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## Stories with a Twist [58]

"...but there is one commandment..."  
Insights into Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 44a

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### Background to Our Story

#### Beds in the Roman Empire



#### Numbers 15:37-41

*37. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 38. Speak to the people of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a thread of blue; 39. And it shall be to you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them; and that you seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, which incline you to go astray; 40. That you may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God. 41. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God; I am the Lord your God.*

#### Ritual Fringes - Tzitzit



<http://www.wikipedia.org/>

Tzitzit or tzitzis are "fringes" or "tassels" worn by observant Jews on the corners of four-cornered garments, including the tallit (prayer shawl) and tallit katan.



Tzitzyot are attached today only to Jewish religious garments, such as a tallit gadol ("large prayer shawl"). This is because today's clothes do not have four corners, and thus the fringes are not necessary. Traditional Jewish men wear a tallit katan ("small prayer shawl") constantly in order to fulfill this commandment at their own volition, and some consider it a transgression to miss a commandment that one has the ability to fulfill. The tallit katan is also commonly referred to as "tzitzit," though this name technically refers to each of the fringes only.

Various reasons are given for the commandment. The Torah itself states: "So that you will remember to do the commandments". In addition, it serves as a reminder of the Exodus from Egypt (Numbers 15:40). The Talmud equates its observance with that of all the mitzvot. Rambam (Comm. Pirkei Avot 2:1) includes it as a major mitzvah along with brit milah ("circumcision") and the korban pesah ("Paschal lamb").

### **Aureus (pl. aurei — "golden")**



<http://www.wikipedia.org/>

The aureus (pl. aurei — "golden") was a gold coin of ancient Rome valued at 25 silver denarii.



The aureus was regularly issued from the 1st century BCE to the beginning of the 4th century ACE, when it was replaced by the solidus. The aureus is about the same size as the denarius, but is heavier due to the higher density of gold.

### **Denarius (pl. denarii)**



The Roman currency system included the denarius (plural: *denarii*) after 211 BC, a small silver coin, and it was the most common coin produced for circulation.

### **Conversion to Judaism**



<http://www.wikipedia.org/>

Conversion to Judaism (Hebrew: giyur) is a formal act undertaken by a non-Jewish person who wishes to be recognized as a full member of the Jewish community. A Jewish conversion is both a religious act and an expression of association with the Jewish people.

The Bible does not describe a formal process for conversion. However, the Amoraim who produced the Talmud set out three requirements for a conversion to Judaism (Keritot 8b), which must be witnessed and affirmed by a beth din:

- Circumcision (Brit milah or hatafat dam brit) for men
- Immersion (tevilah) in a ritual bath (mikveh) for both men and women
- Offering a certain sacrifice (korban) in the Temple (the Beit Hamikdash) - this requirement is deferred while the Temple does not exist until such time as it may be rebuilt.

The consensus of halakhic authorities also requires a convert to understand and accept the duties of the halakha, classical Jewish religious law. This is not stated explicitly in the Talmud, but was inferred by subsequent commentators.

After confirming that all these requirements have been met, the beth din issues a "Certificate of Conversion" (Shtar Giur), certifying that the person is now a Jew.

### Rabbi Hiyya

## JewishEncyclopedia.com

Palestinian amora of priestly descent; flourished at the end of the third century, he is frequently mentioned merely as R. Hiyya. Though a native of Babylon, where, perhaps, for a very short time he came under the influence of Mar Samuel, he migrated to Palestine at a very early age. There he studied under Hanina and Joshua b. Levi, and came into very close contact with Simeon b. Lakish. He is, moreover, known as a disciple of Johanan, after whose death he and his friends Ammi and Assi were the recognized authorities on the Halakah in Palestine.

Hiyya was distinguished for the care with which he noted the sayings of his masters and in questions of doubt as to the phraseology of a tradition the version of Hiyya was preferred. Though he was the author of many haggadot, his interest was centered in Halakah, in the knowledge of which he probably excelled all his Palestinian contemporaries.

Hiyya was very poor, and therefore was compelled to go lecturing from town to town in search of a livelihood; he even temporarily left Palestine. Through stress of poverty he accepted a commission from Judah II. to collect money to defray the expenses of the decaying patriarchate. The esteem in which Hiyya was held is manifested in the credentials obtained for him by Eleazar b. Pedath: "Behold, we have sent you a great man, our envoy. Until his return he possesses all the powers that we do." According to another version the introduction ran: "Behold, we have sent you a great man. His greatness consists in this, that he is not ashamed to say 'I know not' "

By: Solomon Schechter & Nathan Stern

Bibliography: Weiss, *Dor*, iii. 94-95; Grätz, *Gesch.* 3d ed., iv. 1893; Bacher, *Ag. Pal. Amor.* ii. 174-201.S

### The Text: Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 44a

מַעֲשֵׂה בְּאָדָם אֶחָד שֶׁהָיָה זֶהִיר בְּמַצּוֹת צִיצִית, שָׁמַע שְׂיֵשׁ זֹנֶה בְּכַרְכֵי הַיָּם שְׁנוּטָלֶת אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת זְהוּבִים בְּשִׁכְרָה, שִׁיגֵר לָהּ אַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת זְהוּבִים וְקָבַע לָהּ זְמַן. כְּשֶׁהִגִּיעַ זְמָנוֹ, בָּא וַיֵּשֶׁב עַל הַפֶּתַח .

נכנסה שפחתה ואמרה לה: אותו אדם ששיגר ליד ארבע מאות זהובים בא וישב על הפתח, אמרה היא: יפנס, נכנס. הציעה לו שבע מטות, שש של כסף ואחת של זהב, ובין כל אחת ואחת סולם של כסף, ועליונה של זהב.

עלתה וישבה על גבי עליונה כשהיא ערומה, ואף הוא עלה לישב ערום כנגדה, באו ארבע ציציותיו וטפחו לו על פניו, נשמט וישב לו על גבי קרקע, ואף היא נשמטה וישבה על גבי קרקע. אמרה לו: גפה של רומי, שאיני מניחתה עד שתאמר לי מה מום ראית בי.

אמר לה: העבודה, שלא ראיתי אשה רפה כמותך, אלא מצוה אחת ציונו ה' אלהינו וציצית שמה, וכתוב בה "אני ה' אלהיכם" שתי פעמים – אני הוא שעתיד ליפרע, ואני הוא שעתיד לשלם שכר, עכשיו נדמו עלי כארבעה עדים.

אמרה לו: איני מניחה עד שתאמר לי מה שמך, ומה עירך, ומה שם רבך, ומה שם מדרשך שאתה למד בו תורה. כתב ונתן בידה.

עמדה וחילקה כל נכסיה, שליש למלכות ושליש לעניים ושליש נטלה בידה, חוץ מאותן מצעות, ובאת לבית מדרשו של רבי חניא. אמרה לו: רבי, צוה עלי ונעשוני גיורת. אמר לה: בתי, שמא עיניך נתת באחד מן התלמידים? הוציאה כתב מידה ונתנה לו, אמר לה: לכי זכי במקחך.

אותן מצעות שהציעה לו באיסור הציעה לו בהיתר. זה מתן שכרו בעולם הזה, ולעולם הבא – איני יודע כמה.

There was an incident involving a certain man who was diligent about the commandment of ritual fringes.

This man heard that there was a prostitute in one of the cities overseas who took four hundred gold coins as her payment. He sent her four hundred gold coins and fixed a time to meet with her. When his time came, he came and sat at the entrance to her house.

The maidservant of that prostitute entered and said to her: That man who sent you four hundred gold coins came and sat at the entrance. She said: Let him enter. He entered. She arranged seven beds for him, six of silver and one of gold. Between each and every one of them there was a ladder made of silver, and the top bed was the one that was made of gold. She went up and sat naked on the top bed, and he too went up in order to sit naked facing her.

In the meantime, his four ritual fringes came and slapped him on his face. He dropped down and sat himself on the ground, and she also dropped down and sat on the ground. She said to him: I take an oath by the gappa (*master*) of Rome that I will not allow you to go until you tell me what defect you saw in me.

He said to her: I take an oath by the Temple service that I never saw a woman as beautiful as you. But there is one commandment that the

Lord, our God, commanded us, and its name is ritual fringes, and in the passage where it is commanded, it is written twice: "I am the Lord your God" (Numbers 15:41). The doubling of this phrase indicates: I am the one who will punish those who transgress My mitzvot, and I am the one who will reward those who fulfill them. Now, said the man, the four sets of ritual fringes appeared to me as if they were four witnesses who will testify against me.

She said to him: I will not allow you to go until you tell me: What is your name, and what is the name of your city, and what is the name of your teacher, and what is the name of the study hall in which you studied Torah? He wrote the information and placed it in her hand.

She arose and divided all of her property, giving one-third to the government, one-third to the poor, and she took one-third with her in her possession, in addition to those beds of gold and silver.

She came to the study hall of Rabbi Hiyya and said to him: My teacher, instruct your students concerning me and have them make me a convert. Rabbi Hiyya said to her: My daughter, perhaps you set your sights on one of the students and that is why you want to convert? She took the note the student had given her from her hand and gave it to Rabbi Hiyya. He [Rabbi Hiyya] said to her: Go take possession of your purchase.

Those beds that she had arranged for him in a prohibited fashion, she now arranged for him in a permitted fashion.

This is the reward given to him in this world, and with regard to the World-to-Come, I do not know how much reward he will be given.



**Explaining the Story** - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

### **Comprehension and Analysis Questions**

**Bonus ?** If the hero of our story was so scrupulous about the commandment of ritual fringes, why did he go to a prostitute?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** How do we know that the prostitute was a rich woman?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Why do you think the harlot prepared seven beds, six of silver and one of gold, for her customer and sat upon the top one naked to wait for him?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** How do we know the prostitute was really beautiful?

**Bonus ?** Why did the harlot come down to talk to the man after he slipped off the bed?

**Bonus ?** What is the meaning of the expressions "By the master of Rome" and "By the divine service in the Temple"?

**Bonus ?** Why couldn't the hero of our story consummate the sexual relationship with the prostitute? What does this story teach us about the commandment of ritual fringes (tzitzit)?

**?** Why did the harlot ask for the man's name, the name of his town, the name of his teacher, and the name of the school in which he studied the Torah?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**Bonus ?** Why did the prostitute divide her estate the way she did?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** Why did the prostitute keep her beds of gold and silver?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**?** What do we learn about the conversion process in Talmudic times from the exchange between Rabbi Hiyya and the prostitute?

**?** According to our story, what is our hero's reward in "this" world?

### More Analysis Questions

**?** Rabbi Hiyya said to the harlot: "Go take possession of your purchase!" What is she acquiring? What is the price she is paying?

Answer 1 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 2 \_\_\_\_\_

Answer 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**Bonus ?** What is the sweet paradox involved in the words of Rabbi Hiyya to the harlot "Go take possession of your purchase!"?

### "The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from the Text

**!** "What is your name, and what is the name of your city, and what is the name of your teacher, and what is the name of the study hall in which you studied Torah?" – There is no greater way to shape other people's lives than living by our convictions

**!** Hanging in there, by a string... Thinking on what keeps us anchored and connected!



The Sages of the Talmud bring this interesting story to showcase the *grounding* power of a single commandment, in this case the commandment of ritual fringes (tzitzit), inviting all of us to think of what keeps us and our children connected to both our core convictions and our Jewish identity.

At the same time, our story depicts how an average flawed person, living by his convictions, holds the power to touch the lives of other people (in our story, the prostitute) and transform them.