

# Vaeschanan

## *Sanctifying the World, Spirituality, and the Tallis*

**T**here has been a constant argument throughout the generations about what is the purpose of religion. Is the purpose of religion to elevate our souls, to bring us as close as possible to G-d, or is the purpose of our religion to sanctify the world? Judaism has always maintained throughout the ages that the purpose of our religion is to sanctify the world. That's why we have never approved of a monastic lifestyle. The purpose of Judaism is to bring out the G-dly potentialities of everyone and everything in this world, to veritably create a new Garden of Eden in this world. It is true, though, that in order for us to learn how to do this, we must maintain a high level of spirituality; otherwise, we will stoop to all sorts of illicit means in order to obtain what we think are good goals. Judaism, on the one hand, contends that our main job is to sanctify the world but, on the other hand, it contends that in order to sanctify this world, we need to have a spiritual base. Complete immersion in this world without recognizing Judaism's especial spirituality will only lead to disaster while, on the other hand, complete absorption with the spiritual will not permit us to sanctify the world.

In the *Torah* portion *Vaeschanan* we learn how Moshe begs G-d to let him enter the land of Israel. The rabbis explain that Moshe asks to be allowed to enter into the promised land as a plain citizen. He was willing to give up leadership. He just wanted to have the elevating spiritual experience of having trod the earth of the holy land, but G-d denied him even that, and He answered him in a very sharp fashion. He said, "*Rav Loch*, it's enough for you. Do not continue to speak to Me about this matter." The rabbis all ask, "Why did G-d speak so sharply to Moshe Rabbeinu? After all, his request seemed so reasonable. The rabbis explain that G-d spoke this way to Moshe because this is the way Moshe spoke to the 250 members of the Tribe of Levi who joined the rebellion of Korach against Moshe. These members of the Tribe of Levi joined the rebellion of Korach, not because they sought honor and power as Korach had sought honor and power, and not because they were not in the category of *Doson*

and Aviron, who had joined the rebellion because they were professional troublemakers. They had joined the rebellion out of sincere spiritual motives. They wanted to draw closer to G-d. They wanted to have an overwhelming spiritual experience, and they thought that they could only have this type of experience if they could offer the incense and other sacrifices on the altar. They did not understand why from now on these duties would have to be restricted to Aaron and his descendants.

Moshe was especially angered by the joining of the 250 Levites to the rebellion of Korach. They were among the leaders of the Tribe of Levi, and it was the Tribe of Levi which Moshe had always relied upon to help him educate the people. It was only the Tribe of Levi which had maintained Jewish practices in their entirety in Egypt. They were, so to speak, the *frum* ones. They were the only tribe which had continued to keep circumcision in Egypt. During the time of the golden calf, it was the Tribe of Levi which had rallied to Moshe's side and had helped him put down that rebirth of paganism in the midst of the Jewish people. It was also his tribe. Now it was precisely these pious Levites who did not want to follow him and Aaron. He shouted at them, "It's enough for you, sons of Levi." He could not understand why they were so disgruntled. After all, they still had roles to play in the Tabernacle services. It was they who would set up the Tabernacle, and it was they who would sing in the choir, and it was they who would assist the priests in many of their functions. Why should they have acted the way they did? G-d, though, was displeased by Moshe's remark and later paid him back measure for measure. Just as he had yelled at the Levites, "It's enough for you," (in other words, stop all this nonsense about wanting a heightened spiritual experience) so now G-d yelled the same thing at Moshe Rabbeinu. Moshe should have understood that the 250 Levites' motives were pure, even though they had no business doing what they were doing, and even though they eventually were struck down by a fire from heaven when they tried to offer incense on the altar. They wanted to get close to G-d. They were wrong and, eventually, G-d taught them the lesson that you can only truly get close to Him if you

sanctify this world, not if you try to retreat from this world and concentrate only on spiritual things.

This was the same problem with the spies that Moshe had sent into the land of Israel. Ten of them came back with a bad report. They claimed that the people were too strong in the land of Canaan. “*Efes Ki Az Ha’am*—but the people are Az.” Az can stand for strong or it can stand for *Avoda Zorah*, idol worship. The ten spies felt that they would endanger their souls and the souls of the Jewish people if they were to enter the land of Canaan. The land of Canaan was filled with idol worship. It would be better if they would stay in the desert. G-d was providing them with manna. The clouds of glory protected them from the elements and from their enemies. Even their clothes were not decaying. They should stay in the desert and learn *Torah* and elevate their souls, but G-d said that this was wrong. The purpose of the Jewish people is to enter history, to serve as a model for other peoples so that eventually all the peoples of the world will accept the moral teachings of Judaism so that eventually all the peoples of the world will follow the seven commandments of Noah. Yes, it is difficult. Yes, we can and will suffer casualties. Many people will endanger their souls. Many people may succumb to the temptations of their surroundings, but that is what G-d wants. He wants us to sanctify the world despite the dangers. He does not want us to retreat into isolation. He does not want us just to be concerned about elevating our individual souls.

On the other hand, in the *Torah* portion *Vaeschanan* we also learn how Moshe Rabbeinu reminds the people of what happened at Baal P’or when the Jewish people, led especially by the Tribe of Shimon, decided before they entered the land of Israel to emulate the licentious acts of worship of the Canaanites. Right in front of Moshe and the elders, the head of the Tribe of Shimon began to perform these rites. The rabbis explain that the head of the Tribe of Shimon, Zimri Ben Saluh, did not consort with Kuzbi, the daughter of Tzur, one of the heads of the Midianite clans, because he was lustful but because he felt that since they were entering into the land of Canaan, they had to adopt Canaanite ways. The only way they could have an

influence on the Canaanites was to be like them. In Rome do as the Romans. This meant that he was willing totally to rid himself and the Jewish people of all their own spirituality and act exactly as the heathens. In this way he would be able to inch them away from their false ideas and bring them closer to Jewish ideas. This, of course, could only end in disaster. All his program would accomplish would be the total assimilation of the Jewish people into an alien culture without hardly leaving a trace.

Twice a day when we read the third paragraph of the *Shma*, we read about the *tzitzis*, the fringes that are attached to any four-cornered garment we wear. The rabbis say that the *tzitzis* stand for the 613 commandments. Why? Because the letters in the word *tzitzis* add up numerically to 600, and we have on each corner of the garment 8 strings and 5 kots, which add up to 613. On the *tzitzis* we are supposed to have a blue thread. Rabbi Soloveitchik taught that the white threads stand for human reason and for the things of this world. The *Tachailis*, the blue thread, stands for the mystery of life, stands for the spiritual G-dly element in life. As the *Medrash* says, the blue stands for the blue of the sea, which stands for the blue of heaven, which stands for the throne of G-d. The *Rambam* says that one of the 8 strings should be blue. The *Raivad* says that two of the 8 should be blue. Rashi and the *Tosfos* say that 4 of the 8 should be blue. This, of course, symbolizes what part of our efforts should be devoted to maintaining our spiritual life and what part of our efforts should be devoted to applying these truths to the real world. Today we do not have any blue thread on our *tzitzis* because the special dye that came from a special sea urchin has not been available to us, but every tallis has either an azure blue or navy blue stripe to remind us of our spiritual responsibilities. The 250 leaders from the Tribe of Levi could only see the blue. They were not interested in the white. That's why it says that they came dressed before Moshe in a tallis that was made all of blue. Zimri Ben Saluh, the head of the Tribe of Shimon, could only see the white. He was only interested in making it in the world. He could only see the white and not the blue.

In Judaism we are supposed to take the teachings of our faith

and apply them to all our acts throughout the world. Sometimes this means that we have to forego personal, spiritually elevating experiences because we are needed more to demonstrate how Judaism's lessons can sanctify the world. Other times we must withdraw from certain activities because they will totally compromise our Jewish message, even though we must be continually engaged in other ways with the people who practice these abominable rites. When we recite the third paragraph of the *Shma*, which deals with the *tzitzis*, we say, "And you shall see it and you shall remember all the commandments of the Lord and you shall do them." When we look at the *tzitzis* we are reminded about our mission on earth. We must see the blue at least in our mind's eye, and we must remember that we must apply these teachings in everything we do. Our main mission is to sanctify life.

That's why marriage is so important in Judaism because marriage and family bring us into contact with life. They also bring us into contact with civil authorities and the greater community in order to support our family, educate our children, provide for accommodations, etc. Judaism is not an abstraction and it is not a selfish quest for personal spiritual satisfaction. It is a quest for the perfection of the world through deeds of kindness. Let us all hope and pray that all of us will be able to influence our surroundings a little bit so we and everyone in our surroundings will be a little kinder, a little better, and a little bit more compassionate so that the world will eventually become a place where harmony, compassion, love, and justice will reign. Let us always see the blue and the white. Let us not be so completely concerned about the blue that we totally isolate ourselves from the world and sometimes even from other Jews, and let us not be so completely concerned about the white that we totally neglect everything Jewish and assimilate totally into the general society. The world still needs the message of Judaism, and this requires that each of us see constantly, at least in our mind's eye, the blue and the white.