

Tzitzit and Sensual Redemption

An explication of the story in Menahot 44a.

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The Talmud tells the story of a man who was extremely careful in the observance of the commandment of *tzitzit*, of wearing ritual fringes on the four corners of one's garb. Once he heard that there was a prostitute in a city by the sea whose fee was four hundred gold pieces. He sent her the four hundred gold pieces, and a time was arranged for him. When the day arrived, he went to the door of her house. Her maid went in and told her: "That man who sent you the four hundred pieces of gold has come and sits at the door." Said she: "Let him enter." He entered.

She had prepared for him seven beds, six of silver and one of gold. They were arranged one above the other, and between each there was a ladder made of silver. The highest bed was the one of gold. She climbed up to the top and lay down naked in the golden bed. Then he too climbed up to sit beside her in the nude. At this moment the *tzitziot*, the four fringes of his garb, came and slapped him across the face. At this, he broke away and sat down on the ground. She too came down and sat on the ground. Said she to him: "By the Capitol of Rome! I shall not let you off until you tell me what blemish you saw in me."

Said he to her: "I swear I have never seen a woman as beautiful as you, but there is a commandment that God commanded us, and its name is *tzitzit*. The words in which it is written contain the phrase 'I am the Eternal your God' twice, meaning: I am the one who calls to account; I am the one who will reward. Now, the *tzitziot* appeared to me as if they were four witnesses."

Said she to him: "I shall not let you off until you tell me your name, the name of your city, the name of your rabbi, and the name of the school where you study Tora." He wrote it all down and placed it into her hand.

Then she got up and divided all her property into three parts: A third for the government, a third for the poor, and a third she took with her, apart from "that bed linen" (which was included in the division). She proceeded to the study house of R. Hiya and said to him: "Rabbi! Command that I be made a convert." Said he to her: "My daughter, is it perhaps that one of the students appealed to your eyes?" She took the note that the man had given her from her hand and gave it to R. Hiya. After reading it, he said to her: "Go and take possession of what you have acquired." The story concludes with this moral: "And so the same bed linen that she once spread out for the man to serve his

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lust, she now spread out for him in consecrated union. This was the reward for the *mitzva* of *tzitzit* in this world. How much in the world to come, who can tell?"²

Apart from a very few stylistic alterations, I have intentionally told the story with the same simplicity as it is found in the Talmud, because every part of it and almost every phrase is important for understanding the teaching that is being communicated.

The story begins with a full recognition of the almost irresistible force of the sexual instinct. The young man is a talmudic scholar, a pious man. As used to be customary, in addition to observing the commandments of the Tora as befits a student of the Tora, he dedicates himself to the strictest observance of one specific commandment. His sexual desire in this case is not a momentary temptation. The prostitute is extremely expensive, and he has to sacrifice a small fortune in order to get to her. He has to wait for the appointed day, and he has to go on a long journey, for she lives in a city "by the sea." When he arrives, he has to undergo the indignity of having to sit at her door until he is admitted. None of this deters him. He is like one possessed. It is not accidental to the story that the young man had chosen the commandment of the fringes for especially conscientious observance. For of this commandment the Bible says:

And it shall be unto you for a fringe, that you may look upon it and remember all the commandments of the Eternal, and do them; and that you go not about after your own heart and after your own eyes, after which you used to go astray.³

Now, quite clearly, sexuality is that instinct in man which is most likely to lead him astray after "his own heart and his own eyes." If our young Tora student dedicated himself to the strictest observance of the *tzitzit* commandment, it was due to the fact that he realized his own weakness in the face of temptation and was struggling to overcome it.

As he enters the prostitute's boudoir there is no meeting between them. It is nudity that meets nudity; his sexual desire meets her greed. It is an accommodation between a man who has been reduced to the pleasure principle, and a woman who has been reduced to cupidity. It is sex in its classically impersonal manifestation. What could be more impersonal than an appointment between lust and greed?

The fringes that take on a life of their own and slap his face are the symbolic expression of his own resistance. The merit of the *mitzva* saves him from complete failure. As he is about to sink into the ecstasy of impersonality, a kind of an ego death, he is called back to the personal level of his being, and tears himself away and sits on the ground. The sight of him on the ground calls her from the impersonality of prostitution. She sits down with him on the ground. They sit there, still naked, but no longer in the nudity of lust and desire, but in the nakedness of their frail humanity, amidst the ruins of their human dignity. And now, *mima'amakim* – from the depths – to use a phrase of the psalmist, they call to each other. "She said to him" and "he said to her," and so again and again. When he first heard about her, she was the celebrated prostitute whose fame was spread across the lands. He had not even set eyes on her; she was the anonymous symbol of sex to him. But now, sitting opposite each other on the ground, he recognizes her as the most beautiful woman he ever saw. He acknowledges her in her full feminine dignity and is able to appreciate her beauty without the eyes of lust. When he first appeared at her door, he was nameless. He was "that man who sent her the four hundred pieces of

² Menahot 44a.

³ Numbers 15:39

gold.” That was enough, nothing else mattered. But now she asks him about names: His name, the name of his city, the name of his rabbi, the name of the house of study where he learns Tora – so many names! Having emerged from the wilderness of impersonality, she is longing for personalization: Who are you, where do you come from, who made you what you are, and how was it achieved? As she meets him as a person, she finds herself as one. It is one of those revelational I-Thou encounters about which Martin Buber has taught us and which have within themselves the mystery of sudden transformation. It is redemption from impersonality. She comes out of it a changed human being. And so, we assume, does he. Finally, his struggles with the heart and the eyes that lead one astray are over. He has gained himself a new heart and he sees with new eyes. Now, the *mitzva* of *tzitzit* is fulfilled, not only in ritual observance, but also in recovered personal dignity.

The understanding between the man and the woman is subtly hinted at in the story. She says to him: Tell me your name and all the other names. But he does not tell. He writes it all down for her on a piece of paper, and “placed it into her hand.” The text does not simply say that “he gave her the note,” for that would have meant the mere technicality of conveying an object from one person to another, the purely physical act of handing over a piece of information. “He placed it into her hand” is the entrusting of something precious into safekeeping. It is not just handing over, it is communication. He did not answer her questions by word of mouth. He wrote it all down. “Please, do not forget – this is who I am. That is where I come from. This is how I became what I am. All this I place into your hand. Keep it.” The importance of the note is revealed at the end of the story. The rabbi asks her: is it perhaps that one of the students appeals to your eyes? Once again the eyes appear in the story as doors of temptation, against which the young man sought protection by means of the *mitzva* of the fringes. Now, this is actually what she wants, one of the rabbi’s students. But she does not answer, she does not explain, she does not defend herself. She is silent. And as he, without answering her questions, entrusted the note into her keeping, so now she, in silence, hands over the note to the rabbi. And once again the phrase is used which corresponds exactly to the phrase used for his entrusting the note into her hands. The text does not say, “she gave the note to him,” but instead, that she brought the note out from her hand and gave it to him. The rabbi sees it and accepts her.

What did R. Hiya see? How was his question answered? There was a beautiful woman in front of him who could have had the great ones of Rome at her feet. Yet she was coming to his door to be converted. It is a matter of ultimate importance to her, yet she does not plead her cause. Is there a man involved? She is silent, but with one of those silences that tell more than any words could tell. A silence of truth and trust. Yes, indeed, there is a man. She hands him his paper. The rabbi notices that she had been treasuring it as a trust, which she now surrenders from her hand into his safekeeping as it was entrusted to her. The rabbi reads: There is a man who desired to be known by this woman for what he was, a Jew, who has a master, a student of the Tora. And who wanted her not to forget him. She kept his trust and now placed their joint destiny into the rabbi’s hands. Not a word is said. The rabbi understands. Strangely, as he gives his blessing to their union, the rabbi uses what one might think is most inappropriate language in the situation: “Go and take possession of what you have acquired.” It would seem to us that these words are chosen intentionally to make the point of her transformation. Originally, in her state of impersonality, she wanted possession in its impersonal form. She did not want him, but his gold pieces. But now that the impersonality of their relationship has been redeemed, it is person who takes the place of possession.

There is one more aspect to this story. Though redeemed from his lust, the man is fully open to the woman's beauty. She, on the other hand, does not hide the fact that she desires the man, but the whole man, in his bio-psychic completeness. The story ends with a statement of the sensual enjoyment of their union, that is seen as the this-worldly reward for the careful observance of the *mitzva* that protects a man against going astray after his "heart" and his "eyes."

This story contains all the basic principles of a Jewish sex ethics. It recognizes the force of the sexual instinct while illustrating how this instinct in its impersonal givenness depersonalizes a human being. It need not be repressed. Indeed, it can be raised to the personal level of human existence as the natural outcome of the personalization of the relationship between a man and a woman who encounter each other in the completeness of their bio-psychic being. Finally, as in our earlier systematic presentation, so in the story too, personalization is twofold. It is accomplished between the Jew and his God, and between the man and the woman. Thus they are rejoicing together in the presence of God. Once redeemed from the bondage of the impersonal, neither the eye nor the heart has to be denied. They lead, but do not lead astray.