



Following the Thread

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One of the most dazzling of all the ornate garments worn by the *Kohen Gadol*, the High Priest, was the *tzitz* (צִיץ), a tiara that encircled the turban on his head, forming a sort of crown.¹ In the front, resting on his forehead, was a plate of gold sealed with a boldly proclaimed message: “Holy to the Eternal!” But the intricate design of the *tzitz* was encoded with other, hidden messages that complicated its meaning.

Three verses in Parashat Tetzaveh give us a vivid description of the *tzitz*:

שמות כח:לו-לח

וַעֲשִׂיתָ צִיץ זָהָב טְהוֹר וּפְתַחְתָּ עָלָיו פֶּתוּחֵי חֹתֶם קֹדֶשׁ לֵה'. וְשָׂמַתָּ אֹתוֹ עַל פֶּתִיל תְּכֵלֶת וְהָיָה עַל הַמְצַנֶּפֶת
אֶל מֹול פְּנֵי הַמְצַנֶּפֶת יְהִיָּה. וְהָיָה עַל מִצְחֵה אַהֲרֹן וְנָשָׂא אַהֲרֹן אֶת עֹון הַקִּדְּשִׁים אֲשֶׁר יִקְדִּישׁוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
לְכָל מִתְנַת קֹדְשֵׁיהֶם וְהָיָה עַל מִצְחוֹ תָּמִיד לְרָצוֹן לָהֶם לִפְנֵי ה'.

¹ While the *tzitz* was not an actual crown, it seems to be the inspiration for the phrasing from Mishnah Avot 4:13, *Keter Kehunah*, “The **Crown** of the Priesthood”: “R. Shimon said, there are three crowns: The Crown of Torah, the Crown of the Priesthood, and the Crown of Kingship—and the Crown of a Good Name is greater than them all.”



Exodus 28:36-38

You shall make a **tzitz** of pure gold and engrave on it a **seal** (*hotam*) with the inscription:

“**Holy to the Eternal** (*Kodesh lAdonai*).” Hang it on a **cord of blue** (*petil tekheilet*), so that it may remain on the turban; it shall remain on the front of the turban. It shall be on Aharon’s **forehead, and Aharon will carry the sin** of the holy things that the Israelites make holy, from any of their holy donations. It shall be on his **forehead** at all times, to find favor for them before the Eternal.

Embedded in this short passage is a cluster of textual connections that will zig-zag us backward and forward in the Torah, weaving a network of associations together into the *tzitz*.

Let’s begin by following that blue cord backward, so to speak, because a “cord,” a *petil*, has only appeared in one other context in the Torah before this: in the Yehudah and Tamar story—another tale of dressing up.

When Yehudah unwittingly solicits his own daughter-in-law, who has dressed up as a prostitute (after fearing that she would be kept a perpetual widow), she asks that he leave a pledge to ensure payment:

בראשית לח:יח

וַיֹּאמֶר מָה הָעֶרְבוֹן אֲשֶׁר אֶתֶּן לָךְ וַתֹּאמֶר חֲתָמְךָ וּפְתִילְךָ וּמַטְךָ אֲשֶׁר בְּיָדְךָ

Genesis 38:18

He said, what kind of pledge shall I give you? And she said, “Your **seal**, and your **cord**, and the **staff** in your hand.”

There is the cord—just like the cord upon which the *tzitz* hangs. And there is a seal—just like the seal that makes up the front of the *tzitz*, and upon which “Holy to God” is engraved. Those



are two striking parallels to the *tzitz*. Intriguing. But that's just two out of three. What about the third item: the staff?

Of course, the staff is also an item that Aharon notably took up, long before he became a priest (see Exodus 7:9). He performed the first three plagues with it (see Exodus 7:19, 8:1, 8:12). But that alone is not a particularly strong textual connection to the *tzitz*. For that, we have to jump forward, to the Book of Numbers. After Aharon's priesthood has been challenged by Korah, God proposes a test to demonstrate Aharon's legitimacy: each tribe will put forth one staff and they will all be left overnight in the Tent of Meeting, in front of the Ark. The one that God chooses will sprout forth flowers:

במדבר יז:כג

וַיְהִי מִמָּחֳרָת וַיָּבֵא מֹשֶׁה אֶל אֹהֶל הָעֵדוּת וְהָיָה פָּרֹחַ מִטֶּה אֶהֱרֹן לְבֵית לְוִי וַיֵּצֵא פָּרֹחַ וַיֵּצֵץ צִיץ וַיִּגְמַל שְׂקָדִים

Numbers 17:23

So the next morning, Moshe came into the Tent of the Testimony, and behold, the staff of Aharon, of the House of Levi, had flowered, bringing forth flowers, **budding buds** (*vayatzeit tzitz*), and producing almonds.

The phrase, “budding buds,” in Hebrew is *vayatzeit tzitz*, because a *tzitz* is literally a bud, or a sprout (it “sprouts forth” from the High Priest’s forehead). But this is the **only** time the Torah uses that word outside of the description of the priestly garments. It is as if this passage were well aware that one item was missing from the *tzitz*’s parallel to Yehudah’s pledges, and stepped in to supply it. That’s three for three. Now the connection is a lock. Back to Genesis.

Why would the *tzitz* take us back to this moment in the Yehudah story? It is an example of sin, to be sure, and the need for atonement creates some general thematic connection to the



priesthood. But the link is more specific than that: these three items are the very things that force a confession and bring about real repentance. When Tamar is discovered to be pregnant, and no one knows who the father is, she is condemned to death for betraying her family:

בראשית לח:כה-כו

הוא מוצאת והיא שולחה אל חמיה לאמר לאיש אשר אלה לו אנכי הרה ותאמר הכר נא למי החתמת והפתילים והמטה האלה. ויכר יהודה ויאמר צדקה ממני.

Genesis 38:25-26

But as she was being taken out she sent her father-in-law a message saying, the man to whom these things belong is the one I am pregnant by, and she said, recognize, please, whose **seal, cord, and staff** are these. And he recognized them, and said: She has been more just than I have.

This becomes the paradigmatic act of recognizing taking ownership of sin. Yehudah—whose name shares a root (ה.ד.י) with the word for confession²—sets the precedent for the kind of confession that the High Priest will have to make on behalf of us all. Remember that the *tzitz*, “shall be on Aharon’s forehead, and Aharon will carry the sin of the holy things.”

That phrasing takes us back even further into Genesis, to the first person ever to speak of “carrying his sin.” After Kayin kills his brother, he is doomed to wander the earth and, far from accepting responsibility for his sin, he protests:

בראשית ד:יג

ויאמר קין אל ה' גדולי עוני מנשא.

² On the meanings of Yehudah’s name, see my colleague R. Elie Kaunfer’s essay on Parashat VaYeishev, “The Meaning of Judaism: Gratitude and Confession,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/meaning-judaism-gratitude-and-confession>.



Genesis 4:13

Kayin said to the Eternal, “My **sin** is too great to **bear!**”

Kayin worries that as a known killer, wandering the roads, he will be vulnerable to revenge attacks. God responds by giving Kayin a mark that will protect him from anyone who tries to kill him. Rashi imagines what and where that mark was:

רש"י בראשית ד:יג

“וישם ה' לקין אות” חקק לו אות משמו בְּמִצְחוֹ.

Rashi on Genesis 4:13

The Eternal placed a mark (*ot*, lit. “a letter”) on Kayin—that is, a letter from God’s name was engraved on his **forehead**.

God’s name was on his forehead. Rashi’s language conjures up the image of the High Priest, who also wears God’s name on his forehead in order to carry sin.

And what does the High Priest do with these sins? For the Torah’s account of that, we jump forward again, to the Book of Leviticus, where the Yom Kippur service is detailed. Its central ritual consists of taking two goats and designating one: **to the Eternal** (that is, the goat is designated with exactly the same language that the priest is designated). That goat is offered up to God, as a sin offering.

It is the other goat, however, who will be “carrying sins,” for he will be sent out into the wilderness (לְעִזְאֵזֶל). Look at what happens before the goat is sent:



ויקרא טז:כא-כב

וּסְמַךְ אֶהָרֹן אֶת שְׁתֵּי יָדָיו עַל רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁעִיר הַחַי וְהִתְוַדָּה עָלָיו אֶת־כָּל עֲוֹנוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת כָּל פְּשָׁעֵיהֶם לְכָל חַטָּאתָם וְנָתַן אֹתָם עַל רֹאשׁ הַשָּׁעִיר וְשָׁלַח בְּיַד אִישׁ עֵתִי הַמִּדְבָּרָה. וְנָשָׂא הַשָּׁעִיר עָלָיו אֶת כָּל עֲוֹנוֹתָם אֶל אֶרֶץ גְּזֵרָה וְשָׁלַח אֶת־הַשָּׁעִיר בַּמִּדְבָּר.

Leviticus 16:21-22

Aharon shall lay both his hands upon the **head** of the live goat and **confess** over it all the sins and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their iniquities, putting them on the **head** of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated agent. **Thus the goat shall carry on it all their sins** to an inaccessible region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.

Aharon seems to be transferring the sins of the people onto the goat by placing his hands on his head—where Aharon’s own designation as a bearer of sins usually rests—and then confessing the sins—just as Yehudah, the first wearer of the cord, taught us how to do. Before that confession, in the days of Kayin, people would have to carry their sins forever, like a mark on their foreheads. But Yehudah taught his people the power of confession and repentance, and then that became formalized in the service of the *mikdash* and in our representative, Aharon.

The Torah has “threaded” all these texts together with common symbols, to trace the development of a process of grappling with sin that begins with an unrepentant killer, runs through the moral reckoning between Yehudah and Tamar that ended in the first great confession, and then culminates in the Kohen Gadol’s unique power to confess and achieve forgiveness for the sins of an entire nation.

It is a magnificent display of symbolic mapping. But what does it have to do with us?



We have so far left out perhaps the most obvious textual connection to the *tzitz*. There is another word in the Torah that sounds almost exactly alike and is also related to a ritual object: *ציצית* (*tzitzit*), sometimes translated awkwardly as “ritual fringes.” Here is the description of the *tzitzit* in Parashat Shelah:

במדבר טו:לח-מ

דָּבַר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם וַעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם צִיצִית עַל כְּנָפֵי בְגָדֵיהֶם לְדֹרֹתָם וְנָתַנוּ עַל צִיצִית הַכֶּנֶף פֶּתִיל תְּכֵלֶת. וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְצִיצִית וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וְזָכַרְתֶּם אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹת ה' וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְלֹא תִתְּרוּ אַחֲרֵי לְבַבְכֶּם וְאַחֲרֵי עֵינֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם זֹנִים אַחֲרֵיהֶם. לְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתֵי ה' וְהִיִּתֶם קֳדָשִׁים לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם.

Numbers 15:38-40

The Eternal said to Moshe as follows: “Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves *tzitzit* on the corners of their garments throughout the ages; let them attach a **cord of blue** to the *tzitzit* at each corner. That shall be your *tzitzit*; look at it and recall all the commandments of the Eternal and observe them, so that you do not follow after your heart and and after your eyes in that which you lust after—so that you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be **holy to your God.**”

The word *tzitzit* itself looks like a diminutive form of *tzitz*, suggesting that this is something like a “little *tzitz*,” one that any Israelite can wear.³ The *tzitzit* are also assigned a similar language of designation: “holy to your God.” But if we needed any further proof that these are related items, there is that same “blue cord” that we saw on the priestly garment.

The *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*, then, contains a trace of the priesthood, long after the services of the priests in the Temple have ended. There is something excitingly democratizing about this

³ My colleague, R. Shai Held makes this connection in his essay on Parashat Korah, “Every Jew a High Priest: The Meaning of *Tzitzit* and the Sin of Korah,” included in *The Heart of Torah* and available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/every-jew-high-priest>. R. Held in turn thanks R. David Silber for pointing out this connection.

mitzvah: holiness is accessible to anyone with a four-cornered garment. But the *tzitzit* are also freighted with the complex history of its priestly progenitor, reminding us that we all carry sin, but also that we have learned of the power of confession from Yehudah,⁴ and of the possibility of atonement from Aharon.

⁴ No wonder the description of the *tzitzit* warns us against that which we “lust after” (*zonim*, a word related to exactly what Yehudah took Tamar for: *l’zonah*). The Gemara in Menaḥot 44a about the Torah scholar who visits a prostitute but is saved from his sin at the last minute by his *tzitzit*, also seems to be playing on the connection between these two words. The prostitute of that story ends up converting and coming to claim the scholar for a husband, using a note he has left her—rather similar to Tamar, who “claims” Yehudah after an illicit encounter with the pledge he has left her.

