

TZITZ, TZITZIT AND THE BUDDING PLANT

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What is the connection between the *tzitzit* (צִיצִית), the fringes with knots that adorn the four corners of the tallit, and the word *tzitz* (צִיץ), whose primary meaning is “blossom” or “flower?”¹ *Tzitz* (צִיץ) is a palindrome, with the letter *yod* flanked by a letter *tzadi* on either side. The letters seem to form a picture of a blossom that is small and encased.²

¹ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin and Company 1906) p. 847; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *A Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill 2002), pp. 1023-24.

Two meanings of *tzitz* that will not be addressed in this paper occur only once each in the Bible: In Song of Songs 2:9, where it is in verb form and the sense seems to be “peeking out,” and in II Chronicles 20:16, where it seems to be the name of a place.

² Coincidentally, the English word “bud,” when written in lower-case letters, is likewise formed by a single letter (u) framed by look-alike letters (b and d). Here, too, visual form seems to reflect meaning. However, the same cannot be said for the *tzitzit* in Paleo-Hebrew letters; there, the *yod* is larger than the *tzadi*.

It is well-known among gardeners that many plants produce twinned buds that are affixed at the same point on the stem:³



Buds. © Copyright by <http://Istock.com/XIFotos>.⁴

³ The configuration is known as the “opposite-bud” pattern. See Faust, Joan Lee. “Can’t I. D. a Plant? Check Bud Arrangement” in *The New York Times*, in the NY Region/Gardening section of March 28, 1999.

⁴ Rights to reproduce image for this article secured by the author.

The pattern reveals an unmistakable affinity with the configuration of the *tzitzit*, whose smooth strands are interrupted by a series of knot pairs:



White *tallit* edges with visible *tzitziyyot* (plural of *tzitzit*). Photo by author. © Copyright by Dina Shargel.

The only appearance of *tzitzit* in the Torah is in Numbers 15:38-39, where it is commonly translated as “fringe.”⁵ I will be working on the assumption that *tzitz* and *tzitzit* are intimately interrelated, based on the strong visual and philological

⁵ The only other occurrence of *tzitzit* in the rest of the Bible is in Ezekiel 8:3, where it means “a lock of the hair.” One other verse in the Torah, Deuteronomy 22:12, speaks of the commandment to wear fringes. However, there a different noun is used: גְּדִילִים (*gedilim*, “twisted threads”). See Brown *et al.*, p. 152..

resemblances between the fringes at the edges of the ritual garment and buds in the natural world.

Two modern scholars, Baruch Levine and the late Jacob Milgrom, have acknowledged an association between *tzitzit* and *tzitz*, citing evidence from ancient Near Eastern cultures outside of Israel and various biblical texts containing the word *tzitz*. Neither scholar is concerned primarily with *tzitz* as a phenomenon of nature (though they both touch on the idea). Rather, each of them is interested in the relationship of *tzitz* to holiness, especially in its association with the domain of the ancient Israelite priesthood. Explaining the way each of the scholars shows that inclination will be my first order of business.

Next, as I will demonstrate, the connection of *tzitzit* to buds may run deeper when understood in tandem with poetic passages from later books of the Bible, where the bud often symbolizes either human anxieties about death or confidence in a future under God's protective presence. After exploring selections from Isaiah, Job and Psalms, I will conclude by turning the spotlight on Numbers 15:37-41, the passage on *tzitzit*, in its liturgical context as the concluding paragraph of the Shema. My goal is to reveal how an awareness of the bud design of the *tzitzit*, coupled with echoes of some of the Priestly and poetic biblical passages that feature the *tzitz*, can enhance and enrich the experience of the liturgical recitation of the Shema for the Jewish worshipper.

Let us begin with a look at Milgrom and Levine. In the *JPS Commentary on Numbers*, Milgrom explores the origin of *tzitzit* in the cultures of the ancient Near East and its evolution in Israelite practice. He explains that in polytheistic societies, *tzitzit* were worn not by commoners but by kings and priests. He argues that the tassels set the elite apart from others and designated them as holy. Milgrom's contention is that the Bible revolutionized the use of this ritual garb by assigning it not just to members of the elite, but to any individual. Thus, for Milgrom,

the *tsitsit* are the epitome of the democratic thrust within Judaism, which equalizes not by leveling but by elevating. All of Israel is enjoined to become a nation of priests. In antiquity, the *tsitsit* (and the hem) were the insignia of authority, high breeding and nobility... *Tsitsit* are not restricted to Israel's leaders, be they kings, rabbis or scholars. It is the uniform of all Israel.⁶

Milgrom's chief argument is that the Bible transformed the *tzitzit* into a symbol of holiness that is not dependent on a priesthood. *Inter alia*, he offers a possible origin for *tzitzit* from the world of plants:

That *tsitsit* are an extension of the hem is profusely illustrated in ancient Near Eastern art. In one picture, a pendant *tsitsit* is clearly evident, taking the form of a flower head or tassel.⁷

What interests Milgrom mainly is the idea of a tassel.⁸ For him, the resemblance of *tzitzit* to a bud is just one of several possibilities for its origin, and not inherently significant. When discussing the high

⁶ See *JPS Commentary on Numbers* (Philadelphia: 1990), Excursus 38, p. 414. Milgrom also notes the significance of another shared element in the "uniforms" of the high priest and the ordinary Israelite: the פהיל חכלה (*petil tekhelet*, "the cord of blue").

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 411.

⁸ Milgrom offers a number of competing suggestions for the origin of *tzitzit*:

The *tsitsit* resemble a lock of hair... the Targums and the Septuagint render "edges, hems..." Possibly *tsitsit*... should be rendered "ornament, something to look at" – from the verb *hetsits*, "peek, glimpse," or from *tsits*, "ornament, frontlet," mentioned in Exodus 28:36. The Septuagint renders it... "fringe." (*Op. cit.*, p. 127, in his comment on Numbers 15:38-39.)

priest's golden frontlet (Leviticus 8:9), which is also called a *tzitz*, Milgrom does make more of its connection to buds.⁹ Yet his chief interest in the *tzitz* in that context is not its etymology, but its inscription with the words קֹדֶשׁ לַיהוָה (*kodesh ladonai*, "holy to Adonai."). Once upon a time, the high priest, wearing the holy words, afforded the people to access holiness by proxy.¹⁰ Later, as

⁹ Milgrom explains the high Priestly *tzitz* as follows:

This word means "flower, blossom" (Num 17:23, Isa 28:1, 40:6-8, Ps 103:5, Job 14:2). Akkadian *sissatu* "flower ornament" passed into Egyptian... It is possible that the plate was called *sis* because of its floral decoration, which it (once) had (Josephus, *Antiquities* 3, 172-78), and that it continued to be called by this name even after the decoration had disappeared. (*Anchor Bible, Leviticus 1-16* [NY: 1991] pp. 511-12.)

Nevertheless, in Leviticus 8:9, Milgrom renders the word *tzitz* as "plate." Other scholars also associate the high priest's headpiece with a bud or flower. For example, Nahum Sarna writes:

In biblical texts, the *tsits* is used in parallelism with *'atarah*, "a crown," and is either identical with or associated with the *nezer*, "a diadem," or the ornamental headband, which was emblematic of royalty and aristocracy. The diadem is well known from Egyptian paintings. Its outstanding feature is the lotus flower, a symbol of nascent life (*JPS Commentary on Exodus* [Philadelphia: 1991], p. 183.)

¹⁰ Milgrom assigns the Numbers passage to a later date than the sections of the Torah describing the high priestly garb. (*Anchor Bible, Leviticus 1-16*, p. 512). See Israel Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence* (Winona Lake, 2007), for a full discussion of P divided into two strata: an earlier one (PT= Priestly Torah), which was focused only on the priesthood; and a later one (HS= Holiness School), which extended certain key priestly elements into the popular realm. On *tzitzit*, Knohl states:

Milgrom explains, the people were able to become holy independently, with the *tzitzit* upon their garments as a reminder that they were thus empowered.

In contrast to Milgrom, Baruch Levine links both the high priest's *tzitz* and the *tzitzit* of Numbers to a common origin:

Hebrew *šišit* appears to represent the feminine of *šiš*, an ornamental floral design used in fashioning the frontlet worn by the high priest (Exod 28:36, 39:30, Lev 8:9). The basic sense is botanical, for *šiš* is synonymous with *perah* 'blossom' (Num 17:23; and cf. Isa 28:1, 40:5-8, Pss 72:16, 103:15).¹¹

Levine associates both items of ritual garb with the bud, but does not explicate the significance of the relationship. Of all the passages he cites in parentheses, he comments only on Numbers 17:23, another Priestly passage from the Torah that features the word *tzitz*. It describes an apparent miracle involving Aaron's staff in the aftermath of Korah's rebellion:

ויוצא פרח ויצץ ציץ ויגמל שקדים

It gave forth sprouts/produced blossoms
(*vayyatzetz tzitz*)/bore almonds.¹²

The piece of cut wood that blossoms and bears fruit symbolizes the re-establishment of the power and legitimacy of the Aaronide priesthood. While this does not advance our argument about *tzitz* and *tzitzit*, Levine's comment on the literary style of the verse bears scrutiny. He characterizes it:

HS expresses the extension of the domain of holiness beyond the narrow confines of the Temple and the priesthood through the fringes law...Just as in the headpiece, the gold frontlet (ציץ)...designates the anointed priest as 'holy to God' (קדש לה')... so too the fringes (ציצית)... testify to Israel's mission to be consecrated unto their God. (*Ibid.*, p. 186.)

¹¹ Baruch A. Levine, *The Anchor Bible, Numbers 1-20* (NY:1993), p. 400.

¹² *Op. cit.*, p. 80. The translation is Levine's.

...[a] proverbial cliché, something unusual in priestly narrative... Partial elements of this rare cliché are expressed in Isa 18:5, 40:5-8, Ps 103:15, and Job 14:9. The textual distribution of the components of the cliché reveals the links existing between priestly writings and the proverbial repertoire of biblical prophecy and wisdom.¹³

Levine's suggestion that other Priestly sources might be linked to the biblical genres of prophecy and wisdom is tantalizing. It raises anew the possibility that the passage on *tzitzit*, itself a Priestly text, could be related somehow to other poetic biblical texts. Once again, it compels us to ask what buds have to teach us about *tzitzit*.

To explore that question, let us delve into selections of poetry from Isaiah (Prophets) and Psalms and Job (wisdom literature) that use *tzitz* imagery. There, significantly, blossoms serve as metaphors to express anxiety about human mortality. Yet this does not prevent some of the poets from attaining a stance of assurance or even confidence.

Isaiah 40 associates *tzitz* with the fleeting duration of human life:

כל בשר חציר וכל חסדו כצייץ השדה יבש חציר נבל צייץ כי רוח ה'
נשבה בו אכן חציר העם

All flesh is grass; all its goodness like flowers (*tzitz*) of the field. Grass withers, flowers (*tzitz*) fade when the breath of Adonai blows on them. Indeed, the human being is but grass.¹⁴

Psalms 103 expresses the same idea with a slight variation:

¹³ *Ibid.*.

¹⁴ Isaiah 40:6-7.

אנוש כחציר ימיו כצייץ השדה כן יציץ כי רוח עברה בו ואיננו ולא
יכירנו עוד מקומו

The human being's days are like those of grass, blooming (*yatzitz*) like a flower (*tzitz*) of the field. A wind passes by and it is no more; its own place no longer knows it.¹⁵

Both passages posit that like plants, human beings are fragile and temporal. Both texts compare human life to grass or buds that bloom quickly and quickly wither. Once we die, it is as if we never had existed at all. Yet each passage takes a measure of comfort in its own way. For Deutero-Isaiah:

יבש חציר נבל צייץ ודבר א-להינו יקום לעולם
Grass withers, flowers (*tzitz*) fade, but the word of our God is always fulfilled.¹⁶

The prophet highlights the contrast between the effect of time on human beings and on the Divine. Human beings are finite, while God is not. Deutero-Isaiah suggests a pact between us and God that outlasts our short lives, that is eternal. The Psalmist goes further, suggesting that though the righteous cannot escape dying, they are able to extend God's beneficence through their progeny. For the psalmist, "for all eternity" can be understood as the legacy to future generations.

In Job, however, when the protagonist contemplates human life in relation to plants, there is no consolation in the temporality of the *tzitz*:

אדם... כצייץ יצא וימל ויברח כצל ולא יעמוד
The human being... blossoms like a flower (*tzitz*) and withers, vanishes like a shadow and does not endure.¹⁷

¹⁵ Psalm 103:15-16.

¹⁶ Isaiah 40:8.

¹⁷ Job 14:1-2.

Indeed, Job goes on to suggest that plants are more fortunate than people:

כי יש לעץ תקוה אם יכרת ועוד יחליף וינקתו לא תחדל. אם יזקין
בארץ שרשו ובעפר ימות גזעו מריח מים יפרח ועשה קציר כמו נטע
וגבר ימות ויחלש ויגוע אדם ואיו

There is a future for a tree; if it is cut down, it will renew itself. Its shoots will not cease. If its roots are old in the earth and its stump dies in the ground, at the scent of water it will bud and produce branches like a sapling. But mortals languish and die; the human being expires; where is he?¹⁸

Trees that appear to be dead are sometimes dormant and can be revived. For human beings, by contrast, death is permanent and irreversible. In contrast to Isaiah 40 and Psalm 103, Job develops the *tzitz* image into an unrelentingly harsh depiction of both the quality and quantity of life. For Job, there is no consoling reference to God's eternality or Divine promises that redound to future generations. Here the use of *tzitz* exposes a bitter irony, that human beings are like flowers that are nipped in the bud, as it were, while trees can endure indefinitely.¹⁹

Psalm 90 is another poem that speaks of human frailty and finitude in terms of budding and withering:

בבקר יצייץ וחלף לערב ימולל ויבש
At daybreak (grass) buds (*yatzitz*) anew; by dusk, it
wITHERS and dries up.(Ps 90:5b-6.)

In contrast to Job, who protests the inability of human beings to rise above withering and death, the author of Psalm 90 expresses anxiety over the brevity of human existence and human failings, which often incur God's anger. The psalmist wonders whether it is possible, given the circumstances, to find meaning and joy in living. The tone

¹⁸ Job 14:7-10.

¹⁹ Some people observe the custom of burying a loved one in his or her beloved tallit, after first invalidating it for ritual use by cutting off part of one of the fringes. For sources, see Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Ritual Practice* (New York: 1979), p. 277.

of the answer, while not resoundingly happy, is optimistic. The poet continues by appealing to God for help in using the time allotted, as limited as that might be, wisely. People cannot live forever, but they are capable of cultivating an appreciation for life's preciousness. The psalm ends on a hopeful and forward-looking note, asking God for the opportunity to start afresh each morning.^{20,21}

Now let us turn our attention to Psalm 92:

בפרח רשעים כמו עשב וייציצו כל פעלי און להשמדם עדי עד

Though the wicked sprout like grass, though all evildoers blossom (*vayyatiztu*), it is only that they may be destroyed forever.²²

Once again, we encounter plants springing up and then dying just as quickly. Yet this time, only the wicked are compared to doomed blossoms. To represent that those faithful to God deserve Divine protection, the poet offers a new image: mature plants, strong and healthy and secure. Note that the verb to describe their blossoming is

²⁰ According to Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, in the Bible, morning is "the time that God answers prayers." For sources, see Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible, 2nd edition* (New York: 2014), p. 1371. Morning is also the time the rabbis designated for donning the *tzitzit* (as per, e.g., *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 18:3).

²¹ Psalm 90 is read in its entirety on Shabbat and the festivals during *pesukei d'zimra* (the preliminary part of the morning service). Selections from it are also included in *yizkor* (memorial) liturgy for Yom Kippur, when life-death connections are felt most keenly, and again at the end of each of our joyous festivals (Sukkot, Pesah and Shavuot). Just as Shabbat marks time from week to week, the festivals, originally tied to agricultural events, mark each season. Remembering the dead helps their survivors to maintain connections with them, even as they go on with communal, life-affirming celebrations. At the same time, *yizkor* inspires dread and awe in the face of our own finality. It is striking that both *yizkor* and the Jewish funeral service end with the *El Malei Rahamim* prayer; in asking God to give the deceased eternal rest, it invokes גן עדן (the Garden of Eden), an image associated with living, fertile plants.

²² Psalm 92:8.

yifrah/yafrihu, verb forms that refer to flowering, the next stage in plant development beyond budding:

צדיק כתמר יפרח כארז בלבנון ישגה. שתולים בבית ה' בחצרות א-
להינו יפריחו

The righteous bloom (*yifrah*) like a date-palm. They thrive like a cedar in Lebanon, planted in the house of Adonai; they flourish (*yafrihu*) in the courts of our God.²³

God's righteous are like glorious trees. Instead of being snuffed out prematurely, they have passed the budding stage into full blossom; they stand strong and tall. For Job, people are compared unfavorably to plants because only the latter can defy death. The author of Psalm 92 sees things differently; trees grown to maturity prompt a sense of confidence, stability and serenity for those whose faith is strong. Moreover:

עוד ינובון בשיבה דשנים ורעננים יהיו
In old age they still produce fruit; they are full of sap
and freshness.²⁴

The Psalm concludes with the image of a plant that, like Aaron's staff, had progressed from budding to flowering to fruiting. After many years, it continues to produce. The depiction is heartening, precisely because the same may be possible for human beings. To look ahead to one's later years as a time of prospective new growth and development depends on nurturing the bud, sustaining faith and trust in God.

Now at last we turn to Numbers 15:37-41, the Torah's passage on *tzitzit*, and consider its honored place in Jewish liturgy, at the end of

²³ *Ibid.*, vv. 13-14.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, v. 15.

the Shema. It offers instruction to the *tzitzit*-wearer on how to make use of the ritual object:

וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְצִיצִית וּרְאִיתֶם אֹתוֹ וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹת ה' וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם
That shall be your fringe (*tzitzit*); look at it and recall
all the mitzvot of Adonai and carry them out.²⁵

The direction to gaze at the *tzitzit* may have been intended to call attention to its bud-like design. The rabbis, who mandated the liturgical recitation of the passage from Numbers, would have assumed that educated members of their communities would also be familiar with the entire contents of the Bible. The worshipper, looking at the shape of the fragile bud and uttering the word *tzitzit* repeatedly (three times in five verses), would have heard echoes of the other passages containing the word *tzitz*.

Thinking of the more depressing verses in Isaiah, Psalms and Job, a worshipper might be tempted to succumb to despair. Some may feel comforted by contemplating God's eternity, and others by Divine promises to future generations. Alternatively, some might feel encouraged and heartened to think of the blossom that, like the plant in Psalm 92, continues to thrive and grow. We are like buds in many ways, and—as Job notes—sometimes they even have advantages over us. Yet unlike buds, we have agency and the ability to cultivate a relationship with God.

The Shema's passage on *tzitzit* is a homily of sorts, offering guidance on channeling our spiritual energies, shifting us away from preoccupation with the self and morbid thoughts to right action, toward which we can strive in this lifetime.

As Milgrom and Levine have pointed out, the *tzitzit* calls to mind other priestly texts in the Torah. Perhaps the ancient liturgical setting of Numbers 15:37-41 prompted worshippers to make the association that Milgrom did with the holy *tzitz* of the high priest, upon whom the people once depended in order to reach God. In that context, the passage on *tzitzit* would have been—and remains—empowering, granting all worshippers direct and immediate access to God and to holiness.

Below is the full text of the *tzitzit* passage, Numbers 15:37-41:

²⁵ Numbers 15:39.

Adonai said to Moses as follows: Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages; let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner. That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of Adonai and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge. Thus, you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God. I Adonai am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I, Adonai your God.²⁶

Here's my own reading of the passage, overlaid with the multiple biblical associations of the *tzitz*:

To all members of the people Israel: Wear *tzitzit* at the edges of your garments, and notice the bud design. Look at the *tzitzit* and remember your obligation to live a holy life, with whatever time you have on earth. Be aware that time is necessarily limited, but do not let that awareness paralyze you from taking action. Fulfill your responsibilities in a manner that reflects both holiness and an appreciation of your freedom. It is your sacred mission and privilege to do so.

Rabbi Dina R. Shargel received her B. A. in music from Brandeis University in 1982 and settled contentedly into a life as a suburban music teacher. In response to the dread of her fortieth birthday looming on the

²⁶ Translation adapted from Harry Orlinsky (ed.), *New Jewish Publication Society of America Tanakh* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America 1985).

horizon, she immersed herself in the study of Torah and began taking on a series of spiritual challenges, one of the first of which was to wear a tallit each morning. By 2006, she had earned an M. A. in Bible and rabbinic ordination from the Jewish Theological Seminary, and has been serving ever since as Ritual Director at Temple Israel Center in White Plains, NY.

