

### Tazria: Red and blue in Judaism

I will tell you a rabbinical secret: The Parasha we are reading today, Tazria, from the whole list of Parashot from the Torah, is from the ones which the rabbis want to run away. It is so difficult and, let's say, not "so attracting", that can be the worst nightmare for a rabbi trying to teach an interpretation or a message every year to her/his congregation. And this is because Tazria speak about skin diseases: Leprosy of the skin, a kind of leprosy in the houses, spots on the wall, quarantine proceeding and rituals of purification.

For the rabbis of the Midrash, these types of skin deceases were related to punishments of Lashon hara, the evil tong and gossip. And they learn this from another story of the Torah, when Myriam did Lashon Hara about Moses and she was punished with leprosy. But today I would like to talk with you not about gossip or Lashon Hara, but about a very interesting commentary that I learnt from Rabbi Jack Riemer about our Parsha which I think is nice, interesting and also different: He speaks about the colours of the Jewish Tradition

We know colours from many places in the Torah, especially in the description of the building of the tabernacle. But what is interesting here is not the decorative function of colours but its function in religion and society. And Rabbi Riemer in his commentary speaks specifically about two: Red and Blue. And in both cases these colours are related with threads... blue and red threads which we can find in different stories across our history.

Let's begin with the red: Where can we find a red thread in our tradition?

a) The first time is in the book of Genesis, when after deceiving Jacob, her father in law, Tamar became pregnant of twins from him. Tells the Torah that upon the delivery, the midwife tied a red thread to the son that was coming out, but the child came back to the womb and then the other child came out before his brother. Thanks to the red thread Tamar could know who the firstborn was and who the second was.

b) The second time we find a red thread is in our Parsha. In the purification process that the leprous had to do in order to be admitted back to the Camp, we are told: "*And the Kohen shall take two live pure birds, cedar wood, red threads and hyssop*" for the purification ceremony. We don't really know why exactly these elements and its significance. We could say that the animal and vegetal elements could have some healing properties for leprosy. But why exactly red threads? We don't really know, but they appear in a context of healing and recovery.

c) The third time is with the story of Rachav the prostitute. If you remember, Yeoshua sent two spies to know about the Land of Israel before the conquest. In order not to be discovered, they decided to go to the house of Rachav because nobody will question about two strangers going there late in the night. But someone discovered them and the police went there looking for them. But Rachav helped and hid them, and they promised her that in retribution the People of Israel will save her and her family during the conquest of Jericho, but in order to recognize her, she will have to put a red thread in her window. Maybe that red thread is the origin of the "red light district" concept ... But seriously, it can be the origin of the idea that a red thread brings protection, something that has a very important role in Jewish superstition.

d) They fourth time that we can find a red thread in Judaism is related to the history of Rachav: In some moment of our history some Jews started to use red bracelets that, as you know, are very popular among many Jews and also non-Jews. Many mothers tie a red thread to their children when they are born as a kind of protection. There are women that go to the tomb of Rachel in Bet Lechem and they tie red threads there. And as you know many people wear a red bracelet to be protected against the Evil Eye, something that is especially in fashion in some cabalist groups, where Madonna and Britney Spears go. They proudly wear the bracelet. It is interesting the fact that the Rabbis in the Talmud prohibit this practice of the red thread as a source of protection and considered it "Darkei Haemori", a category that applies to the superstitions and pagan practices of the people of Emor. It is very interesting the fact that even though they were forbidden, the people continued to use them anyway, even knowing that they have no support and they are even against the spirit of Judaism

But enough with the red thread, let's speak about blue: *"Vayomer Adonay el Moshe leemor: And God said to Moses: Daver el bene Israel veamarta lahem ve asu lahem tzitim al kanfei bigdeigem ledorotam...Speak with the people of Israel and ask them to tie tsitsiot in the corners of their garments... Venatnu al tzitzit hakanaf petil techeleg...They have to put on each of the tsitsit a blue thread..."*

But take a look at your Tallitot... Where is the blue thread? According to the Talmud, the ink for this blue thread was made by a mixture of many snails, and there are rabbis who say that the formula about how to do the colour was lost, others say that it was very expensive and because of that it was impossible to be made anymore. In any case, the practice of the blue thread in tzitziot was discontinued and from that moment our Tallitot have only white tzitziot.

Some years ago, a hassidic Rabbi, the Radnizer, said that he found again the correct way to do the tchelet, that especial blue colour, and his followers (and today many Jews) they started to use Tallitot with the the blue thread in the tsitsiot. I can tell you that when I was studying in Israel, to have tchelet in you tallit was a fashion. You were a "cool religious Jew" if you put tchelet in your Tallit.

So we have here two traditions related with different colours in Judaism: The red thread that comes from the book of Genesis, from our Parsha and from the story if Rachav... And the blue thread that comes from the Torah when God gave us the mitzvah of tzitzit.

What do these two traditions have in common? That both are very old traditions that were going to die, but today they are very popular again. And in which sense they are different? And here is where Rabbi Riemer learns an insight about the type of Judaism we can choose to live, and this is the lesson I would like to share with you today:

Red and blue represent very different ways of understanding the role of Judaism in your life:

There are Jews that for them, being a Jew is like to wear a red bracelet: You just have to wear it and your will be protected. You don't have to do anything else: If you wear it your life is secured, you will be safe you will live for many years. Those are the Jews that when there is a catastrophe they run to check the mezuzot: They thing that if the letters of the klaf are in good shape, nothing bad will happen to them. Success here is not the product of study, creativity, effort or resilience, is about magic: If you put on tefillin in the morning you will be able to do good business during the day. Life is easy. Just follow the ritual and you will be fine... You don't have to study very much, a lot of work is not necessary: Live a life of mitzvot and you will have a good life, many good children, money, health and a lot of naches... That is to be a "red colour" Jew.

But then we have the other type of Jew, the blue one. The blue thread of the Tzitziot reminds us about the Mitzvot: "*Lemaan tizkeru veasitem et kol mitzvotai*". We look at the tzitziot in order to be reminded to fulfill the commandments. The tzitziot are only a reminder... What is important is what we do with the remainder, not the remainder itself. What will give us the opportunity to have a good life are not the commandments, but what we do with the commandments.

The Mitzvot are a way to make us better human beings and to make the world a better place. We are not going to fix the world only putting on tefilin or fixing mezuzot if we don't understand this as only a reminder of what I have to do after that.

God gave us Mitzvot as tools to improve ourselves and what is close to us, and that requires studying, it requires effort, it sometimes requires some battles to fight. This is the "blue Jew", the one for whom Mitzvot are a way to make Tikkun Olam, and not an end in itself.

So the question here, and with this I have to finish, is what type of Jew you want to be: Like the "red thread Jew" or like the "blue one"? Every one of us has to answer the question. So let's ask God to help us to answer that question wisely, so we could have be better Jews and better human beings.

Shabbat Shalom!