

## ParShaT *SheLaCh* One Pager Series

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**[Background:** We have been bringing controversies between Rashi and either academic scholars or other Jewish commentaries. Today we examine a Ramban-Rashi controversy]

**Rashi #1 Biblical Text: Nu15-39a** *[God had just given the command to make Tzitzith, protrusions, on ones garments] They will be established to you as Tzitzith, protrusions, and [when] seeing them you will remind [yourselves] of all biblical commandments*

**Background for Rashi:** *Gematria* is a technical term by which every word is assigned a numerical value. These numerical values may have uses as innuendoes. *Gematria* is applied by first assigning numbers to each alphabetic letter:  $a=1$ ,  $b=2$ ,  $c=3$ , etc. The *gematria* of a word is then the sum of the numbers of its individual letters. So  $cab = 3+1+2=6$ .

**Rashi #1:** You will remind [yourselves] of all biblical commandments: There are 613 biblical commandments. But i) the *gematria* of *tzitzith* is 600, ii) the protrusions consist of 8 strings, iii) and these 8 strings are fastened with 5 knots. Hence, the *Tzitzith*,  $600+8+5=613$ , remind one of all the commandments.

**Ramban:** But Rashi's explanation is not consistent with the opinion that there are 6 strings with two knots and that additionally an alternate spelling of *Tzitzith* found in the Bible has a *gematria* of 590. My opinion is that the sky-blue thread in the *Tzitzith* reminds one, by its color, of the heaven and hence the revelation; therefore, the *Tzitzith* reminds us of the commandments given by revelation to us.

**Rashyomi critique:** But the sky-blue thread is not essential. One can fulfill ones' obligations with only white threads. It wouldn't make sense that the component of the *Tzitzith* that *reminds us of the commandments* need not be present.

**Rashyomi approach:** The *tzitzith* protrusions are like any anomaly that serve as a *general non-specific* reminder. In the following story (TB Menacoth 44a) the *Tzitzith* protrusions did indeed serve as a general reminder. Note in the story that there is mention of neither sky-blue nor gematrias (cf. Rav Hirsch, Emor).

*Once a man, who was very scrupulous about the precept of zizith, heard of a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted four hundred gold [denars] for her hire. He sent her four hundred gold [denars] and appointed a day with her. When the day arrived he came and waited at her door, and her maid came and told her, That man who sent you four hundred gold [denars] is here and waiting at the door; to which she replied Let him come in. When he came in she prepared for him seven beds, six of silver and one of gold; and between one bed and the other there were steps of silver, but the last were of gold. She then went up to the top bed and lay down upon it naked. He too went up after her in his desire to sit naked with her, when all of a sudden the four fringes [of his garment] struck him across the face; whereupon he slipped off and sat upon the ground. She also slipped off and sat upon the ground and said, By the Roman Capitol, I will not leave you alone until you tell me what blemish you saw in me. By the Temple, he replied, never have I seen a woman as beautiful as you are; but there is one precept which the Lord our God has commanded us, it is called zizith, and with regard to it the expression I am the Lord your God is twice written, signifying, I am He who will exact punishment in the future, and I am He who will give reward in the future. Now [the zizith] appeared to me as four witnesses [testifying against me]. She said, I will not leave you until you tell me your name, the name of your town, the name of your teacher, the name of your school in which you study the Torah. He wrote all this down and handed it to her. Thereupon she arose and divided her estate into three parts; one third for the government, one third to be distributed among the poor, and one third she took with her in her hand; the bed clothes, however, she retained. She then came to the Beth Hamidrash of R. Hiyya, and said to him, Master, give instructions about me that they make me a proselyte. My daughter, he replied; perhaps you have set your eyes on one of the disciples? She thereupon took out the script and handed it to him. Go, said he and enjoy your acquisition. Those very bed-clothes which she had spread for him for an illicit purpose she now spread out for him lawfully.*

**Rashi & Ramban revisited:** Quite simply, Rashi and Ramban gave additional supportive components of *Tzitzith* that could also remind. Thus if the sky-blue thread is there it *also* reminds of the commandments. Similarly, the opinions who required 8 strings and 5 knots did so require as an additional reminder.

I think that this approach, identifying a core source of *reminding* with additional supportive *reminders* is the best way to approach the text.