

# THE MISSING THREAD OF BLUE

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Practicing Jews typically are very conscientious about observing to the finest detail all the commandments and requirements of sacred written material, particularly the Torah. So careful are the elders that, for example, when the Torah is read aloud by a trained person, two readers are stationed on either side to catch any mistakes in pronunciation.

That conscientious observance does not hold as regards a very specific Torah requirement, despite the plain words of the Torah. Conspicuously absent is the prescribed "thread of blue."

I am referring to those persons who proudly wear a *tallit* [prayer shawl] with the prescribed *tzitzit* [fringes] but lacking the threads of blue, and who recite the *shema* twice a day which includes the following.:

*The Lord 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 **thread of blue** to the fringes on each corner. That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them, so you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge. Thus shall you be reminded to observe all My commandments and be holy to your God' (Num. 15:37-41).*

This biblical requirement could not be more specific Why, then, is not a single blue thread found in the *tallitot* worn today? Even the *tallitot* of ultra-orthodox Jews do not meet this simple requirement. Is it a matter of the quality or intensity of the blue color? What is the rabbinic reasoning?

Via the Internet, I submitted the question to: rebbe@ou.org. He, in turn, sent it to the rabbis of Eretz Hemdah ([www.erezhemdah.org](http://www.erezhemdah.org)). This was the reply:

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"The blue thread which is called in the Torah *t'cheleth* should be colored by a dye made from a sea animal which has been unknown for at least 1100 years (Tur Orach Chaim 11). Our sages forbade using any other blue dye, as it would be a forgery of the original. Lately, some rabbis and researchers have offered a suggestion of an identification of the *t'cheleth* but this identification has not been widely accepted."

Strange that the lack of a lowly snail permits prayer-shawl wearers blatantly to defy the dictate of Torah that its commandments be carefully observed: *Do not add anything to that which I am commanding you, and do not subtract anything from it, to keep the commandments of your God, which I am commanding you* (Deut 4:2). May there be exceptions to the commandments?

The Hebrew word for this kind of "blue" is *tekhelet*. But as regards the blue thread for the *tallit*, the word has taken on a special status. Ask any rabbi: Where is the missing blue thread? His answer: The midrash notes that nowadays we only possess white *tzitzit*, the *tekhelet* having been concealed (Num. R.17:5). We do not have the genuine *tekhelet*.

Blue was a commonly-used color in biblical times, and even in the desert, blue was used in the appointments of the Tabernacle. The dye was not used merely for a small item like a thread, but for whole lengths of fabric. Here are some biblical references to a preference for blue and other bright colors:

1. Exodus 26:1: *Make the tabernacle with ten curtains of finely twisted linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn.*
2. Numbers 4:6: . . . *spread a cloth of solid blue over that and put the poles in place.*
3. Numbers 4:11: *Over the gold altar they are to spread a blue cloth.*
4. Jeremiah 10:9: *What the craftsman and goldsmith have made is then dressed in blue and purple – all made by skilled workers.*
5. Ezekiel 23:6: . . . *clothed in blue, governors and commanders, all of them handsome young men, and mounted horsemen.*
6. Esther 8:15: *Mordecai left the King's presence wearing royal garments of blue and white.*

The Torah is replete with references to blue and purple and scarlet, each shade having its own identity. There is no mention in the Tanakh how dye was to be obtained. During the 40 years in the desert, it may have been ex-

tracted from plants, or from land snails. However, desert snails are quite small, and it would take multiple thousands of snails to produce a few ounces of material useful in making dye. Surely, even in this period craftsmen were able to produce dyes in various distinct colors. How deep or light their dyes were, or their durability, was irrelevant. As for a specific quality of blue, Samson Raphael Hirsch in his commentary on the Torah always amplified the color as "sky blue."

Only after the Israelites were settled in their land did they become acquainted with dyes obtained from a sea-creature *chilazon* [mollusk] that were expertly produced by the nearby Phoenicians. From this mollusk could be obtained a remarkably clear, durable blue dye *tekhelet*.

Where did the understanding arise on the use of dye made from a special, small sea-creature, and why is it significant only when it is used for adding threads of blue to the prayer shawl?

First, there was the encounter with the Babylonians, then the Greeks, and later with the Romans. They brought a new, more dressy culture to the Israelites. They sought bright, colorful garments, especially blue-purple and red-purple. Purple dye was obtained from glands of the mollusk *purpura*; since this is small in size, it was a costly undertaking to secure an adequate supply. (Although the words "purpura" and "purple" are related, the color of this dye was closer to crimson.)

The demand for this dye was so great that the Phoenicians established workshops for its production in Crete, Sicily and Anatolia as well as in their own cities of Tyre and Sidon. The limited supply of this dye made the wearing of purple a mark of high status. In Daniel 5:7, the Babylonian King Belshazzar offered a prize for interpreting his dream, and the award was a chain of gold and purple clothing. Later, wealthy Romans clamored for purple garments.

Jews who were not Roman citizens may have been barred from wearing purple, but there was no restriction on material dyed blue. Jews could use blue dye to embellish their special garments and take the opportunity to enhance a specific commandment; thus glorifying God.

To this end, those who could afford it bought threads of cloth dyed with the blue of the *chilazon*. But not all could afford to partake in such a special mitzvah. A mitzvah cannot be reserved only for those fortunate enough to

afford it. Therefore, it is likely that the rabbis meant to prevent this, and decreed that a thread colored with the expensive dye of sea-creatures was not required. But the decree, for unknown reasons, led to the belief that the fringes of the *tallit* could be worn without the blue thread required in the Torah.

It was not unusual for the rabbis to add new requirements or even to set aside Torah or rabbinic requirements if the purpose was to assure the good and welfare of the people. This was especially true when the cost of an article was deemed excessive. For example, in Mishna Keritut, as a result of Rabbi Simeon ben Gamaliel's ruling reducing the number of required sacrifices, the price of a pigeon was cut from one gold dinar to one silver dinar.

Rabbi Hillel, the foremost rabbi of the Second Temple period, in a famous *prusbul* set aside the Torah requirements of the Jubilee year for economic reasons. But real reasons have a way of getting lost.

The decision by the rabbis to overrule the requirement of Numbers 15:37-41 most certainly related solely to the blue dye obtained from appropriate mollusks. Surely they did not intend to preclude the use of blue readily obtainable from a variety of plants and minerals. But why was not ordinary blue used for the thread of blue in the *tallit*?

People in their earnest desire to be totally pious often read more into a rabbinic decree than was intended, and a custom becomes established. Did the decree mean that any other type of blue was acceptable? Threads of blue from other sources of dye were available, but authoritative rabbis were unrelenting. Only blue from the appropriate sea-creature, the *chilazon*, would be acceptable. In turn, the word *tekhelet* acquired a new meaning: a special type of blue. In modern times, new efforts have been made to search for the biblical *tekhelet*.

There is no Torah basis to hold that the source for the dye of the required thread of blue should be restricted to a specific sea-creature. Blue is a very common color. Because the knowledge for making a blue dye was commonplace, it was not necessary for the Torah to specify how the color blue was to be obtained. However, after centuries of affirming that for this specific purpose only the blue dye from a *chilazon* is kosher, the requirement has been accepted as *halakha*. Thus, no rabbi or authority has had the intellectual initiative to declare that a blue dye from another source can be kosher.