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Parshas Tetzaveh

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TORN TZITZIS STRINGS

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It is not an uncommon occurrence for *tzitzis* strings to tear, leaving one wondering whether the *tzitzis* are still kosher. As we will see, the answer to this question depends on a number of factors.

By way of introduction, several pieces of information are necessary for this discussion: 1) Each of the four *tzitzis* attached to a garment are made of four strings that are doubled over and inserted into the corner of the garment for a total of eight strands.¹ 2) The *tzitzis* comprise of two main parts, the braided upper portion known as the *gedil*, and the portion of loose-hanging string known as the *anaf*. The required total length of the *gedil* and *anaf* of each of the eight strings is 12 fingerbreadths, which is equal to three *tefachim* (handbreadths) and half an *amah*. In practical terms, there is some question as to what this length is, with opinions varying from 9.5 inches to 11.4 inches. Preferably, one-third of the final length should be the *gedil*, while two-thirds should be the *anaf*. (See Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 11:14 and Rema ibid.) 3) Once the *tzitzis* are complete, there are two groups of four strings hanging down on opposite sides of the knot. When making the *tzitzis*, one can be careful that the two ends of each of the four strings remain on opposite sides throughout. This enables one to be assured that he will never encounter the two ends of one of the original four strings on one side, which, as we will see, can have significant ramifications.

The Gemara (Menachos 38b) states that if the *techeiles* strings of the *tzitzis* were reduced to stubs but the white strings remain, or if the white strings were severed and are now stubs, but the *techeiles* is still whole, the *tzitzis* are kosher. The Gemara asks what size the stubs must be, and replies that they must be *kidei aniva*, long enough to tie a slipknot. The Gemara wonders whether this means that each string must be long enough to be tied into a slipknot

individually or if all the strings together must be fit to be tied; the Gemara leaves the question unresolved.

There are varying interpretations of this passage of Gemara among the Rishonim (Medieval authorities), and practical application of this Gemara is even more complex. We will focus on the opinions relevant to practical halacha.

Tosafos (ibid. s.v. *ela*) and the Rosh (Hilchos Tzitzis siman 7) cite two approaches to understanding the practical application of this passage.

The first approach is that so long as each of the four original strings has *kidei aniva*, the *tzitzis* are kosher. Thus, in theory, it is possible for all eight strings to tear, with only four *kidei aniva*-lengths remaining. So long as one knows that these four *kidei aniva*-lengths are on each of the four original strings, the *tzitzis* will be kosher. If, when making the *tzitzis*, one was careful to keep the opposite ends of the strings on opposite sides (as described at the beginning of this article), then even if all four strings on one side of the knot were completely torn, the *tzitzis* are kosher as long as the four strings on the other side have *kidei anivah*. If one was not careful, then if any two strings are reduced to less than *kidei anivah*, the *tzitzis* are *pasul*, since we are concerned that these two strings are the two halves of one of the original strings. Under all circumstances, if one string on one side and one string on the other side tore to less than *kedei anivah*, the *tzitzis* are *pasul* for the same reason.

The second approach is that of Rabbeinu Tam. He says that only two of the original four strings may be shortened to *kedei anivah*; there must be at least two of the original four strands intact with the proper total length of twelve fingerbreadths on either side of the original string. If three of the original four strands are shortened to less than the required length of half an *amah* on either side of the original string, the *tzitzis* are *pasul* (invalid).

¹ During the course of this discussion, these four strings will be referred to as “the original four strings.”

According to Rabbeinu Tam, if one was careful to keep the opposite ends of each string on opposite sides of the knot, up to two strings on one side of the knot may be severed to less than *kedei anivah* and the *tzitzis* are still kosher. If the two less-than-*kedei-anivah* strings are on opposite sides, we are concerned they are two ends of the same string and there is not a *kedei anivah* remaining; the *tzitzis* are therefore *pasul*. If one was not careful to keep the opposite ends apart, then even two strings measuring less than *kedei anivah* on one side would invalidate the *tzitzis*, as they may be from the same original string. Under all circumstances, if three strands were shortened to less than half an *amah*, the *tzitzis* are *pasul*. (Technically, if one were to know that two of the three torn strings are from the same string [or, for that matter, if four strands broke and are from two strings], it would be kosher. However, it is usually not possible to know if two of the ends are from one string or two strings.)

The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 12:1) cites both opinions, rules in accordance with the first, more lenient approach, but says that where possible, one should follow the more stringent approach of Rabbeinu Tam. The Rema, however, rules in accordance with Rabbeinu Tam. Thus, Sefardim, who generally follow the Shulchan Aruch, can rely on the lenient first approach if necessary², while Ashkenazim, who generally follow the Rema, cannot.

There is a second dispute regarding from where the *kidei anivah* is measured. Rashi, as understood by Tosafos (ibid. s.v. *kidei*), says that the *anaf* must have *kidei anivah*, while Tosafos say that even if the entire *anaf* is severed but there is *kidei anivah* left on the *gedil*, it is kosher. This dispute would greatly affect most cases of torn *tzitzis*, as *tzitzis* tend to tear far more often along the *anaf*, not the *gedil*. According to Tosafos' opinion, so long as the *gedil* is intact with *kedei anivah*, this suffices, while according to Rashi, a *kdei anivah* of *anaf* – the loose, hanging string – is required.

In terms of practical application, the Shulchan Aruch (ibid.:3) says that the custom is to follow Rashi's opinion, but that if that is not possible, one may rely on Tosafos'

leniency. The Mishna Berurah says that one may not make a blessing on such *tzitzis*, nor may one walk in a public domain on Shabbos wearing them (since wearing non-kosher *tzitzis* is tantamount to carrying). It is thus clear that wearing such *tzitzis* is only a last resort.

How long is *kedei anivah*? This, too, is the subject of much discussion. As noted earlier, the Gemara itself is undecided on whether it must be long enough to make a slipknot around the one severed strand or around all the strings. There is discussion among the Rishonim as to what the practical halacha is; the Shulchan Aruch (ibid.:1) rules stringently and requires a slipknot around all the strings. There is yet another dispute as to whether "all the strings" means around all eight strings or only around the severed strings. The Shulchan Aruch (ibid.) rules in accordance with the Smag that a slipknot around the severed strings suffices. However, the Magen Avraham (ibid.:2) cites a Mordechai that the string must be long enough to tie a slipknot around each severed string individually! The Bi'ur Halacha (ibid. s.v. *im nifsiku*) rejects this view.

What if the *tzitzis* strings are unusually thick, thus making a slipknot difficult unless the string is quite long? The Shulchan Aruch (ibid.:2) says that one may imagine that the strings are thinner; the Rema (ibid.) qualifies this as average-thickness strings.

It is important to note that if any of the *tzitzis* tore at the point where they loop through the garment, they are *pasul*, even though all the strings are still hanging from the garment. Similarly, if more than one string tore in the *gedil*, even if all the strings are still in place, the *tzitzis* may be rendered *pasul*.

It is also important to add that there is a far greater tendency for *tzitzis* of children to tear than those of adults. For children under the age of 13, whose obligation to wear *tzitzis* is based on the obligation of *chinuch* (training), there may be greater room for leniency than the halachos discussed above. Due to the complexity of these halachos, one should seek competent Rabbinic guidance in dealing with torn *tzitzis*.

² The Mishna Berurah (12:13) defines this as when one cannot locate other *tzitzis* easily or if one will miss davening with a *minyan* while obtaining the preferable *tzitzis*.