

# THE MYSTERY, MEANING AND DISAPPEARANCE OF THE *TEKHELET*

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*And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes [tzitzit] on the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a thread of blue [Petil Tekhelet]. 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; That you may remember, and do all my commandments, and be holy to your God" (Num. 15:37-40).*<sup>1</sup>

This text is climaxed by the commands to look upon the fringes, to remember the commandments, and to do them. But, why and how do the fringes enable a person to become *holy to your God*?

The rabbinic interpretation and explication of these biblical verses and the disappearance of the *tekhelet* fringe will lead us to a rather surprising exposition of talmudic mysticism.

Our inquiry begins with a quote from T.B. *Menahot* 43b. The Talmud there first quotes from the biblical text in a Tannaitic source (*Baraita*), and then adds a critical point: "*That you may look upon it and remember . . . and do them.* Looking [upon it] leads to remembering [the commandments], and remembering leads to doing them." This comment presumably relates to the issue of *looking* at the fringe in order to remember the commandments. The Talmud then continues: "R. Simeon b. Yoḥai says, Whosoever is scrupulous in the observance of this precept is worthy of receiving the Divine presence, for it is written here, *That ye may look upon it*, and there it is written, *You shall fear the Lord your God, and Him shall you serve* (Deut. 6:13)."

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The Talmud now digs a little deeper into the cognitive progression:

It was taught: R. Meir used to say, Why is blue of all other colors specified [for this precept]? Because blue resembles the color of the sea [oceans], and the sea resembles the color of the sky, and the sky resembles the color of [a sapphire, and a sapphire resembles the color of] the Throne of Glory, as it is said, *And there was under his feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone* (Ex. 24:10), and it is also written, *The likeness of a throne as the appearance of a sapphire stone* (Ezek. 1:26).

According to both R. Simeon b. Yohai and R. Meir, the fringes in general and the thread of blue in particular are mystical and metaphysical symbols which, when one gazes upon them, are related to reaching the state of being "holy to your God."

Also, by winding the thread of blue around the white threads one creates a symbolic nexus between heaven and earth, between the terrestrial and celestial. Some wound it seven times, to symbolize the seven heavens, while others [in talmudic times] wound it thirteen times to symbolize the seven heavens and the six intervening realms of heavenly space (T.B. *Menahot* 39b).

#### MEANING OF THE TEKHELET

The mystical stream of spiritual consciousness of the blue thread in the fringes was located in still another area, in the Ark of the Covenant of the Tabernacle:

When they [Israel] set forward, they spread over it [the Ark] neither a cloth of purple nor of scarlet, but a cloth all of blue. Why? Because blue is like the sea, and the sea is like the sky, and the sky is like the Throne of Glory; as it says: *And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of sapphire stone* (Ezek. 1:26) which tells us that the Ark and the Throne of Glory were alike (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 4:13).

According to this Midrash, the *Aron ha-Berit* [Ark of the Covenant] was covered in blue because the Ark was the earthly equivalent of the *Kisseh ha-Kavod*, the Throne of Glory. It was fitting, therefore, that it be covered in blue, for as other talmudic masters have suggested, blue "resembles the sea and the sea resembles the sky and the sky resembles the throne of divine glory" (T.B. *Menahot* 43b).

The Ark of the Covenant draped in blue as well as the blue thread made of *tekhelet* were both evocative of the Throne of Glory. The connection between the Ark and the Throne of Glory, as representing the abode of God on earth, is more clearly envisioned and better understood than the thin blue thread (*tekh-elet*) in the *tzitzit*. Various explanations have been suggested for this.

The *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*, Mitzvah No. 386 (a work frequently attributed to Rabbi Aaron Ha-Levi of Barcelona 13<sup>th</sup> cent), suggests that the white and the blue of the *tzitzit* symbolize the body and the soul of man. The white symbolizes the body created from matter which originates beneath the divine throne, i.e., the natural world. The blue resembles the blue of the heavens and refers to the soul of man emanating from the Celestial Throne. He further says that this is the meaning of the talmudic teaching (T.B. *Menahot* 43b) that the blue resembles the oceans, etc.

In line with this symbolic/mystical train of interpretation, Rabbi Soloveitchik interpreted the white in the fringes as representing clarity, logic, that which is evident and understandable in the world of reality. Blue represents the opposite: the mysterious, mystical, remote and transcendental. It is the Infinite – which is beyond human reach and true comprehension. It is the Ultimate, namely, the Throne of Glory itself.<sup>2</sup>

#### DISAPPEARANCE OF THE TEKHELET

At some point, the *tekhelet* disappeared from the field of Jewish ritual practices.<sup>3</sup> In the long run, this did not cause a decline in the observance of the commandment to wear a garment with *tzitzit*. The Mishnah (*Menahot* 4:1; T.B. *Menahot* 39a) makes it clear that *tekhelet* is not indispensable for the fulfillment of the precept. Nevertheless, the nature and reasons for its disappearance require clarification.

Numerous explanations have been offered. Rabbi Herzog surmises that it was the Arab conquest of Israel in the seventh century that brought an end to the snail-based dyeing industry in Israel.<sup>4</sup> The *Jewish Encyclopedia* suggests that the Romans issued edicts that only royalty could wear garments colored with these dyes, and only imperial dye houses were permitted to manufacture it. This apparently drove the Jewish *tekhelet* industry underground. Later, with the Arab conquest of *Eretz Yisrael*, the secret of *tekhelet* was essentially lost and the dyeing process forgotten.<sup>5</sup>

Within the past century and a half, numerous attempts have been made to identify the particular snail used in making the *tekhelet* and in renewing the manufacturing process. During the present decade, another endeavor has taken place and a noticeable spread in the use of the *tekhelet* has become evident. All these attempts are based upon the assumption that the absence of *tekhelet* constitutes a partial or incomplete fulfillment of *tzitzit* and that the return to wearing the blue would constitute enhancing fulfillment of the precept.

A close reading of the relative text in *Bamidbar Rabbah* (17:5) and *Midrash Tanhuma* (Shelah, Chap. 15) give expression to an intriguing and opposing theory: "Now, however, we possess only white, for the blue has been<sup>6</sup> hidden [*nignaz*]".

The word *nignaz* suggests a deliberate withdrawal on ideological grounds. For example, the same term, *bikshu li-gnoz*, is used when consideration was given for withdrawing the Books of Ezekiel (T.B. *Hagigah* 13a), Proverbs and Ecclesiastes (T.B. *Shabbat* 30b) from the canon of Scripture. The possibility of a purposeful withdrawal [hiding, buried, or cached] of the *tekhelet* appears to have been ignored until the 19<sup>th</sup> century when R. Israel Joshua Trunk, in his collection of response, *Yeshu'ot Malko*,<sup>7</sup> wrote that once the decision was accepted that the precept of *tzitzit* can be fulfilled without the blue, the *tekhelet* was purposely hidden and henceforth the commandment was to be fulfilled with the white threads only. He added that the Ari ha-Kadosh in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Safed had adopted the same approach.

#### CONCEALMENT OF THE TEKHELET

Still to be clarified is the rabbinical motivation for purposely ignoring a positive commandment of biblical origin, namely, the thread of blue. The authors of this paper are suggesting that the concealment of the thread of blue is related to the history of Jewish mysticism. Excesses related to the attribution of mystical meaning and power ascribed to the *tekhelet* were a matter of serious concern to mainstream rabbinic authorities. They either heard or witnessed, with trepidation, the spread of heretical theosophical and theological ideas associated with the *tekhelet* as well as practices bordering on idolatry.

During the era of the Second Temple and after its destruction, Gnosticism and mysticism captured the hearts and minds of Jews as well as non-Jews,

both in Israel and in the Diaspora. The goal of these movements was to enable man to establish a link with God, to withdraw from the snares and temptations of the temporal world and to leap into the realm of the divine, so as to know its peace and its power. It was believed that a secret method existed by which men might enter into this mystical realm.

Normative Judaism understood that the gulf between mortal man and the Almighty was unbridgeable and impassible. It therefore taught one to accept one's mortality, and the existing world which is one's home, and to improve and perfect both to the degree and extent that such is humanly possible. The means toward this end was the Torah (Law). This transcendence or supererogation of the Law for the purpose of a more direct and intimate connection with God (*Unia Mystica*) was deemed perilous if not sacrilegious. It opened the door to superstition, to speculative vagaries filled with misleading images and fanciful symbols. Moreover, it denied a life that needed discipline by which it might be refined and spiritualized. It is because, as normative Judaism taught, man cannot leap across his finitude and his mortality that God has given us His Torah by which we can realize our potential to become more fully human. Man becomes godlike through *Imitatio Dei*: as He is compassionate and merciful, so too must we strive to be (T.J. *Pe'ah*, 3a).<sup>8</sup> Man is always perfectible, but never perfect.

R. Meir's association of the color blue with the sea, sky and Throne of Glory, as a demonstration of the link between the earthly and the heavenly, was seen not merely as a symbol, but as a possible vehicle and instrument for performing supernatural acts. The thread of blue was thought to be capable of acting as the mystical facilitator whereby the practitioner could actually stand before the throne of the Almighty and intimately experience the presence of, or merging with, the *Shekhinah*. It wasn't the symbolism of the *tekhelet* that troubled the rabbis but the mistaken belief in its mystical potency. The *tekhelet* mystics held fast to the notion that by wearing the blue thread one becomes a participant in a cosmic drama that would permit one to behold the Divine Presence.

A striking incident is recorded in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Hagigah* 2:1), involving R. Meir and his errant teacher, known as *Aher*, "the other." *Aher* (Elisha ben Avuyah) was excommunicated by the Rabbis, apparently for having yielded to Gnostic heresy. When he died and was buried, smoke was seen

rising from his grave, a sign that he was burning in hell. R. Meir rushed to the site and spread his *tallit* (apparently with its blue thread) over the grave of his master exclaiming: "Sleep for the night, which is this world, and when morning comes, which is the world to come, if the Good [God] redeem you, He will redeem you, and if He is unwilling to redeem you, I will redeem you."

The thread of blue in R. Meir's *tallit* can be perceived, according to the talmudic narrative, as the mystical facilitator, able to rescue Aher from the painful consequences of his heresy. Not to be overlooked are the remarkable last words of R. Meir: "If the Good [God] redeem you, He will redeem you, and if He is unwilling to redeem you, I will redeem you." It was possibly if not probably understood by those assembled that R. Meir had command of supernatural powers (locked in the thread of blue), capable of saving his master from the punishment meted out to heretics in the hereafter, without being entirely dependent on God's mercy. It was this kind of misunderstanding of the function of the blue thread that the rabbinic authorities wanted to suppress, leading to the decision to hide the *tekhelet*.

At the beginning, we noted that the biblical precept of *tzitzit* contains two elements, remembering the commandments and being "holy to your God." With the disappearance of *tekhelet*, the symbolism of the heavens and the Throne of Glory disappeared. The rabbis responded by devising a system of knots and coils that helped one to remember the commandments. Remembering the commandments thus replaced the mystical transport to heaven, focusing upon halakhic commitment to the Torah rather than mysticism.

Rabbi Yom-Tov Lipmann Heller,<sup>9</sup> in his work *Ma'adanei Yom Tov*,<sup>10</sup> cites a custom of the controversial Rabbi Solomon Molcho (a "dreamer" and kabbalist).<sup>11</sup> Molcho would make four sets of coils on his *tzitzit*, consisting of 10, 5, 6 and 5 coils in each set. This numerical sequence (10 = the Hebrew letter *yud*, 5 = *heh*, etc.) was meant to symbolically represent the ineffable Name of God, thereby restoring the mystical allusion to heaven and His Throne of Glory. It would appear that the search for an enhanced religious, and at times mystical, experience continues.

#### NOTES

1. All translations from Soncino CD ROM, slightly amended.
2. Lecture by Rabbi J. D. Soloveitchik, write-ups of which can be found in: A. R. Besdin, *Man of Faith in the Modern World: Reflections of the Rav*, vol. 2 (Hoboken, N.J.: Ktav Publishing Vol. 39, No. 2, 2011

House, 1989), pp. 25-28. Also in: M. Yair Kahn, *Shiurei Ha-Gri"D: Inyanei Tefillin, Ketivat Sta"m ve-Tzitzit* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2004), p. 225.

3. Both the *Midrash Tanhuma* (Shelah, chap. 15) and *Bamidbar Rabbah* (17:5) lament: "... and now we have no *tekehet*, only white ..."

4. Rabbi Isaac Halevi Herzog, "Hebrew Porphyrology", *The Royal Purple and The Biblical Blue* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1997), p. 112.

5. Isidore Singer (ed.), *The Jewish Encyclopedia* (Varda Books, on the WEB as eBookShuk, original publication: 1901-1906); CD ROM 2400. See also: *Vayikra Rabbah* (Margolit), chap. 32, note 1.

6. The Soncino translation here inserts the following: "[divinely]." This is an attempt by the editors and others to deny the possibility that the Rabbis purposely hid the *tekehet*. The present paper offers a different, "non-apologetic" explanation.

7. Responsa *Yeshu'ot Malko, Orakh Hayyim, siman 3*. Rabbi Israel Joshua Trunk, born 1820 in Plock, Poland, died in Kutno, Poland, in 1893. After serving as rabbi of various communities in Poland, he became rabbi of Kutno in 1861. He joined the Zionist *Hibbat Zion* movement, and participated in the famous halakhic dispute regarding the permissibility of agricultural work in the Land of Israel during the sabbatical year.

8. Ben-Zion Bokser, *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, vol. 31, 1963, pp. 1-32.

9. Rabbi Yom-Tov Lipmann ben Natan ha-Levi Heller (b. Wallerstein, Bavaria, 1578; d. Krakow, August, 1654) was a Bohemian rabbi and Talmudist best-known for writing a commentary on the Mishnah called *Tosefot Yom-Tov* (1614-17). His major halakhic work was *Ma'adanei Yom Tov*. Heller was one of the major talmudic scholars in Prague and in Poland during the "Golden Age" before 1648.

10. At the end of T.B. *Menahot*, in his commentary to the work of Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel (known as the *Rosh*), *Hilkhot Ketanot* (Minor Laws), *Hilkhot Tzitzit*, p. 127, note 48.

11. Solomon Molcho (Hebrew: Shlomo Molkho), originally Diogo Pires (1500–13 December 1532), was a "New Christian" who reverted to Judaism, possibly declared himself the Messiah, and was burnt at the stake for apostasy by the Catholic authorities.