

A Thread of Blue: Queer perspectives on tzitzit

Parashat Sh'lach 5781

This week's Torah reading ends with the mitzvah of tzitzit (Numbers 15:37-41), five verses that we also recite as the third paragraph of the Shema. The mitzvah is to attach fringes to the corners of our garments. We generally do this by wearing a tallit. The Torah specifically says the fringes include a thread of a blue color called *techelet*. The purpose of tzitzit is for us to remember and observe the mitzvot—the idea is that people need a visible reminder to do mitzvot, and if the reminder is attached to all four corners of a piece of clothing, we will see it no matter in which direction we turn.

The first thing I'm interested in about tzitzit is the blue thread, the *ptil techelet*. Why was this particular blue required for tzitzit? The rabbis asked this question in the Talmud – “Mah nishtana techelet michol minei tzevaonin?” “What is different about techelet from all the other colors?” Answering this question, Rabbi Meir taught that the techelet is blue because it reminds us of the sea, and the color of the sea reminds us of the color of the sky, and the blue of the sky is like the sapphire stone of the heavenly throne. (BT Menachot 43b, citing Exodus 24:10 and Ezekiel 1:26).

Why didn't he just say that the blue of the techelet is like the sapphire stone of the heavenly throne, and tell us that the tzitzit are to remind us of God? Why does his explanation go through the sea and the sky first? For me Rabbi Meir is connecting the blue of techelet not only with something transcendent we can try to imagine, the heavenly throne, but foremost to things in the physical world we can perceive: the sea and the sky.

The techelet itself comes from the sea. Techelet was a dye made from a certain snail or shellfish called a *hilazon*, at least back in the time before we lost the knowledge of how to do this. (Now, we no longer know how to make techelet, and most tzitzit are white or match the fabric of the tallit.) The Torah teaches that techelet was used to dye not only this thread in the tzitzit, but also parts of the priestly garments and the fabric of the Mishkan—all of these being sacred objects.

So, again: The special blue dye for the tzitzit and for certain ritual objects was made from shellfish, an animal that is forbidden to eat. To me there is something deliciously queer about this whole idea: we take something that is in one binary category – a non-kosher animal – but because we recognize that it also has potential to create beauty, we use it to create objects for sacred ritual.

To grossly oversimplify the academic discipline queer theory: queer theory is about interrogating and subverting conventional binary categories and seeing the world in terms that permit and even celebrate boundary transgression and fluidity. There is brilliant scholarship about this, and in my experience it is also intuitive. If one grows up, as I did, learning one narrative of love and relating to other people and family structure, and if one realizes as a teenager that one's life is not going to follow that story... for me, coming out was learning by lived experience that categories are not fixed and there is not only one way to see the world. Because I had white privilege and class privilege and cisgender privilege, I could experience coming out largely as a gift, and not as a threat to my well-being. Having a queer perspective has allowed me to ask what other narratives can be questioned or disrupted, and I can't imagine the trajectory of my life without it.

Back to tzitzit: for me, there is something queer and subversive in the ancient tradition of dyeing Jewish ritual objects to a heavenly shade of blue using a dye made from shellfish. When we have a queer perspective, we can see the possibilities in something that is otherwise outside a boundary. We can share this perspective in such a way that others, too, can see its beauty and find something sacred in it. As an example, the Pride@GJC symbol takes the standard GJC logo that is a mash-up of a menorah and a branch of wheat, and then flips it upside down, adds color, and voila! It's a rainbow. The symbol is delightful not only because rainbows are pretty and rainbows are a brilliant symbol of Pride, but also because it transforms how we see the GJC logo.

The Pride symbol is an easy example because it doesn't challenge any of our core assumptions. But what would it require for us at GJC to adopt this queer perspective more broadly, for us to be able to look at treif but see techelet and thus add beauty and meaning to our community? I see this as a challenge to think

about what categories or stories we assume are normative, and instead to find opportunities for flipping things upside down and celebrating fluidity.

This is not easy, because we are so accustomed to making assumptions about people by using categories. But we know that we will be a stronger GJC when we are able to challenge or let go of our assumptions about who is Jewish and who is part of our community, our assumptions about race and ethnicity and Jewish identity, our assumptions about gender, our assumptions about family configuration, disability, and socioeconomic status.

This is really the project of our Cultural Transformation Committee and of other efforts within GJC to build an antiracist and inclusive community. We know we have members and visitors who are Jews of color; who are single people; who do not have children; who live with disabilities; whose gender is non-binary; who struggle financially. And yet we also know that our conversations and our programming tend to assume that people are partnered, have children, are white, able-bodied, and economically secure.

So how do we bring a queer perspective to our community? One way is to include people with different perspectives and lived experience in decision making, and this is an area where GJC can grow; we have long had a lack of LGBTQ people and people of color in lay leadership, including on both the Board and the Executive Committee and other committees. Happily, the lay leadership is beginning to include some of these perspectives, but we can do more both to include different perspectives and to ensure that those voices are heard.

Even once voices are included, this kind of work challenges communities. For instance, this year Heritage of Pride, the organization that puts on New York City's Pride celebration, is struggling with the role of law enforcement, both for providing security and as a group to march in the parade. Pride celebrations originated in New York in protests against police brutality led by Black and brown transgender and gender non-binary people. Over the years NYC's Pride celebration grew; law enforcement was asked to secure the parade; and groups of LGBTQ police officers chose to march in the parade. This year the organizers, in order to maintain solidarity with Black Lives Matter and to acknowledge the

trauma experienced by LGBTQ people of color at the hands of police, announced that they would not hire law enforcement as security and that police officer groups in uniform would not be permitted to march in the parade. Since that announcement in mid-May, Heritage of Pride has received tremendous criticism and there is division within the organization also.

What we learn here is that incorporating multiple perspectives like this can be difficult; it can be uncomfortable; it can be imperfect. Heritage of Pride is wrestling, in public, with its core values including the racial justice history of Pride, creating space where LGBTQ people feel safe and celebrated, and inclusion.

Making decisions while holding onto core values is the purpose of tzitzit. The Torah teaches that the tzitzit are on our garments to remind us of our sacred obligations, of the mitzvot, as we move about the world.

Like New York Pride, GJC will have decisions to make in the coming months as we respond to the racist vandalism on our Black Lives Matter sign on Lincoln Drive; and as we continue to pray in person, as we are able, raising questions about synagogue security and creating a space where we all feel safe, and questions about what our services look like and who participates in them. The vandalism on the BLM sign is upsetting in particular because we as a community reject anti-Black racism and because we reject the assertion that Black and Jewish are binary categories, since of course they overlap. Although the vandalized sign was replaced with the Pride at GJC sign, appropriate to June, we also must reject any implication that GJC's celebration of Pride and support of Black Lives Matter are separate; instead, they are intersectional. So as we move forward I pray that GJC will make decisions incorporating multiple perspectives and holding onto our core values as a community.

The verses about tzitzit in this week's parsha come right after the episode of the man who collected firewood on Shabbat, violating the prohibition on work during Shabbat. When God tells Moses the people need tzitzit to remind them of the mitzvot, to me the purpose is not to remember mitzvot at the granular level, at the level that may seem obscure or less meaningful – it's to remember the big picture, like Shabbat. The same with Rabbi Meir, who teaches that ptil techelet,

the blue thread, reminds us of the blue of the sea and the blue of the sky – again focusing our attention on the big picture, on experiencing the Divine in the world we inhabit.

Although I'm saying that the tzitzit are there to remind us to be intentional in our actions, I know and acknowledge that wearing a tallit or tzitzit in any form is not an easy decision or practice for everyone. I've been listening to a podcast called Fringes about the experiences of transgender and gender-non-binary Jews with tallit and tzitzit. The host Emma June, who is transgender and works for a Judaica company tying tzitzit, leads intimate and thoughtful conversations about people's experience with tallitot. At the same time it's striking to me how difficult this mitzvah can be, even or especially for people challenging gender binaries and living Jewishly involved lives.

By talking about tzitzit today I don't mean to say that wearing a tallit is simple, whether one is transgender or gender non-binary or cisgender. ("Cisgender" is the term for a person who identifies with the gender assigned to them at birth. For example, when I was born, the doctor said I was a girl; because that is also my experience of myself, I am cisgender.) The truth is that many people and many of us grew up in communities where only cisgender boys and men wore tallitot. Although the Torah and even many of the ancient rabbis do not limit the wearing of tzitzit to men, powerful gendered norms around wearing a tallit developed, and those norms can exclude or alienate people and cause a lot of pain.

Having heard the complexity in people's stories about how they relate to wearing a tallis or not, I don't see this conversation as: "Here we are at GJC, anyone can wear a tallis," assuming that is easy. It's more like: "Even in egalitarian communities, binary gender categories are woven deeply into the wearing of a tallit. Let's open this conversation gently rather than pretend those dynamics are not there." In this way, we can recognize that gender boundaries around tallitot limit the full expression of people's prayer experience.

My own experience was not so much one of boundaries around gender, because I didn't learn those as a young person. It was hard for me to begin praying in a tallit because it felt illicit. I was studying for my conversion, but it wasn't finalized

yet, and Rabbi Zeff suggested that I wear a tallit to pray at home. So I borrowed my wife's. The first morning I prayed in her tallit, downstairs in our house, where there are windows right onto the sidewalk. I was genuinely afraid that someone would see me, knock on the door and tell me I wasn't allowed to wear a tallit. It felt like I was doing something forbidden.

But not long afterward I had a chance to begin again. Just a few days before my conversion, I decided I wanted my own tallit, so I went to the Little Shop. I explained that I wanted a really big tallit, one that could completely envelop me. The kind women of the Little Shop helped me choose a really big tallit. The morning after my conversion I wrapped my tallit to pray in it for the first time. I knew then that something was different. The experience of the mikveh itself had been emotional and intense and great, but I wasn't quite sure I felt different. Under my new tallit, I was sure.

In the siddur there are some verses that one can say after wrapping one's tallit, and the first verse is:

מִה־יִקָּר חֲסִדְךָ אֱלֹהִים וּבִנְיָ אָדָם בְּצִל כְּנָפֶיךָ יִחְסִיָּו:

How precious is Your love, God; humanity shelters under Your wings. (Psalm 36:8).

The first time I wrapped my tallit, I didn't know this verse, but in some sense I understood it. When I chose a tallit that could envelop me, I hoped it would hold me spiritually, too, but I didn't know that it would.

We began with the ptil techelet, the single thread of blue and how that might change our perspective, and I want to close by asking what possibilities open in the wrapping of the whole tallit. **What would it mean for us to be a community that intentionally creates space where every person feels sheltered by boundless protection?**

The common phrase "I see you, I hear you," is a way to affirm someone's experience even when it is not our own. And we must, of course, aspire to see and hear the experiences of all within our congregation. But as a holy community our obligation goes beyond seeing and hearing. As we come together to pray and

play, study and work, talk and eat and laugh, we need to hold each other; we need to extend an embrace in which every person can find refuge, where no one is diminished, where everyone inhabits their full self.

On this Pride Shabbat and as we carry Pride through the year, may we find inspiration in the queer perspective of the ptil techelet, may we hold onto our core values as we make decisions, and may we wrap others and our whole community in a protective embrace.

Shabbat Shalom.