

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Shelach

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Chayah *bas* Shmuel *a"h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Anti-Semitism and *Tzitzis*

The Torah in parshas Ki Savo describes a certain ritual B'nei Yisrael were to perform upon their arrival in Eretz Yisrael, entailing the installation and inscribing of stones. The Mishnah in Sotah (5:7) records some details of this procedure:

וְאַחַר כֵּן הֵבִיאוּ אֶת הָאֲבָנִים וּבָנוּ אֶת הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְסֻדְוָהוּ בְּסִיד, וְכָתְבוּ עָלָיו אֶת כָּל דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה בְּשִׁבְעִים לָשׁוֹן.

“Following (the ceremony of pronouncing blessings and curses on Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eval), they brought the stones, constructed an altar, covered it with plaster and wrote upon it the words of the Torah in the seventy languages (spoken in the world).”

True to Form

In *She'ar Yisrael*, a monumental essay outlining the roots and causes of the phenomenon of anti-Semitism, the Netziv sheds some light on this curious exercise. He explains that in proscribing this ritual, the Torah was providing a message to Yisrael concerning their future mission. The transcribing of the Torah into the spoken languages of the world portended that they were yet destined to be scattered amongst the nations around the globe. By observing the Torah amongst them, the Jews were to function as a “light unto the nations” (*cf.* *Yeshayah 42:6*) and “a father to the multitude of peoples” (*Bereishis 17:3*).

This is not to say that they were supposed to either actively attempt to draw the nations to Judaism or to mingle amongst them. On the contrary; the Jews were ordered to preserve their distinct *tzurah* (form and appearance) wherever they were. By following Hashem's directives, they would automatically provide the surrounding nations with a model, showing by example how people recognize and serve the One True Hashem.

Furthermore, the Netziv explains, it is exactly when they deviate from their distinct *tzurah* – by attempting to resemble and intermingle with the nations – that the trouble starts. The Jews have a unique arrangement, quite different from the standard exiles. Usually, when one nation is absorbed by another, the exiles have little choice other than to assimilate into their surroundings. This practice gains them more acceptance and a chance to survive and prosper. Concerning the Jews, however, the verse states (*Bamidbar 23:9*): “Behold, they are a nation that rests in solitude; among the nations, they will not be considered.” As long as they remain apart and retain their distinct *tzurah* and practices, they obtain “rest” and security. Efforts to abandon their Torah and gain entry into foreign society will ultimately fail and actually backfire; when they attempt to become “among the nations,” they will “not (even) be regarded,” but rather, repelled (*She'er Yisrael, ch. 3*).

In other words, when the Jewish people try to minimize their special Torah-based *tzurah* to win acceptance by the nations, the very opposite occurs. The nations reciprocate by reminding the Jews that they are different; often, they deliver this message with hostility and malice (*ch. 4*).

In an enlightening account recorded by R' Yochanan Luria, one of the Torah figures of sixteenth century Germany, this message was brought to bear by a certain clergyman of the Church. In his sefer *Meshivas Nefesh*, R' Luria relates how he was confronted by this priest concerning one of the hallmarks of the Jewish *tzurah* – the mitzvah of *tzitzis* (fringes worn on a four-cornered garment), featured at the end of this week's *parshah*.

The Dunce Cap

The notorious decree of the Nazis (may their memory be blotted out) requiring Jews to append stars to their clothing was not exactly an original idea. Throughout the centuries, in numerous locations, similar such directives had been promulgated in which the Jews were obligated either to wear certain hats or garments or to apply a mandated shape or design to their clothing to accentuate their Jewishness.

So it was that in sixteenth-century Strasbourg, the Jewish community was required to attach a yellow identifying mark to their raiment. A member of the gentile clergy once approached R' Luria, who was wearing the mandated appendage.

“Jew,” he asked, “what is the meaning of that yellow patch? Why do you wear it?”

“What can I do?” R' Luria replied. “It's the royal decree; another senseless directive foisted upon us by the likes of you.”

“Allow me to explain its significance to you,” the clergyman continued. While perhaps devoid of sympathy or compassion, it so happened that his words were not far off the mark. He said:

“I know what it says in the Scriptures: ‘I have separated you from the nations, to be (special) to Me’ (*Vayikra 20:26*). Now, to amplify and remind you of this fact, the Master of all has granted you certain identifying devices, such as *tzitzis*. But these are noble garments, serving a most worthy purpose: ‘And you shall see them and remember the commandments of Hashem’ (*Bamidbar 15:39*).

“But instead of taking pride in these conventions, what have you done? Many of you Jews have shied away from their fulfillment and have instead adopted foreign dress to try to measure up to and associate with the other nations. So what has happened? You cannot ‘outsmart’ Your G-d. Since you have rejected the special garments of prestige you were bidden to wear, it was arranged for there to be a replacement of sorts. In other words, you will still have to wear identifying badges, only this time they are calculated to denigrate you, in the form of conical hats, colored patches or what-have-you.

“This, then, is what lies behind the degrading decrees. They are actually orchestrated by your G-d. He ensures that if you don't ‘remember’ yourselves to remain apart from the nations and designated to Him – then *we* will remind you. And our methods are much less pleasant” (*cf. Talelei Oros, Bamidbar 15:39*).