

“Like a Throne of Glory”

The Apotropaic Potential of *šîšîṭ* in the Hebrew Bible and Early Rabbinic

Literature

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Abstract: Although at first glance *šîšîṭ* meet the definitional criteria of an amulet, there are just three passages in the early rabbinic literature that only indirectly suggest such an interpretation. Yet, as it turns out, the tassels feature strong connections with the priestly clothes, and given the protective role played by the latter inside the Tabernacle, *šîšîṭ* can be interpreted as a lay functional equivalent of the sacerdotal garment. The present paper has three main purposes: first, to scrutinize the passages from B. Men. (41a, 43b and 44a) that are often taken as witnessing to the apotropaic function of fringes; second, to contextualize tassels in the network of the priestly objects: *teḳēleṭ*, *ša‘aṭnēz* and *šîš*; third, to advance a hypothesis in regards to the implicit apotropaic potential of *šîšîṭ*.

Key-words: fringes, tassels, *šîšîṭ*, apotropaism, *teḳēleṭ*, *ša‘aṭnēz*, *šîš*

***Šîšîṭ* among Other Customs**

A lengthy section in B. Men. 29a-44b deals with three specific mitsvot: mezuzah, tefillin, and *šîšîṭ*. Most of the text revolves around the technical and halakhic details of these commandments, such as the types of materials used in their production or the situations in which one is exempt from performing the obligations. An account on folio 43b however goes beyond the pragmatic minutiae and supplies a picturesque justification:

Our Rabbis taught: Beloved are Israel, for the Holy One, blessed be he, surrounded them with precepts: tefillin on their heads, tefillin on their arms, zizith on their garments, and mezuzoth on their door-posts; concerning these David said, Seven times a day do I praise Thee, because of Thy righteous ordinances. And as David entered the bath and saw himself standing naked, he exclaimed, “Woe is me that I stand naked without any precepts about me!” But when he reminded himself of the circumcision in his flesh his mind was set at ease. (...) R. Eliezer b. Jacob said, Whosoever has the tefillin on his head, the tefillin on his arm, the zizith on his garment, and the mezuzah on his doorpost is in absolute security against sinning, for it is written, And a threefold cord is not quickly broken; and it is also written, The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them.¹

Although the phrasing is careful, it could be inferred that all these four customs are invested with the apotropaic function. In fact, such way of interpreting circumcision, tefillin, and mezuzah is neither unjustified nor new, and the arguments for their protective role can be gathered from at least three spheres. First, comparative ethnology furnishes numerous examples of similar objects and practices from other cultures where they play a clearly protective and luck-bringing function. From this perspective, an item containing a portion of a holy text worn on the body or placed on the border of a dwelling meets the criteria of an amulet,² while the “sacred wound” on genitalia

1 Unless otherwise stated, the translations of the rabbinic literature are from *The Soncino Midrash Rabbah* and *The Soncino Talmud* in *Judaic Classics Library*, ed. D. Kantrowitz, (Chicago, 2001, CD-ROM).

2 The amulet is hereby understood as an object believed to bring luck and protect against malevolent forces, both personal and impersonal. See for instance: Ludwig Blau, “Amulet” in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. I. Singer et al. (New York, 1902), <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/1445-amulet>, accessed December 25th 2016. John L. Crow, “Miracle or Magic? The Problematic Status of Christian Amulets,” in *Discussion to Experience: Religious Studies at the University of Amsterdam*, eds. J. Braak D. Malone (Amsterdam, 2009), 99. Theodore H. Gaster, “Amulets and Talismans” in *Encyclopedia of*

can be explained in terms of protective scarification repelling the evil spirits.³ Second, the writings of the later Jewish sages who criticize the amuletic usage of these customs suggest that this was the actual case at least among some parts of the society. Such a critique together with the rational explanation of the mitzvot in general started already in antiquity, and one of the earliest instances of this approach is the pseudepigraphic *Let. Aris.* 155-161 and Philo's *Spec. Laws* 4, 26:137-142. In turn, one of the most popular examples of such appraisal comes from *Mishneh Torah* (Sefer Ahavah, Tefillin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah 5:4), which denounces those who impair "the unity of the Name" by attributing independent power to inanimate artifacts.⁴

Third, and most important, the rabbinic sources themselves describe all these customs in apotropaic terms. In *Exod. Rabbah* 5:8, circumcision repels the angel of destruction who wishes to kill Moses, while in *Gen. Rabbah* 21:9 and 48:8 it protects from the "flaming sword of Gehenna" and against being devoured by Sheol. The power of *brît mîlâh* seems to stem from its sacrificial nature: in *Gen. Rabbah* 48:5 it is presented as the most important of the blood offerings, while according to *Num. Rabbah* 14:12, the blood of circumcision secures the Hebrews against the tenth plague of Egypt. Even more numerous and elaborate are the examples of the apotropaic function of the mezuzah. According to *B. Men.* 33b and *B. A.Z.* 11a it protects

Religion, ed. L. Jones, vol. 1 (Detroit, 2005), 297-298. Erica Reiner, "Plague Amulets and House Blessings," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 19.2 (1960): 148-150. David Frankfurter, "The Interpenetration of Ritual Spaces in Late Antique Religions: An Overview," *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 28.10 (2008): 200-201.

³ Moshe Gaster, "Two Thousand Years of a Charm against the Child-Stealing Witch," *Folklore. Transactions of the Folk-lore Society*, 12.2 (1900): 129-162. See also: Lauren Cullivan, "The Meaning behind the Marks: Scarification and the People of Wa," *African Diaspora ISPs*, 1998, paper 4, http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/african_diaspora_isp/4, accessed August 30th 2016. Sandra Jacobs, "The Body Inscribed: A Priestly Initiative?" in *The Body in Biblical, Christian and Jewish Texts*, ed. J.E. Taylor (New York, 2014), 1-16.

⁴ These sources are scrutinized in *inter alia*: Ben Zion Luria, "The Development of the Mezuzah," in *Dor le-Dor*, eds. H. Abramowitz et al., 5.1 (1976): 6 and Yehudah Cohn, *Tangled up in Text: Tefillin and the Ancient Word* (Providence, 2008), 80-86.

the house, in Y. Pe. 1:1, 15d, Rav gives the Parthian king Artaban a mezuzah and promises that it will guard him, while in Mekhilta 14:29 to Exod. 14:22, the mezuzah protects the Hebrews travelling through the middle of the Sea of Reeds. Also, the sources emphasize the grave consequences of failing to fulfill this commandment: B. B.M. 102a describes the case of a man who brings death on his family, while B. Pes. 113b bans from heavens those who neglect the mitzvah. No different is the case of tefillin: according to B. Ber. 23a-b, the rabbis use it to repel the evil spirits, B. Men. 36b, 44a-b and B. Shab. 13a-b stress the tefillin's life-lengthening qualities, while at M. Kel. 23:1, M. Erub. 10:1, and B. Erub. 96b-97a tefillin are listed with various items explicitly classified as amulets.⁵

What is more, the sages' insistence on the protective function of these artifacts is not at all surprising given the fact that numerous passages in the early rabbinic literature construe the world as pandemonic. Unlike in the previous literary strata of the Jewish literature, where demons inhabit the wastelands, here they tend to occupy the more immediate fringes of the civilized world (B. B.Q. 21a; B. Ber. 60b). In fact, even in the city one is far from safety, and numerous passages (e.g., B. Ber. 43a-b; B. Meg. 3a) warn against wandering alone at night, especially on Wednesdays and Fridays, due to severe demonic activity (B. Pes. 112b-113a). Some demons are responsible for little daily frustrations (B. Ber. 6a), while others bring various diseases, ranging from simple fever up to epilepsy (e.g. B. Yom. 83a; B. R.H. 28a). Finally, some of them submit their powers to those from among the humans who surpass their might:

⁵ See: Wojciech Kosior, "Brit milah. Some Remarks on the Apotropaic Meaning of Circumcision in Agadic Midrashes" (Polish), *The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture* 4.1 (2013): 103-118. Idem, "'It Will Not Let the Destroying [One] Enter'. The Mezuzah as an Apotropaic Device according to Biblical and Rabbinic Sources," *The Polish Journal of the Arts and Culture*, 9 (2014): 127-144. Idem, "'The Name of Yahweh is Called Upon You'. Deut. 28:10 and the Apotropaic Qualities of Tefillin in the Early Rabbinic Literature," *Studia Religiologica* 48.2 (2015): 143-154.

king Solomon (B. Git. 68a-b), Moses (Num. Rabbah 12:3), and Noah (Gen. Rabbah 31:14).

Certainly, dealing with evil spirits must have been one of the rabbis' primary concerns.⁶

Yet, as the cautious reader may have noticed, the above considerations involved only three of the customs listed in B. Men. 43b. What about the *ṣîṣîṭ*, then: does it fit into the category of amulets? On a first glance, the tassels seem to have some suggestive apotropaic qualities, such as being made out of knots and bound to the garment's borders. In fact, numerous scholars, while differing in their justifications, consider *ṣîṣîṭ* to be a clear example of a rabbinically approved Jewish amulet. Thus, for instance, Geoffrey W. Dennis, based on various material qualities of *ṣîṣîṭ*, draws connections with similar artifacts in other cultures.⁷ Joshua Trachtenberg, in turn, in his now classical treatise, assumes that all personal ornamentation initially had an apotropaic purpose.⁸ Finally, there are scholars who simply affirm the amuletic function of *ṣîṣîṭ* without providing any justification.⁹ Surprisingly enough, and somewhat against our intuition, the Hebrew Bible and early rabbinic literature remain very laconic regarding the alleged amuletic power of the fringes and, apart from the already quoted passage, furnish just two ambiguous accounts, in B. Men. 41a and 44a. On the other hand, and unlike the case with the previously noted customs, the commandment of *ṣîṣîṭ* appears to be a composite and as such demands that

⁶ Hillel Aviezer, "Mezuzah – between Commandment and Amulet" (Hebrew), *Ma'aliyot* 19 (1997), 224. Gershom Scholem, "Demons, Demonology" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, eds. F. Skolnik, M. Berenbaum, vol. 5 (New York, 2007), 572-578. "Demonology" in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/5085-demonology> accessed December 24th 2016. Gregory J. Riley, *Demon*, in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, eds. K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, P. Willem van der Horst (Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill, 1999), 235-240.

⁷ Idem, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic and Mysticism* (Woodbury, 2007), 99.

⁸ Idem, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York, 1939), 132.

⁹ E.g. "Zizit," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 21, p. 642. Philip J. Budd, "Numbers," in *Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. D.A. Hubbard, G.W. Barker, et al., vol. 5 (Waco, Tex., 1984). (CD-ROM).

we consider its particular elements: the weaving of the thread of *tekēleṭ*, the mixing of wool and linen, and the linguistic-semantic connection to the *šîš*, the plaque worn by the high-priest. Therefore, the present paper has three main purposes: first, to analyze the passages from B. Menahot that are often taken as witnessing to the apotropaic meaning of *šîšîṭ*; second, to contextualize the *šîšîṭ* in the network of the priestly objects; and third, to advance a hypothesis regarding the implicit apotropaic potential of *šîšîṭ* stemming from its associations with the sacerdotal garment. Beforehand however, some introductory remarks need to be made.

The Biblical Origins of *Šîšîṭ*

Although the etymology of the word *šîšîṭ* is dim, scholars tend to agree that it was loaned from Akkadian clothing vocabulary: either *sisiktu* (a thread, edge, loom) or *tsitstsatu* (a floral ornamentation).¹⁰ This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the custom of making fringes from extending the threads of embroidery was common in the ancient Near East, as the means of strengthening the fabric. Further analyses of antique iconography suggest that, apart from this pragmatic purpose, tassels could also decorate cloth and as such be a marker of social status: the more elaborate and elegant the fringes, the higher the position of the wearer. In addition to this and given the unique nature of each of the tassels, it could also be used as a personal “signet” for sealing documents.¹¹ This data has led scholars to assume that the practice itself is of very

10 For the review of hypotheses see Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1907/2013) [BDB] (CD-ROM), 8084. “*Šîš*,” in *The New Dictionary*, Avraham Even-Shoshan, vol. 5 (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1979), 2223-2224. Ludwig Köhler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, 1994-2000/2013) [HALOT] (CD-ROM), 7986. Ferris J. Stephens, “The Ancient Significance of *Šîšîṭ*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 50.2 (1931): 65-66.

11 Stephen Bertman, “Tasseled Garments in the Ancient East Mediterranean,” *The Biblical Archaeologist*, 24.4 (1961): 120-122, 128. Jacob Milgrom, “Of Hems and Tassels. Rank, Authority and Holiness Were Expressed in Antiquity by Fringes on Garments,” *Biblical Archeology Review*, 9.3 (1983): 410. Jacob Milgrom, “Excursus 38 The Tassels (Tzitzit),” in

ancient origins and was only secondarily incorporated into Num. 15:37-41, which contains the sole direct mention of *mīšwāṭ šîšîṭ* in the Hebrew Bible:

37 The Lord said to Moses, 38 “Speak to the people of Israel, and tell them to make tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and to put a cord of blue on the tassel of each corner. 39 And it shall be a tassel for you to look at¹² and remember all the commandments of the Lord, to do them, not to follow after your own heart and your own eyes, which you are inclined to whore after. 40 So you shall 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.”¹³

The text is rather ambiguous. Since the Hebrew word *kanâp̄* can mean a “corner” or a “border,”¹⁴ the specific place of the attachment of the fringes remains unsure. Their exact number is also not specified. Obviously, there is no mention of tallit, which is a later rabbinic invention developed probably with convenience in mind.¹⁵ Lastly, the passage lacks any instructions on the binding of

JPS Torah Commentary. Numbers (Philadelphia, 1990), 62. See also: Eric Silverman, *A Cultural History of Jewish Dress* (London, 2013), ch. 1.

12 Interestingly, it remains vague, what exactly is supposed to remind about the obligations. The original text says *û-re’îṭem ’otô* and the masculine personal suffix suggests that it is *petîl* (“a thread,” masculine) rather than *šîšîṭ* (feminine) which should be looked at. Baruch Sterman, *The Meaning of Tekhelet*, www.baruchsterman.com/Essays/MeaningOfTekhelet.pdf, accessed August 31st 2016, p. 8.

13 Unless otherwise expressed, the translations of the biblical passages are from *The English Standard Version Bible*, [online], <http://www.esvbible.org/>.

14 Pnina Galpaz-Feller, “The Fringes” in *The Voice of Clothing: Garments in the Bible – Does the Cloth Make a Man?* (Hebrew; Carmel, 2008), <http://mikranet.cet.ac.il/pages/item.asp?item=21328&author=2430>, accessed September 1st 2016. Milgrom, “Excursus,” 410. Stephens, “The Ancient,” 59.

15 “Tallit,” in *The New Dictionary*, vol. 2, p. 894. “Tallit,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 19, p. 466. Cyrus Adler, Immanuel M. Casanowicz, “Arba’ Kanfot (“four corners”),” in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com>, accessed January 15th, 2017.

the fringes, save for the obligation to include “a cord of blue” (Heb., *petîl tekēlēt*). This technical laconicism notwithstanding, the primary purpose of the mitzvah is expressed clearly: it is to remind about the proper performance of all the other commandments and thus to prevent idolatry.¹⁶ In addition to Num. 15:37-41, there is only one more passage in the Hebrew Bible that, although indirect, is taken as referring to the tassels. Deut. 22:12 reads: “You shall make yourself tassels on the four corners of the garment with which you cover yourself.” The number of corners is finally specified, which has probably influenced the total number of the fringes. But apart from that, no other instructions are present. The only significant difference is the substitution of the Hebrew *šîšîṭ* with the plural of *gadîl*, an Akkadian loanword meaning a “cord” or a “string.” The reason for this lexical change is open to speculation, yet, scholars are inclined to assume that when Deuteronomy was composed, the meaning of the *šîšîṭ* of Num. 15:37 had been lost, and *gedîlîm* is a dynamic translation of an unusual term.¹⁷

Šîšîṭ Reminds about the Covenant

Given the scarcity of detail in the Hebrew Bible one can surely expect a lot of creativity by the rabbis when it came to the realization of the commandment. Thus, in a lengthy passage in B. Men. 41b-44a, sages discuss the exact number and the length of the threads, the possibility of reattaching a set of tassels from one garment to another, the means of connecting it to the clothing, and the details of the acquisition of the cord of *tekēlēt*. Most of sages’ attention was

¹⁶ Such is the dominant idiomatic usage of the Heb. verb *zānâh* (“to whore”) in Num. 11-14. Budd, “Numbers.” “Zizit,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, p. 642. The metaphorization of idolatry as adultery is continued in the early rabbinic literature as well – see the further part of this paper.

¹⁷ BDB 1653, HALOT 1645. P. Galpaz-Feller, “The Fringes.” For the review of interpretations see Stephen Bertman, “Tasseled Garments in the Ancient East Mediterranean,” *The Biblical Archaeologist*, 24.4 (1961): 119. Worth noting here is that *Tg. Ps.-J.* and some manuscripts of *Tg. Onq.* transliterate the variant provided by the LXX which renders *šîšîṭ* as *kraspedon* meaning “border,” “tassel” or “fringe.”

devoted to down-to-earth aspects of the fringes, and this is by no means surprising, given the thematic preferences of the early rabbinic literature in general and the analogical descriptions of circumcision, mezuzah, and tefillin in particular. Yet, while the latter customs received at least several more elaborate passages in regards to their apotropaic significance, hardly anything was said about analogical qualities of *šîšîṭ*. Besides the already quoted passage from B. Men. 43b, there are just two other such instances. The first one appears at B. Men. 41a:

An angel once found R. Kattina wearing a linen wrap, and he exclaimed, ‘Kattina, Kattina, a wrap in summer and a cloak in winter, and what is to happen to the law of zizith?’ ‘And do you punish,’ asked R. Kattina, ‘a person [who fails to perform] a positive precept?’ ‘In a time of wrath,’ replied the angel, ‘we do.’ Now if you hold that the law of zizith is an obligation incumbent upon the person then that is why one would incur guilt for not wearing a garment with fringes; but if you hold that it is an obligation attaching to the garment, then why [is any guilt incurred] seeing that these garments are exempt? What then do you hold? That it is an obligation incumbent upon the person? I grant you that the All — Merciful would punish one who wears [without fringes] a garment that is subject to fringes, but would the All-Merciful punish one who wears [without fringes] a garment that is not subject to it? — This is what [the angel] implied, ‘You find every excuse to free yourself from the law of zizith.’

Undoubtedly, the story is primarily concerned with technical halakhic matters, namely, whether *šîšîṭ* constitutes an obligation incumbent upon the garment or the person. The discourse, however, involves a rather atypical interlocutor, and although early rabbinic literature furnishes other instances of human-divine legal arguments, such conversations are usually reserved for the

rabbis themselves.¹⁸ Whatever the initial purpose of this mixed *dramatis personae*, Rabbi Kattina gets a glimpse into the working mechanism of the commandment, and, from this perspective, the fringes could be perceived as an apotropaic artifact protecting the person from angelic assault. This conclusion is reached by Yishai Kiel, who compares the *ṣîṣîṭ* with the Zoroastrian *kustig*, a ritual girdle wrapped on the waist and believed to repel evil spirits. Kiel locates the discourse in the framework of the Persian influences on rabbinic Judaism and advances a hypothesis that these apotropaic undertones of *kustig* have affected the meaning of *ṣîṣîṭ* in this talmudic passage. To further support his claim, he furnishes several early rabbinic passages that construe *ṣîṣîṭ* as the most important commandment, equal in value to all the remaining obligations. If the fringes are so important, writes Kiel, then no wonder that they should have such apotropaic strength.¹⁹

At first, given the contents of the story and the obvious similarities between the artifacts, it is difficult not to agree with Kiel. One could wonder, though, if the amuletic value of a given custom or object is not just a specific case of its more general and indefinite “magical” potential, which would translate into the ability to work wonders in various spheres of life. As a result, whether the portrayal of a given commandment as the most important mitzvah is an apt indicator of its protective potential requires a more detailed comparison involving a broader range of examples.²⁰ Besides, in this particular case it seems that a more convincing marker of the

18 A somewhat classical case of the halakhic confrontation between the human and divine agents comes in B. B. Metz. 59a-b. Albert I. Baumgarten, “Miracles and Halakah in Rabbinic Judaism,” *The Jewish Quarterly rabbinic literature Review*, 73.3 (1983): 238-253. Yitzchak Blau, *Authority, Heavenly Voices and the Interpretation of Torah*, <http://etzion.org.il/en/authority-heavenly-voices-and-interpretation-torah>, accessed December 1st 2016.

19 This is the case in Sifre 115, B. Men. 43b, B. Ned. 25a, B. Shev. 29a. Yishai Kiel, “Redesigning *Tzitzit* in the Babylonian Talmud in Light of Literary Depictions of the Zoroastrian *Kustig*” in *Shoshannat Yaakov. Jewish and Iranian Studies in Honor of Yaakov Elman*, eds. S. Secunda, S. Fine (Leiden, Boston, 2012), especially 189-190, 192-193, 201. The first two of the cited sources compare wearing *ṣîṣîṭ* to seeing the deity face to face.

20 Cf. somewhat similar position of *brît mîlâh*, another “legal” apotropaion in M. Ned. 3:11.

apotropaic strength of fringes would be the negative repercussions caused by the neglect of the precept. And while such consequences are provided in case of the mezuzah (e.g. B. Pes. 113b) or circumcision (e.g. Gen. Rabbah 21:9 and 48:8), nothing of this kind is said in the early rabbinic literature regarding the failure to observe *mīšwāṭ šîšîṭ*.²¹

Furthermore, while it is obvious that the binding of the fringes is supposed to protect against angelic punishment, the context suggests that it is not the possession of the artifact *per se* that is effective but rather the eagerness to carry out “the yoke of heaven.” Thus, although on the surface the discussion between Rabbi Kattina and the angel turns around *šîšîṭ*, it seems to utilize the fringes for the purpose of the *a minori ad majus* exemplification of the relation between the proper execution of a given mitzvah and the result it brings. Consequently, the account takes sides in the broader discussion between two options. According to the first one, such linkage between commandments and rewards is non-existent or indirect at best. This stance is exemplified in the cycle of narratives revolving around Rabbi Elisha ben Avuyah in Y. Hag.

21 Obviously, the issue of the actual popularity of the commandment of *šîšîṭ* among various social strata of particular Jewish communities is a separate matter and estimating the scale of compliance would require going far beyond the literary data and relying on the auxiliary evidence including archeological artifacts, iconography and the like. This problem is discussed in: Elisheva Baumgarten, *Practicing Piety in Medieval Ashkenaz: Men, Women, and Everyday Religious Observance* (Pennsylvania, 2014), 149-171. Although the chapter concerns the period which is much later than the one in question here, some conclusions and methodological assumptions can be cautiously extrapolated on the Talmudic era as well. Worth noting is also Eric Zimmer, “Men’s Headcovering: The Metamorphosis of This Practice” in *Reverence, Righteousness and “Raḥmanut”: Essays in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung*, ed. J.J. Schacter (Northvale, 1992), 325-352. Accordingly, it seems apt to assume that *šîšîṭ* and tefillin occupied the same place in the hierarchy of the commandments and as such have been practiced by the rabbis rather than the common folk. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out this problem. For the additional insights see the further part of this paper concerning the significance of *tekēleṭ*.

2:1²² or in the story of Rabbi Aqiba in B. Men. 29b.²³ Yet, far more numerous are the examples supporting the other option, according to which there is a direct connection between the performance of the commandment and the reward, be it in this or the future world.²⁴ Given these arguments, the *šîšîṭ* of B. Men. 41a does not seem to be an “independent” apotropaic device but rather a mnemonic tool and the symbol of observance of the mitzvot.

***Šîšîṭ* Protects against Idolatry**

Very similar is the second of the accounts involving *šîšîṭ*. The text appears in B. Men. 44a, which, due to its complexity, needs to be quoted in full:

It was taught: R. Nathan said, There is not a single precept in the Torah, even the lightest, whose reward is not enjoyed in this world; and as to its reward in the future world I know not how great it is. Go and learn this from the precept of zizith. Once a man, who was very scrupulous about the precept of zizith, heard of a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted four hundred gold [denars] for her hire. He sent her four hundred

22 Here the problem revolves around the so called sending of the nest. This commandment has the biblical origins in Deut. 22:6 and lacks any justification. In the early rabbinic literature it is often taken as a symbol of *ḥûqîm*, i.e. the laws which lack explicit or rational explanation. For the review of the traditional exegeses see Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim (Deuteronomy)* (Jerusalem, 1980), 217-222.

23 Cf. B. Qid. 39b and B. Hul. 142a-b which substitute Judah the Baker with another martyr, Hucpit the Meturgeman. Both instances conclude that the issue is unsolvable without the belief in the concept of the world to come. Cf. Eccles. R. 7:16; Ruth R. 6:2. Benyamin Oppenheimer, “Cain and Abel. The Gnostic Background of the Ideological Sermons,” in *Studies in the History of Israel and the Hebrew language*, eds. M. Dorman, S. Safrai, M. Stern (Hebrew; Jerusalem, 1970), <http://www.mikranet.cet.ac.il/mikradidact/pages/printitem.asp?item=7957>, accessed August 10, 2016. Jeffrey L. Rubenstein, *Rabbinic Stories* (New York, 2002), 215-216.

24 Mordecai Roshwald, “Authority, Skepticism and Dissent in Judaism,” *Jewish Social Studies*, 40.3/4 (1978): 189-230. Eve-Marie Jansson, *The Message of a Mitsvah: The Mezuzah in Rabbinic Literature* (Lund, 1999), 10, 44, 157, 160. Although Jansson deals with mezuzah solely, it seems reasonable to extrapolate some of her conclusions to the other apotropaic customs.

gold [denars] and appointed a day with her. When the day arrived he came and waited at her door, and her maid came and told her, 'That man who sent you four hundred gold [denars] is here and waiting at the door'; to which she replied 'Let him come in'. When he came in she prepared for him seven beds, six of silver and one of gold; and between one bed and the other there were steps of silver, but the last were of gold. She then went up to the top bed and lay down upon it naked. He too went up after her in his desire to sit naked with her, when all of a sudden the four fringes [of his garment] struck him across the face; whereupon he slipped off and sat upon the ground. She also slipped off and sat upon the ground and said, 'By the Roman Capitol, I will not leave you alone until you tell me what blemish you saw in me. 'By the Temple', he replied, 'never have I seen a woman as beautiful as you are; but there is one precept which the Lord our God has commanded us, it is called zizith, and with regard to it the expression 'I am the Lord your God' is twice written, signifying, I am He who will exact punishment in the future, and I am He who will give reward in the future. Now [the zizith] appeared to me as four witnesses [testifying against me]'. She said, 'I will not leave you until you tell me your name, the name of your town, the name of your teacher, the name of your school in which you study the Torah'. He wrote all this down and handed it to her. Thereupon she arose and divided her estate into three parts; one third for the government, one third to be distributed among the poor, and one third she took with her in her hand; the bed clothes, however, she retained. She then came to the Beth Hamidrash of R. Hiyya, and said to him, 'Master, give instructions about me that they make me a proselyte'. 'My daughter', he replied; 'perhaps you have set your eyes on one of the disciples?' She thereupon took out the script and handed it to him. 'Go', said he 'and enjoy your acquisition'. Those very

bed-clothes which she had spread for him for an illicit purpose she now spread out for him lawfully. This is the reward [of the precept] in this world; and as for its reward in the future world I know not how great it is.

Those who find this account relevant to the amuletic function of *šîšîṭ* emphasize that the central element of the passage are the fringes, which take anthropomorphic form and help the Jewish man avoid indulging in an illicit sexual union. Interestingly, the tassels' metamorphosis seems to be a play on the more general belief that every good and evil deed of man becomes an angel or a demon, respectively.²⁵ This assumption has parallels in other places, some of which refer specifically to the four customs of B. Men. 43b. Thus, in B. Shab. 32b, 2800 servants will attend the man who scrupulously observes the precept of *šîšîṭ*; in Gen. Rabbah 46:10, the act of circumcision secures the presence of the personal guardian angel; while in Num. Rabbah 12:3, 1000 divine emissaries emerge when the tefillin is bound.²⁶ Analogically, the human-turned *šîšîṭ* of B. Men. 44a protect the potential sinner by reminding him about his obligations.

Yet, similar to the previously cited account, the emphasis of the narrative appears to be elsewhere. First and foremost, the story focuses on a more general axiom concerning the precepts and their benefits. This is explicitly stated in the opening of the sugya and is also suggested afterwards, when the protagonist uses the *šîšîṭ* as the point of departure for his exposition. From this perspective, what counts here is the mnemonic rather than apotropaic function of the tassels.

25 See for instance M. Avot 4:11: "the one who performs a single commandment, acquires a defender (Heb. *praqlîṭ*) while the one who commits a single sin acquires a prosecutor (Heb. *qaṭegôṛ*)" (own translation). Somewhat similar belief is reflected in B. Hag. 14a: "R. Samuel b. Nahmani said that R. Jonathan said: From every utterance that goes forth from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, an angel is created."

26 Yet, to the best of the author's knowledge there is no equivalent instance for mezuzah in the early rabbinic literature. For sure the motif was tackled by Rambam in *Mishneh Torah* (Sefer Ahavah, Tefillin, Mezuzah and Sefer Torah 6:13), who paraphrases B. Men. 43b and compares all these commandments to the angels who remind the pious about their obligations.

Second, the story of a pious man travelling to another town for the sake of a harlot seems to fit the tradition attributed to Rabbi Elai the Elder in B. Hag. 16a:

If a man sees that his [evil] inclination is prevailing upon him, let him go to a place where he is not known, and put on black garments, and wrap himself up in black garments, and let him do what his heart desires; but let him not profane the Name of Heaven publicly!²⁷

Despite the generally ambivalent attitude towards prostitution,²⁸ and given the rabbis' liberal approach to the demands of man's evil inclination,²⁹ it seems that in B. Men. 44a the case is made not for fornication itself but rather for adultery as a symbol of idolatry.³⁰ From this perspective, the picturesque description and the erotically dense atmosphere of B. Men. 44a notwithstanding, the text seems to creatively develop the metaphors of Num. 15:37-41. Thus, the Jew attracted to the Roman beauty³¹ signifies the Israelites' eagerness to despise their covenant and to immerse in the foreign culture; and just as the *šîšîṭ* of Num. 15 is supposed to remind them of their obligations, so do the tassels of this story stop the Jew from sinning with the exotic courtesan. In other words, while the narrative in B. Men. 44a is more about idolatry than

27 Some claim that even putting on the mourner's black dress and being in a foreign place should be enough to dissuade one from the future transgression. *Soncino Talmud*, B. Hag. 16a, footnotes number 20, 22.

28 For instance, it is considered to be one of the causes of the fall of the Temple in M. Sotah 9:13, 1 and a temptation stronger than idolatry in Song of Sol. Rabbah 7:8. According to B. Git. 57b some women would choose to commit suicide rather than become prostitutes. Moshe D. Herr, "Prostitution. Post-Biblical," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, eds. F. Skolnik, M. Berenbaum, vol. 16 (New York, 2007), 626.

29 In this regard see an excellent study of Ishay Rosen-Zvi, *Demonic Desires : Yetzer Hara and the Problem of Evil in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia, 2011). Rosen-Zvi devotes chapters 5 and 6 for the analysis of the gradual sexualization of the evil inclination in the early rabbinic literature.

30 What is more, had the narrative meant the sexual transgression in the first place, the Jew should probably be reprimanded by his circumcision rather than by the tassels.

31 Note their exclamations: "by the Temple!" (the man) and "by the Roman capitol!" (the woman).

prostitution, both quoted accounts portray *šîšîṭ* as a mnemonic rather than apotropaic tool. It is important to note this distinction, and although these two aspects are often connected and a given object can be construed as serving both roles, the purposes differ: to remind about the obligation that is profitable in the long run (after all, the Jew marries the Roman woman) is something different than to serve simply as an immediate and automatic protection.³²

The Associations with *Tekēleṭ*, *Ša‘aṭnēz*, and *Šîš*

While circumcision, mezuzah, and tefillin are explicitly and robustly presented as apotropaic customs, this is not the case with *šîšîṭ*, which features in just three ambiguous accounts. Although the analyses could very well end here with the conclusion that there is not enough evidence in the early rabbinic literature to classify the fringes as apotropaic, the complex nature of the commandment suggests taking a slightly different approach. As it appears, *šîšîṭ* is intertwined in a network of other concepts with their own nuances. Three such ideas, connected to the temple ritual, quickly become apparent: the use of *tekēleṭ* and the involvement of *ša‘aṭnēz* in the production of the tassels, and the linguistic-semantic similarity of *šîšîṭ* to the priestly *šîš*.

The account in Numbers orders the Hebrews to weave a “blue thread” (Heb. *petîl tekēleṭ*) into the tassel. Despite the general agreement of most modern English translations of the phrase, the term *tekēleṭ* itself presents several basic problems. First of all, it remains unknown whether

³² The overlap between these two functions of binding knots is interesting from the comparative perspective. For the parallels in other cultures see for instance: Steven Connor, *Witchknots, Knitwits and Knots Intrinsic. A text written to accompany Ravelling, Unravelling, an exhibition of work by Naheed Raza exploring the theme of entanglement in medicine, art, literature and philosophy*, Royal Institution, London, 13-28 May 2009, <http://stevenconnor.com/knots/knots.pdf>, accessed January 1st 2016. Willeke Wendrich, “Entangled, Connected or Protected? The Power of Knots and Knotting in Ancient Egypt” in *Through a Glass Darkly: Magic, Dreams, and Prophecy in Ancient Egypt*, ed. K. Szpakowska (Wales 2006): 243-269. Giulia Piccaluga, “Binding” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. L. Jones, 2nd edition, vol. 2 (Detroit, 2005), 937-939.

the word in biblical times denoted an abstract color or an actual material. This problem is not specific to the term *tekēleṭ*, and scholars often point to other languages that feature similar interpretative difficulties.³³ Second, although with time it came to denote the color blue, the exact hue in antiquity remains unknown. Based on the scarce material evidence from the ancient Near East and the early biblical translations, scholars suppose that *tekēleṭ* probably belonged to the spectrum between blue, red, and purple.³⁴

Whatever the semantic and chromatic nuances of *tekēleṭ*, the actual use of the word in the Hebrew Bible confirms its distinguished status. The word appears almost fifty times, with approximately 80% of the occurrences in Exodus and Numbers.³⁵ Especially dense are Exodus chapters 26 and 28, which apply the word in the description of the Tabernacle's appurtenances and the paraphernalia of the high priest. The remaining instances outside of Pentateuch (*inter alia*, Judg. 8:26; Esther 1:6, 8:15; Dan. 5:7; Jer. 10:9; Ezek. 23:6, 27:7, 27:24) present *tekēleṭ* in a secular context as the color of the royal elite.³⁶ The special significance of *tekēleṭ* is furthermore

33 Interestingly, this problem persists even in the relatively late part of the Hebrew Bible, e.g. in 2 Chron. 2:6, 13 where it could be inferred that *tekēleṭ* denotes some material rather than just a color. Tomasz Sikora, "Color Symbolism in the Jewish Mysticism. Prolegomena" (Polish), *Studia Judaica* 12.2 (2003): 47. BDB, p. 1067.

34 "Tekēleṭ" in *The New Dictionary*, vol. 7, p. 2855. BDB 10512. Robert Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago, 1980/2013) [TWOT] (CD-ROM), 2510.0. Contra: The word seems to be akin to the Sumerian *takiltu* which in turn is rendered in Akkadian translation as *uqnatu* and taken to mean lapis lazuli. HALOT 10159. Two other issues should be taken into consideration: the psychophysiology of seeing colors (Béla Lukács B., *What is Blue?*, <http://www.rmki.kfki.hu/~lukacs/TZITZIT.htm>, accessed September 1st 2016) and the unpredictable results of dyeing which would support the hypothesis of *tekēleṭ* denoting a spectrum of colors rather than one particular dye (TWOT 2510.0. Bertman, "Tasseled," 123-124). For the equivalents in other languages of the ancient Near East see Irving I. Ziderman, "First Identification of Authentic Tēkēlet," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 265 (1987): 25.

35 The statistics have been made with BibleWorks 9.0 software.

36 TWOT 2510.0. BDB 10512, HALOT 10159. Ziderman, "First Identification," 25.

corroborated by the process of its acquisition as construed in the early rabbinic literature. B. Men. 42b and 44a suggest that *tekēleṭ* was produced from gland secretions of a *ḥīlazôn*—an aquatic animal said to resemble a fish that appears once every seventy years.³⁷ Although the rabbinic descriptions are relatively detailed and definitely surpass the scarcity of the biblical data, many pragmatic questions remain. In all events, *tekēleṭ* must have been very expensive to obtain and as such was reserved for special occasions.

Interestingly, the sages provide two main expositions for the color of *tekēleṭ*, both of which continue the chromatic and semantic problems outlined above. One group of sources, including B. B.M. 61a-b and B. Men. 40a-b, mentions *qāla' ḥīlān*, an indigo dye described as visually indistinguishable from *tekēleṭ*. Yet, although this dye was much cheaper to obtain, the rabbis cursed those who substituted *tekēleṭ* with the low-priced equivalent, and they in fact preferred to annul the obligation altogether rather than to compromise its value (M. Men. 4:1), which clearly proves that it was not the color that mattered most.³⁸ The second and much more numerous group of passages compares *tekēleṭ* to the color of the sky or the sea, which is not far from indigo.³⁹ More important, however, these passages contain several instances (B. Men. 43b, B. Sot. 17a, B. Hul. 89a, Num. Rabbah 4:13, 17:5) that extend the comparison and liken the

³⁷ The *ḥīlazôn* is usually identified with a snail, *murex brandaris* or *murex trunculus* swarming in the coastal area of the Mediterranean Sea, in vicinity of Sidon and Tyre. Joseph Jacobs, Judah D. Eisenstein, “Fringes” in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6397-fringes>, accessed December 1st 2016. HALOT 10159. TWOT 2510.0. The meanders of the modern “quest for *tekēleṭ*” are summarized by *inter alia*: Patrick E. McGovern, Rudolph H. Michel, Max Saltzman, Irving I. Ziderman, Otto Elsner, “Has Authentic Tēkēlet Been Identified?,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 269 (1988): 81-90. The ideological undertones of this quest are highlighted by Gadi Sagiv, “Deep Blue: Notes on the Jewish Snail Fight,” *Contemporary Jewry*, 35.3 (2015): 285-313.

³⁸ Sterman, *The Meaning*, 3. “Zizit,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 642.

³⁹ This is the case *inter alia* in B. Men. 43b, B. Hul. 89a, B. Sot. 17a; Y. Ber. 1:2; Sifre 15-38; Num. Rabbah 14:3, 17:5. Sterman, *The Meaning*, 2-3.

tekēleṭ to the throne of glory. Apparently, the particular features of this divine chair are not speculated on in the early rabbinic literature, but it can be safely assumed that, again, it was not the visual qualities that counted here but the extraordinary value of the object and its explicit cultic associations.

This motif is further developed in the second of the above listed phenomena. According to the discussion at B. Men. 39b, the proper execution of *mīšwāt šîšîṭ* involves creating a mixture of wool and linen known as *ša‘atnēz*,⁴⁰ which is prohibited by Lev. 19:19 and Deut. 22:11.⁴¹ The origins and sense of this prohibition are problematic. It fits the Pentateuchal ban on combinations of various items, like planting different types of seed or plowing with different animals. Yet, unlike other such mixtures, *ša‘atnēz* was not only allowed but also required in the priestly garments (Exod. 28:6, 8, 15, and 39:29).⁴² In addition, the Temple staff was obliged to wear *ša‘atnēz* during their ritual duties, while outside of the Temple, they still needed to perform the obligation of *šîšîṭ*. Thus, both laymen and the priests were supposed to have with them a specific item made of the mixture of wool and linen all the time. Though it is difficult to assess which of the *ša‘atnēz* usages has historical and chronological priority, it seems safe to assume that both the Hebrew Bible and early rabbinic literature give precedence to the Temple. If approached from this perspective, the *ša‘atnēz* of the layman reflects that of the priest.

40 Thomas O. Lambdin, “Egyptian Loan Words in the Old Testament,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 73 (1953): 155. John E. Hartley, “Leviticus,” in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 4. Additional insight may be provided by the Gr. rendition, *kibdylon*, which means “false,” “adulterated,” “drossy.” Wilhelm Bacher, Judah D. Eisenstein, *Sha‘atnez*, in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13463-sha-atnez>, accessed January 1st 2017.

41 Particularly interesting is the prohibition in Deuteronomy, since it directly precedes the obligation of *šîšîṭ* in verse 12.

42 Calum M. Carmichael, “Forbidden Mixtures,” *Vetus Testamentum*, 32.4 (1982): 394. Cf. M. Kil. 9:1, B. Yom. 69a. The rabbis were clearly aware of the presence of *ša‘atnēz* in *šîšîṭ*, what is corroborated by B. Men. 39b-40a, 43a or Lev. Rabbah 22:10. Milgrom, “Excursus,” 413.

A third cultic connection emerges between *šîšîṭ* and *šîš*. The latter term appears in the descriptions of the priestly garments (Exod. 28:36,⁴³ 39:30 and Leviticus 8:9), where it is translated as “plaque” or “rosette.”⁴⁴ The word denotes a golden object inscribed with the words “holy to Yahweh” and tied to the priest’s head with a cord of *tekēleṭ*. The links between these artifacts seem obvious. First and foremost, these are the only two objects in the Hebrew Bible that involve the use of *petîl tekēleṭ*. Second, as suggested above, the etymological affinity between *šîšîṭ* and *šîš* cannot be excluded.⁴⁵ Accordingly, the root *šîš* means “to blossom” or “a flower” and as such is employed in the picturesque metaphors in Isa. 27:6, 28:1, 40:7-8, floral descriptions of Solomon’s Temple (1 Kings 6:18-35) and the blooming of Aaron’s rod (Num. 17:23). This latter instance is particularly interesting, because just as a *šîš* appeared on Aaron’s rod, so is the Aaronide high-priest supposed to wear a *šîš* on his forehead.⁴⁶ In addition to this, once in the Hebrew Bible, in Ezek. 8:3, the word appears in the construction *šîšîṭ rôš* meaning “a mop of hair,” probably deriving from the metaphor of hair as the plants grown from skin.⁴⁷ This is furthermore supported by a handful of rabbinic descriptions that compare the priestly *šîš* to a flower (B. Shab. 63b and B. Suk. 5a). Thus, although the hypothetical etymological kinship is by no means equal to the common origins of both customs that may have developed independently, it is not difficult to imagine the semantic affinity of these terms, as they seem to share a floral

43 Interestingly, the initial listing present in Exod. 28:4 does not include the *šîš* and the linen undergarments (v. 42-43). John I. Durham, “Exodus,” in *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 3.

44 Some authors take the flower-like shape as a marker of the apotropaic significance, though leave this assertion unsupported, e.g.: Ephraim A. Speiser, “Palil And Congeners: A Sampling Of Apotropaic Symbols,” *Assyriological Studies* 16 (1965): 392-393.

45 “*Šîš*,” in *The New Dictionary*, vol. 5, pp. 2223-2224.

46 Cf. Psalm 132:18 which speaks about a crown that will “blossom” or, as some would suggest, “sparkle.” BDB 8082, HALOT 7983.

47 BDB 8143. HALOT 7987. See also Speiser, “Palil,” 393.

metaphor. Third and most important, functionally *šîšîṭ* and *šîš* are somewhat similar. The main purpose of *šîšîṭ* according to Num. 15:37-41 is to remind about the covenant obligations, while the passage itself is woven into the more elaborate narrative that revolves around Israel's being Yahweh's chosen people.⁴⁸ The main purpose of *šîš* is presented as follows, Exod. 28:38:

Aaron shall bear any guilt from the holy things that the people of Israel consecrate as their holy gifts. It shall regularly be on his forehead, that they may be accepted before the Lord.

As the inscription on the *šîš* implies, the device sanctifies the contributions and makes them apt as an offering for Yahweh.⁴⁹ Analogically, *šîšîṭ* is supposed to define the chosen people by reminding them about all the obligations stemming from the exclusive covenant with the God of Israel and by warning against going astray. Thus, both the offerings and the people of Israel become consecrated, i.e., detached and set apart from the rest.

***Šîšîṭ* as a (Protective) Marker of Identity**

The above material that shows the Temple connections of *šîšîṭ* is not surprising in light of previous scholarship. Probably the best known and most seminal is the study of Jacob Milgrom, who has cautiously estimated the cost of *tekēleṭ* production and argued that despite its price tag, even the poor from among the Israelites were capable of fulfilling the commandment. Therefore, Milgrom says, the fringes reminded the Hebrews that they were the people of the divine king, while the common usage of *tekēleṭ* in *šîšîṭ* was a manifestation of “the democratic thrust within

48 Shai Held, *Every Jew a High Priest? The Meaning of Tzitzit and the Sin of Korah*, https://www.academia.edu/21697596/Every_Jew_a_High_Priest_The_Meaning_of_Tzitzit_and_the_Sin_of_Korah, accessed September 1st 2016, p. 4.

49 Cf. B. Ar. 16a, B. Zeb. 88b and B. San. 12b where the *šîš* is supposed to atone for Israel's arrogance.

Judaism” and the will to turn Israel into a “nation of priests.”⁵⁰ Similar conclusions are attained by Eric Silverman, based on the assumption that clothing in general can be taken as an identity marker. Silverman notes that the ancient Near Eastern garment was relatively homogenous and in order to effectively differentiate from the other nations, the Hebrews adopted and modified the custom of attaching the fringes. Thus, by weaving the threads of *tekēleṭ* into the tassels, the Hebrews could be sure that no other nation would copy their rather costly practice.⁵¹ Third, Dov Linzer operates within the previously defined paradigms and notes that B. Men. 36b and B. Zeb. 19a compare *ṣîṣ* to tefillin on the grounds that both artifacts are worn on the forehead and contain the divine name. Taking these passages as the point of departure for his own analyses, he concludes that just as tefillin parallels *ṣîṣ* so does *ṣîṣîṭ* reflect the rest of the priestly garments.⁵² Fourth, Tomasz Sikora, based on the later zoharic material, acknowledges the homoiophonic and semantic connections drawn between *ṣîṣ* and *ṣîṣîṭ*. He employs the analyses of Yeruham Fishel Lachower and Isaiah Tishby to show the dichotomic correspondence between *ṣîṣ* associated with the upper world and *ṣîṣîṭ* representing the lower world.⁵³ Finally, these associations should be perceived in the broader framework defined by numerous writings on the essential role of the

50 Milgrom, “Excursus,” 413-414. Idem, “Of Hems,” 65. Some contemporary expositors note the chauvinistic pitfalls of such assumption and stress, that according to the text Israel is not declared holy but urged to become one in the future. Yeshayahu Leibowitz after Held, *Every Jew*, 5.

51 Silverman, *A Cultural*, ch. 1-2.

52 Dov Linzer, *Menachot 39b: Tzitzit – Wool, Cotton, or Nylon?*, <https://dailydaf.wordpress.com/2011/04/17/menachot-39b-tzitzit-wool-cotton-or-nylon/>, accessed September 1st 2016. Idem, *Menachot 43 – Tzitzit and Priestly Garments*, <https://dailydaf.wordpress.com/2011/04/22/menachot-43-tzitzit-and-priestly-garments/>, accessed September 1st 2016.

53 Sikora, “Color Symbolism,” 62-63.

idea of the heavenly Temple and its mythopoetic potential in the era of the early rabbinic literature.⁵⁴

Thus, *šîšîṭ*, which encapsulates all the above-listed features, could be interpreted as a personal, lay equivalent of priestly attire. It seems, then, that any hypotheses about the extra-Temple significance of *šîšîṭ* should first and foremost take the “natural” and default meaning of these clothes into account. As is apparent from the descriptions of the sacerdotal garment, it was worn in the Holy of the Holies, the innermost part of the Temple believed to be the divine’s earthly dwelling. In turn, being so close to the deity entailed a grave danger that is corroborated by many passages, both in the Hebrew Bible and early rabbinic literature. Probably the best known is Lev. 10:1-3, where Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, die in the divine flame caused by their cultic lapse. Another famous instance comes from 2 Sam. 6:6-8, describing the case of Uzzah, who steadies the wobbling cart carrying the Ark of Covenant, but, by touching it, transgresses ritual protocol and is instantly killed.

The examples can be easily multiplied: Exod. 19:21-23 warns the Hebrews against approaching Mount Sinai lest they die; in Judg. 13:22, Manoah expresses fear that after seeing the angel he and his wife will meet their death; while in Isa. 6:5, the prophet experiences dread in front of Yahweh and his seraphs. Although there are a few counter-examples, such as a report of Moses talking face to face with Yahweh (Exod. 33:11), it can be safely assumed that the dominant option was that every theophany brought with it serious danger.⁵⁵ Such interpretation is by no means unique nor original, and the academic tradition of recovering the dark side of the God of Israel reaches at least as far as the now classical work of Rudolph Otto and his concept of

54 E.g. Jonathan Klawans, *Purity, Sacrifice, and the Temple: Symbolism and Supersessionism in the Study of Ancient Judaism* (Oxford, New York, 2006), 101-104.

55 For more examples, see David Penchansky, *What Rough Beast?: Images of God in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville 1999).

sacred experience as composed of *tremendum et fascinans*.⁵⁶ More modern treatises, on the other hand, convincingly show that this is exactly the price monotheism pays for constructing one deity from the images of many other gods of varying qualities and militant natures.⁵⁷ If this is the case, then no wonder that some appropriate means of approaching the deity must have been developed. This awe and fear expressed in a variety of biblical accounts finds its pragmatic ordering already in the cultic parts of the Hebrew Bible as well as in the talmudic reiterations that deal with the nitty-gritty details of the tabernacle protocol.⁵⁸ Thus, it can be assumed that the high-priest entering the deepest part of the Temple faced a real and lethal danger. From this perspective, all of his actions preceding entrance, as well as all the garments and paraphernalia donned before his encounter with the deity, could be interpreted as protective in nature.⁵⁹

The actual mechanism that secures the safety of the one entering the Tabernacle is separate. One of the interpretations is that the priestly garment in a way reflects the colors and materials utilized in the Temple appurtenances. By maintaining the appropriate “dress code,” the priest may have appeared as if he had “naturally” belonged to the place.⁶⁰ If one of the functions

56 Idem, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (New York, 1958).

57 In this regard very valuable interpretations are provided by: Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy : Satan and the Combat Myth* (Princeton, 1987) and Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove, 1997). See also: Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: the Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago, 1997).

58 In fact, this very detailed protocol could be taken as a mean of dealing with the extreme fear evoked by the divine capriciousness. In this regard see the study of Jay Y. Gonen, who applies the psychoanalytic hermeneutics to the foundational Jewish texts. Idem, *Yahweh versus Yahweh: the Enigma of Jewish History* (Madison, 2005), especially 16-17.

59 A very picturesque and imaginative recreation of what could have been the feelings of the priest entering the tabernacle is presented by Stephen A. Geller, “Blood Cult. Towards a Literary Theology of the Priestly Work of the Pentateuch,” *Prooftexts* 12.2 (1992): 103-105.

60 Nissan Rubin, Admiel Kosman, “The Clothing of the Primordial Adam as a Symbol of Apocalyptic Time in the Midrashic Sources,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 90.2 (1997):

of the priestly garment is to protect during contact with the divinity by means of expressing affiliation, and if *šîšîṭ* mirrors the qualities of the Temple attire, then the fringes may reflect this function outside of the ritual context. In fact, such an affiliative aspect of *šîšîṭ* is what finds some support in the early rabbinic literature. For instance, in B. Ber. 47b, Ben Azzai defines the ‘*am hâ-’ârêš* as those who disregard the *mîšwâṭ šîšîṭ*; B. Ta. 22a attributes to the fringes the function of distinguishing a Jew from a non-Jew; while B. Men. 43a prohibits selling a fringed tallit to foreigners, explaining that the new owner of such an accessory could pretend to be a Jew and kill those who do not expect him to do so. In fact, the tassels are supposed to be a permanently worn and perfectly visible token of identity, an important element “in a world of disorder.”⁶¹

Šîšîṭ among the Other Customs: Revisited

If we return to B. Men. 43b with these considerations in mind, the position of *šîšîṭ* among the remaining customs appears somewhat exceptional. On the one hand, a number of similarities emerge. Each mitzvah serves as an identity marker, although they differ in terms of their visibility, portability, and permanence. Furthermore, each commandment is supposed to remind about the religious obligations, and from this perspective their purpose as described in B. Men. 43b is primarily mnemotechnical. Finally, each of the customs can be construed as apotropaic, at least so far as the anthropological measures are applied. In addition to this, some more specific similarities emerge. *Šîšîṭ* in a way resembles *brîṭ mîlâh*, because it is supposed to be constantly performed, lacks the explicit literary aspect, and is considered to be the most important mitzvah.

163-164. Silverman, *A Cultural*, ch. 1. The problem is, however, whether the priestly garments reflect the temple or is it the other way around.

61 Maureen Bloom, *Jewish Mysticism and Magic: An Anthropological Perspective* (London, 2007), 121-122.

There are also some similarities with tefillin: both objects neatly fit the category of the portable, personal amulets.⁶²

But the differences are even more numerous. While the remaining artifacts get a relatively elaborate apotropaic interpretations in the scope of the early rabbinic literature, the same cannot be said about *šîšîṭ*, the protective potential of which is only hinted at. Conversely, the mnemonic aspect of *šîšîṭ* appears to be its most distinguishing feature. The customs differ also in terms of their visibility and permanence. While circumcision is usually hidden, mezuzah remains on the doorframes, and tefillin are worn only during prayer, *šîšîṭ* is supposed to be present on the wearer all the time. Furthermore, *šîšîṭ* is the only one of these customs that is not classified as *'ôṭ* in the Hebrew Bible. Analogically, *šîšîṭ* is also the only mitzvah that does not involve writing in general and writing of the divine name in particular, so that it is not considered a holy object.⁶³ While mezuzah and tefillin contain passages from the Torah and circumcision is interpreted as inscribing the body with the name Shaddai,⁶⁴ no similar exposition is supported in regards to *šîšîṭ*. This is all the more surprising given the fact that *šîšîṭ* appears to be the only one of these customs so closely related to the Temple-cult: while circumcision resembles blood

62 This interpretation finds some support in Matt. 23:5 containing the critique of the Scribes and Pharisees for their caricatural devotion – here they are described as the ones who lengthen their fringes (Gr. *kraspeda*) and broaden their phylacteries (Gr. *phylacteria*). Although the passage is usually interpreted as witnessing to the custom of tassels along with tefillin, one could wonder whether it should not be read as a case of semantic parallelism. From this perspective the phylacteries could be said to interpret the first phrase or, in other words, explain the protective function of the *kraspeda*.

63 According to B. Meg. 26b *šîšîṭ* belongs to the category of religious accessories which can be simply thrown away while disused tefillin or mezuzah must be stored in genizah.

64 On the amuletic function of this particular divine appellation see: Wojciech Kosior, “The Apotropaic Potential of the Name ‘Shadday’ in the Hebrew Bible and the Early Rabbinic Literature” in *Word in the Cultures of the East. Sound, Language, Book*, eds. P. Mróz, M. Ruchel, A.I. Wójcik (Kraków, 2016), 33-51.

offerings and mezuzah and tefillin contain hand-written passages from the Scripture, *šîšîṭ* features even more such connections.

Still, as has been shown, a relatively rich set of passages full of indirect associations suggests an apotropaic significance of *šîšîṭ*. Just as the priestly garment may have served a protective purpose inside the Tabernacle, so could have been the function of *šîšîṭ* outside the Temple. In addition, *šîšîṭ* possess some of the features almost universally shared by amulets of various kinds present in numerous cultures around the world. This leads to the question, if there are so many reasons and suggestions that the fringes play an apotropaic role, why do so few accounts explicitly witness to this function? Hopefully, the further research will deal with this question.

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