

Tekhelet — A Colour of the Covenant

By D'vorah Berkowitz

There is a new colour becoming fashionable on the streets of Jerusalem today. It is the colour blue. By fashionable, we do not mean, that the wealthy and suave upper class are donning blue blouses or blue jewellery in excessive displays of their opulence. Rather, blue is beginning to re-appear in the strings that hang down the sides of the trousers and dangling from the four corners of the prayer shawls of religious Jewish men. Why blue? What is its religious, or better, Biblical significance to those who clam to live by the Torah? The meaning of the colour blue is the subject of this article.

The Hebrew word used in the Bible to denote this special blue is *tekhelet* תִּלְכַּת.ⁱ Tekhelet is a word that does not necessarily connote only the shade of blue, but also the source and procedure used to produce a special blue dye. Most sources agree that the source for the dye is the chillazon sea snail, found in the eastern sections of the Mediterranean.ⁱⁱ The process to produce the dye is complicated. Accordingly, ever since ancient times, tekhelet has been expensive. There are, of course, cheap copies of the dye, which have been used by Jewish people and others when they could not afford the true tekhelet dye. For example, several years ago archaeologists found some important remains in the “Bar Kokhba Caves” of the Judean wilderness.ⁱⁱⁱ These artefacts, associated with the second Jewish revolt against the Romans that ended in the year 135, included a *tallit* (a prayer shawl worn by Jewish religious men) with a blue cord attached to each of the four corners of fringes. These blue strings were dyed with a cheap imitation of tekhelet.

Royal Blue

There are four uses of tekhelet in the Hebrew Scriptures. First, tekhelet was used to decorate the robes and buildings of royalty. For example, Ezekiel 23:5–6 speaks of the Assyrian nobles who were dressed with tekhelet and Esther 1:6 provides a description of the lavishly decorated Persian royal palace, complete with white and blue (tekhelet) wall hangings. From these, and other examples from the ancient Near East, one might conclude that to wear or to possess tekhelet was to be associated with royalty.

Pure Blue

The second use of tekhelet is in the formal ritual clothes of the High Priest. We are told in Exodus 28:6, 15, 31, and 37 that the ephod, the breast piece, and the headpiece all had tekhelet in them. Moreover, the High Priest's robe was to be entirely of tekhelet (verse 33).

In order to understand what the Holy One might have been teaching by these uses of tekhelet in the wardrobe of the High Priest, we need to explore a series of Hebraic, Biblical thoughts. Our journey begins in Genesis 1:6-7. Here we are told that when God created the heavens and the earth He "separated the water under the expanse from the water above it." When we look at this in real life, it is easy to see that God made the seas to reflect the sky.

As we read further in the Scriptures, we begin to notice that a pattern was set back in Genesis: God made the physical world to reflect some of His spiritual realities. That which is above is reflected down here below. This becomes especially evident in two places in Exodus. Firstly, in 25:9 God instructed Moshe to make the *mishkan* (tabernacle) exactly like the pattern that He showed Moshe. There was/is a heavenly mishkan and God wanted Moshe to make an earthly one to picture it.

Second, and more pertinent to our purposes here, Exodus 24:9–10 tells us that, "Moshe and Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under His feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself." In this remarkable passage we are told that the throne of God was couched in blue (sapphire). Then, we are informed that this blue was like the sky itself. What appears to be unfolding is that the throne of God is reflected by the sky and the sky is reflected by the seas. In other words, the spiritual realities above are reflected in God's physical creation. The purity and righteousness of God are pictured by the pure "tekhelet" blue of the sky and seen in the "tekhelet" blue of the seas.

But what does this have to do with the fact that the High Priest wore tekhelet? To answer this question, we must remember that the High Priest represents us before God, while at the same time representing God to us. When we see the garb of the High Priest, with its abundant use of tekhelet, we catch a symbolic glimpse of the righteousness and purity of God.

There is one more direction in which we can take this idea. The High Priest himself is a picture of the perfect and great High Priest Himself, Yeshua the Messiah. The Scriptures indicate, "In Messiah all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Colossians 2:9). In other words, Yeshua was the perfect reflection of the purity and righteousness of God who was made flesh and dwelt on earth. Colour Yeshua tekhelet!

Finally, we note that this same Yeshua is in each and every one who trusts in Him. He is desirous of living His life in us and through us, ministering God's righteousness and purity — ministering God's "tekhelet" — to all with whom we come into contact.

Our Blue Identity

The third use of the word tekhelet in the Scriptures is in relation to the fringes that the Israelites were enjoined to wear, described in Numbers 15: 37–41. Here, the Holy One instructed His people to put fringes on the corners of their four-cornered garments. In each of the fringes they were to place a cord of blue (tekhelet).

There are a number of lessons that we can learn from this use of tekhelet. Firstly, the Torah itself explicitly states that when one looks upon the fringes, he does so that "you will remember all the commands of the Lord, that you may obey them." Based on what we have seen thus far about tekhelet, this makes perfect sense. When one sees the blue, he is reminded of God's Words. In turn, he is then reminded of the purity and righteousness of God Himself. Remember: that which is above is reflected here below. The purity of God above is reflected by the tekhelet here below.

The second lesson we can learn from the blue fringes is that Yeshua, according to John 1:1 and 14, is the Torah made flesh. He is the living Torah, living out the Written Torah. Thus, when we see the fringes, we are reminded of Yeshua in us, the Hope of glory.

Thirdly, observing the commandment to wear fringes also reminds us of whom we are as new creations in Messiah. Specifically, the tekhelet fringe reminds us that we are royalty, for the Bible states, 1 Peter 2:9, "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

But there is more to our spiritual identity than just that. The Scriptures tell us that in Yeshua we have been made into new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). Moreover, we are also informed that when we became believers in Yeshua we were so radically changed inside that now we are now actually constituted as righteous people (2 Corinthians 5:21, Romans 5:19). We are no longer the sinners we once were. It is true that we sin in our flesh, but the good news is that this flesh is now circumcised from us (Colossians 2:11). Sin is not our basic identity any more like it once was. We are new people in Messiah. Indeed, the good news is even better than most of us realize! When we see the fringes with the tekhelet, we are reminded that in Messiah, God has constituted us righteous. It is as if He coloured us tekhelet!

These are Biblical truths that many believers have learned since their childhood. Yet, they are so easily forgotten. Thanks be to our loving and understanding Father in Heaven Who, centuries ago, described in the Torah a gracious system of gentle reminders to help us along the way when we are so forgetful. Part of this system of reminders is the fringes with their cord of blue.

The Blue of God's House

The fourth and final way that tekhelet is used in the Scriptures is in relation to the construction of the mishkan. In reality, when Israel worshipped in the mishkan, with the pure blue Middle Eastern sky, and the blue of the High Priest, they were literally surrounded by blue. But specifically, Exodus 26 says that tekhelet was a major feature of the colour scheme of the curtains for the Tent of Meeting. In fact, Exodus 26 provides for us an amazing amount of detail concerning the construction of those curtains with the tekhelet. Given the fact that there were many details that we wish we knew, one must wonder why did the Holy One provide so much information concerning the construction of those curtains?

Perhaps the answer to this question might come clearer to us when we realize that the Tent of Meeting was, among other things, the Family Home for God and His people. Hence, if we can understand how this house was constructed, it might teach us something about how God puts together His family of believers in all ages.

This becomes clearer when we examine the details of chapter 26. First, we see that the cover for the Tent of Meeting was actually comprised of two equal sets of five curtains each, stretching across the width of the Tent (north to south). Actually, there were four layers of curtains covering the mishkan. Exodus 26 is speaking specifically of the innermost and most symbolically important layer. There were patterns woven into these inner curtains and tekhelet was a main part of the colour scheme.

One may wonder, what might the Holy One have been teaching by designing the mishkan with these two sets of equal curtains? One suggestion, of course, is that this construction made it easy for transportation. Although this fact is true, one cannot help but to wonder if there is more to it than that.

We think so. May we explain? Perhaps the two equal sets of curtains might picture for us how the Body of Messiah is “constructed.” One set of curtains might picture the Jewish believers, the remnant of true believers in Messiah from the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The second set of curtains might picture the gentile believers, the remnant of true

believers in Messiah from among the other nations of the world. Each set of believers has the same spiritual constitution: we all have Yeshua in us and we are all constituted the righteousness (tekhelet) of God. This is, after all, how the family of God is made. Moreover, the Body of Messiah is specifically referred to in the Newer Covenant Scriptures as God's temple (1 Corinthians 3:16 and Ephesians 2:21). This picture seems to fit.

There is one more important aspect to this picture that the Torah seems to be painting. Exodus 26:3–4 says that the Israelites were to “Make loops of blue [tekhelet] material along the edge of the end curtain in one set, and do the same with the end curtain in the other set.” What the Torah seems to be saying in this verse is that the two equal sets of curtains that constitute God's House, are joined by what they have in common — the tekhelet.

If we are correct, this would picture a wonderful and profound spiritual reality about the Body of Messiah. It tells us that the Body of Messiah, God's House, is comprised of two main groups of people: Jewish believers in Yeshua and gentile believers in Yeshua. Each group has their own distinctives and cultural expressions of their faith. But there is a precious point of unity: we are joined by our tekhelet. We both have the same Yeshua in us. Remember, He is God's perfect tekhelet, the perfect representation of God's purity and righteousness. He lives in each and every one of us, desiring to live out God's Torah in each of our lives. The Yeshua in Jewish believers is the same Yeshua that is in gentile believers; it is the same tekhelet.

In addition, both Jewish believers and gentile believers are constituted with the same righteousness and purity. There is no difference. We both have the same tekhelet. God does not have one different purity and righteousness for Jewish believers and a different one for gentile believers. God's Word is the same because we have one God, Who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We are joined by the tekhelet that we both have in common.

We realize that this understanding of the construction of the mishkan may sound rather midrashic (allegorical). Indeed, the Torah does not specifically spell out the points we have made. However, one must ask, why *did* God provide us with so many details about this part of the construction of His House, while He leaves out many details concerning other things He has revealed? We are not being dogmatic at this point. We are simply offering what we consider to be a viable explanation for some of the meaning of the construction of the mishkan and its use of tekhelet.

If we are correct, however, understanding the mishkan in this way provides for us encouraging truths concerning the unity of the Body of

Messiah. We are Jewish believers in Yeshua and gentile believers in Yeshua. We can express our Faith in Yeshua through our own cultural norms. There is diversity in the Body of Messiah. Gentile believers do not become Jews when they believe in the Messiah of Israel nor do Jewish believers in Yeshua give up their Jewish identities upon believing. The colour tekhelet reminds us of that which we have in common: Yeshua in us, God's Word, and God's righteousness in our new creation selves.

Blue is, indeed, becoming fashionable among religious Jewish men in Jerusalem. Perhaps, given our understanding of what tekhelet means from the Scriptures, blue might also become the "in" colour among those who trust in the Messiah of Israel.

ⁱ There is not a great deal written about this subject in the evangelical world. For a classic Orthodox Jewish treatment on the subject, see *Tekhelet*, by Aryeh Kaplan.

ⁱⁱ There is an excellent website called, *P'til Tekhelet*. One can glean a host of valuable information about tekhelet and its modern rediscovery from it.

ⁱⁱⁱ Yadin, Yigael. *Bar Kokhba: The Rediscovery of the legendary hero of the second Jewish Revolt against Rome*. Jerusalem: Wiedfenfeld and Nicolson, 1971, pp. 82-65 and *Tekhelet*, *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 14, pp. 913-914.