from a sea snail, both of which are found in the Mediterranean Sea. Whatever the case, threads made from both sources are currently available for purchase from Israeli sources.

Why does the Torah specify the use of a blue thread and not some other color? The Scriptures don't tell us. However, according to rabbinic tradition, the *techeilet* blue thread helps one to focus on his spiritual duty to YHVH, since *techeilet* is similar to the color of the sea, which reflects the color of the sky, which in turn is similar to the color of the pavement under Elohim's throne of glory (Exod 24:10). This oblique means of focusing on Elohim's throne teaches us that we should look for ways to direct our attention toward higher spiritual aspirations (Ibid. p. 817). The lowliness of the sea creature from which the *techeilot* dye is derived teaches us that we must be humble and contrite in our demeanor before the Almighty (see Prov 6:16-17; Isa 66:2; Matt 5:3).

Currently, most orthodox Jews wear all white *tzitziyot*. There are various reasons given why they no longer wear blue in their *tzitziyot*. Some sages say that this is because the source and recipe for the exact color of blue has been lost. Others say that the Jews stopped wearing blue out of mourning for the destruction of the second temple in 70 A.D. Despite these traditions of men that make of none effect YHVH's commands (Mark 7:7-9), the Torah instructs us to wear blue, and that, quite frankly, should be YHVH's final word on the matter. YHVH expects his children to do the best that they can to follow his instructions, whether they know the exact shade of blue or not.

The fringes are to be looked upon by the wearer for the purpose of remembering to do all of YHVH's commandments, so that one does not follow one's evil inclination (or sinful nature) and fall into idolatry and spiritual whoredom by turning away from YHVH. These fringes are to remind us that we are set-apart (holy), that our Elohim has called us out of spiritual Egypt, and that he has set us apart as a unique people who belong to him. Therefore, we can't act like the heathens. To look upon the fringes, as the Torah commands, means they must be worn externally where we can see them. This is contrary to what many religious Jews currently do when they wear them on the inside of their clothing.

The Torah gives us no clear directions on what materials the fringes or tassels should be made from, what they should look like or even how to tie them. As can be expected, many traditions have arisen in Judaism regarding tying *tzitzit*. Over the ages, an elaborate system of a certain number of knots and wraps has evolved wherein is encoded, through Hebrew numeration rules where numbers represent letters in the Hebrew alphabet, thus conveying various encoded messages. The most common means of tying *tzitzit*—the Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jewish methods—both have the following message encoded in their respective *tzitzit*-tying method:

- The numerical value of the word *tzitzit* is 600, and there are eight threads and five knots, for a total of 613, the number of commandments found in the Torah (365 negative [for the number of the days of the year] and 248 positive [for the parts of the human body]).
- The five knots in each tassel signify the books of the law; the Torah, which is the foundation of YHVH's word.
- There is one winding of seven wraps and one of eight for a total of fifteen wraps. The number fifteen is written by the letters of the Hebrew alphabet *yod* and *hey*. Next there is a winding of eleven wraps, which is written by the letters *vav* and *hey*. Next there is a winding of thirteen wraps, which signifies the Hebrew word *echad* and is numerically equivalent to *one*. Therefore, the number of the windings spells out the words, *YHVH is one*.

- There are five sets of two knots when multiplied equals ten representing the Ten Commandments on the two tablets of stone with five commandments on each stone.
- Additionally, when adding the number of wraps ($7 + 8 + 11 + 13 = 39$), we arrive at 39, which is the number of Books in the Tanakh.

Sometime in the early modern era, the Jews stopped wearing visible fringes on their four-cornered garments. No one knows for certain when this happened, but it is likely to have been a result of Jewish persecution at the hands of the Romans. Wearing *tzitziyot* was a dead giveaway that one was Jewish, so to avoid persecution *tzitzitot* were placed on a four-cornered poncho-like, rectangular mantle worn over the shoulders called a *talit* (also spelled *tallit*) or prayer shawl. In this manner, the Jewish people could easily conceal and carry this garment, which was brought out and worn only in privacy or in Jewish-friendly gatherings.

The word *talit* is an Aramaic word meaning “to cover.” Each man’s *talit* became his personal prayer covering, tent or closet in which to be alone with his Heavenly Father. A *talit katan* is a small *talit* worn as a t-shirt-like undergarment, while a *talit gadol*—commonly called, a prayer shawl—is a large *talit* that is worn like a cape or poncho over the top of one’s garments like a mantle.

It is common for men to wear a *talit gadol* in religious gatherings, during times of prayer, while teaching from the Scriptures or doing ministry, while worshipping and by a groom in a wedding. Nowadays, more women are wearing a *talit*. This is especially acceptable if her *talit* is more feminine in nature, thus not violating the Torah commandment that forbids women from wearing clothes that resemble those of men (Deut 22:5).

Pertaining to the deeper spiritual significance of wearing *tzitziyot*, we read in Psalm 25:3 and 5 “On you [YHVH] do I wait all the day...” *Wait* is the Hebrew word *qavah* (*Strong’s* H6960) meaning “to wait, look, wait for, hope, expect, to bind together (by twisting).” Could this be a loose reference to the *tzitzit*, which is twisted and bound together in a series of wraps and knots and that the wearer is to *look upon* and *remember the commandments of YHVH*? This author believes so. *Qavah* is referring to a place of intense intimacy with YHVH where we trust our lives with him and know that the outcome is in his hands.

Other scriptures where the word *qavah* is used include:

- Isaiah 40:31, “Those who wait [*qavah*] upon YHVH shall renew their strength...shall mount up with wings like an eagles.”
- Psalm 37:9, “Those that wait [*qavah*] upon YHVH shall inherit the earth.”
- Psalm 37:34, “Wait [*qavah*] upon YHVH and keep his way.”
- Psalm 52:9, “Wait [*qavah*] upon his name [i.e., be bound or twist together with his covenant names, which is tied into the *tzitzit* itself].”
- Psalm 69:6, “Let none that wait [*qavah*] upon YHVH of Hosts be put to shame.”
- Psalm 130:5, “I wait [*qavah*] for YHVH, my soul does wait [*qavah*], and in his word do I hope.”

Additional Possible References to *Tzitzit* in the Tanakh (OT)

In Deuteronomy, we read that the *tzitziyot* were to be placed on the four corners or quarters of one’s garment. As we have already seen, the Hebrew word for *corner* is *kanaph* meaning “wing, extremity, edge, winged, border, corner, skirt.” Here are some other scriptures where the word *kanaph* is used. Perhaps this can give us some additional insights into the spiritual significance of the *wings* of the *talit*.

- Psalm 91:4 says, “He [YHVH] shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his **wings** [*kanaph*] shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.”
- In Ruth 2:12, Boaz says to Ruth, “YHVH repay your work, and a full reward be given you by YHVH Elohim of Israel, under whose wings [*kanaph*] you have come for refuge.”
- Again in Ruth 3:9, “Boaz says to Ruth, And he said, ‘Who are you?’ So she answered, ‘I am Ruth, your maidservant. Take your maidservant under your wing [*kanaph*], for you are a close relative.’”
- In 1 Samuel 24:4–5 we read, “And David arose and secretly cut off a corner [*kanaph*] of Saul’s robe. Now it happened afterward that David’s heart troubled him because he had cut Saul’s robe [*kanaph*].” In this passage, the word *corner* in Hebrew is *kanaph*, which was the same of a garment to which YHVH instructed the children of Israel to attach the *tzitziyot* or blue tassels (Num 15:37–41). Thus, it can be deduced that

if Saul were Torah-obedient, then a *tzitzit* would have been attached to the corner of Saul's garment. The *tzitzit* that David cut off was symbolic of Saul's covenantal relationship and devotion to YHVH. David cutting off Saul's *tzitzit* was symbolic prophetically of the king's spiritual destiny. Because of sin, his relationship with Elohim was being cut off, and he was about to lose the kingship over Israel.

- In Ezekiel 16:8 YHVH speaks about the nation to whom he likens as a young maiden who he married, "When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love; so I spread My wing [*kanaph*] over you and covered your nakedness. Yes, I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you, and you became Mine," says Adonai YHVH." Here we see that YHVH in love and acting as a husband covered Israel with his mantle. This was a sign of his entering into a marital covenant with his spiritual bride and his taking her to himself (see Exod 6:7; 19:4-5) to love, cherish and protect her.
- Zechariah 8:23 contains a prophecy about Yeshua the Messiah. There we read, "Thus says YHVH of hosts: 'In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the skirt [*kanaph*] of a Jewish man, saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that Elohim is with you.'" This is the part of one's garment that would have carried the *tzitziyot*. The action of the ten men is symbolic of the Gentiles taking hold of Yeshua, the Jewish Messiah, and through the gospel message being brought into covenantal relationship with the God of Israel through Yeshua resulting in their becoming a part of the nation of Israel (Eph 2:11-19).
- Finally, in Malachi 4:2 we read about the coming Messiah. "But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings [*kanaph*], and you shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall." Here is another reference to Yeshua, the Light of the world (John 1:7; 8:12), and whose face shines like the sun when in his glorified state (Rev 1:16), and who will be the spiritual Sun shining in the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:23). When Yeshua came to this earth, he healed many people who literally grabbed a hold of his *tzitziyot* that were in the wings or corners (*kanaph*) of his mantle, thus fulfilling both this prophecy and that of Zechariah 8:23.

References to Yeshua Wearing Tzitziyot

As we read just above, Yeshua fulfilled both the prophecies of Zechariah and Malachi when he healed people who literally grabbed a hold of his *tzitziyot* that were attached to the wings or *kanaph* of his outer garment. Again, as we have seen, these *tzitziyot* represent YHVH's covenantal relationship and promises to his people. The people grabbing hold of Yeshua's fringes were demonstrating faith in YHVH's word and promises and were healed as a result.

In the Gospel accounts, we find several examples of people being healed as they grabbed hold of Yeshua's fringes.

- In Matthew 9:20 and Mark 5:27, a woman with the issue of blood received healing when she touch Yeshua's cloak, tunic or mantle.
- In Matthew 14:34-36 we read, "And when they were gone over, they came into the land of Gennesaret. And when the men of that place had knowledge of him, they sent out into all that country round about, and brought unto him all that were diseased; and besought him that they might only touch **the hem** of his garment: and as many as touched were made perfectly whole." The Greek word for *hem* or *border* is *kraspedon* meaning "the extremity or prominent part of a thing, edge, skirt, margin; the fringe of a garment; in the NT a little appendage hanging down from the edge of the mantle or cloak, made of twisted wool; a tassel, tuft: the Jews had such appendages attached to their mantles to remind them of the law."
- Mark 6:56 records a similar incident. "And whithersoever he entered, into villages, or cities, or country, they laid the sick in the streets, and besought him that they might touch if it were but **the border** [Gr. *kraspedon*] of his garment: and as many as touched him were made whole."
- In Luke 8:42-44, we also read, "But as he went the people thronged him. And a woman having an issue of blood twelve years, which had spent all her living upon physicians, neither could be healed of any, Came behind him, and touched the **border** [Gr. *kraspedon*] of his garment: and immediately her issue of blood stanchd."

