

Geulas Yisrael #68 Ki teze

The Color of redemption

The mitzvah of tzizit is mentioned twice in the Torah. In parshat Ki teze, tzizit is embedded within an extensive list of seemingly unrelated mitzvot. The mitzvah of tzizit is implanted in a section of halachot pertaining travel, agricultural activity, house construction and, of course, personal clothing. It is an odd placement for the mitzvah of tzizit.

We typically view tzizit as part of a *ritual uniform*. By situating tzizit within this broad list of human activity, the Torah underscores that mitzvot are all-pervasive. Religious experience isn't limited to the "house of study" or the prayer hall and it isn't confined solely to ritual ceremony. Hashem's will penetrates all precincts of the human condition, including travel, industry, domestic activity and personal clothing. Nothing is devoid of Hashem's will.

The "other" reference to tzizit appears in parshat Shelach, at a very depressing stage of history. We had arrived at the doorstep of Jewish history and were primed to enter the land of Hashem. Tragically, we slandered Israel, balked at this epic opportunity, and were sentenced to a 40-year detour through the hot deserts of Sinai.

Looking to restore the people's faith in a redemptive future, Hashem delivered the mitzvah of tzizit. As the Torah articulates, tzizit elicits awareness of all mitzvot- *וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֵת כָּל מִצְוֹת ה'* and, additionally, tzizit recall our Exodus from Mitzrayim. Something about this mitzvah stokes our redemptive vision.

An "all-access" color

The blue dye of techelet, mentioned in the "redemptive" tzizit section of Shelach, but omitted from the more technical section of Ki teze, is an evocative color. The gemara in Menachot (43b) claims that tchelet-blue evokes the azure blue of the ocean, which in turn, conjures the blue horizon of the sky, which itself, alludes to the blue sapphire base of Hashem's heavenly throne. Through the color of tchelet, aided by a little imagination, we can trace our way to the divine throne in heaven.

After the meraglim debacle our entry to Israel was severely delayed, and our encounter with the heavenly city of Yerushalayim was deferred. Though we could not physically stand in Yerushalayim under the gates of heaven, we could still virtually gaze at the gates of heaven- through tchelet. The "tchelet ticket" to Yerushalayim wasn't just a consolation for that generation, but an opportunity for every Jew who could not visit the city they so deeply longed for. Even at a distance from the heavenly city we could always pray in her direction and additionally, could be transported to the gates of heaven through a quick glance at the blue strings of tzizit. Tchelet was a blue ticket back to Yerushalayim.

Princely nobility

Additionally, the tchelet blue dye showcases our lofty rank as Hashem's children. In antiquity this blue dye, extracted from the blood of sea-mollusks, was inordinately expensive. Cheaper dyes were harvested from plants or tree saps, but this luxurious and visually stunning pigment was animal-based. Being so pricey, it was reserved solely for the affluent and the noble. Stiff penalties were levied for illegal possession or illegal sporting of contraband tchelet. It was the aristocratic color of the upper. The politics of color were quite rigid.

Yet, every Jew wore four stringlets of tchelet upon each of their garments. We may not be affluent aristocracy, but we are all princely. As Hashem's selected children, we conduct ourselves with the class and dignity of our station. Tchelet dye always reminded us to conduct ourselves with the self-respect and pride of nobility. Tchelet was our badge of honor.

In the aftermath of the meraglim, this message was especially resonant. We may have betrayed our covenant with Hashem, and we may have been condemned to certain death. Yet, as far as we fell, we were still princes of history, chosen to represent Hashem in this world, and bearing tchelet dye reminded us of our noble mission.

A "Lost" color

Sadly, for thousands of years we lost tchelet, and with that loss our ticket to heaven expired, and our token of Jewish nobility vanished. Ironically, the color which was intended to connect us to heaven and remind us of our inalienable nobility was lost to Jewish exile. For thousands of years, without access to tchelet, we maintained a shell-performance of the mitzvah. From a purely *halachik* standpoint the blue strings aren't crucial to the performance of the mitzvah. As the Mishnah in Menachot (38a) rules, tchelet strings aren't "me'akeiv", which means their absence from tzizit doesn't disable the mitzvah. For much of our exile, we fulfilled the kernel of the mitzvah even without tchelet. Even though the formal mitzvah wasn't diminished, the overall experience was clearly impacted. We lost our colorful ticket to heaven, and we lost our vivid reminder of Jewish nobility.

Blue became yellow

Tragically we didn't just forfeit the tchelet, but witnessed in horror, as our blue pride turned to yellow shame. As early as the eighth-century Jews were forced to wear demeaning badges -more often than not, colored yellow or faded white. This policy wasn't just a strategy to distinguish Jews from their neighbors, but was an attempt to humiliate Jews by forcing them to wear faded and colorless badges.

In an edict of 1215 Pope Innocent III justified the yellow badge policy based upon the mitzvah of tzizit:

“we decree that such Jews . . . in every Christian province . . . shall be marked off in the eyes of the public from other peoples through the character of their dress. Particularly, since it may be read in the writings of Moses [[Numbers 15: 37–41](#)], that this very law has been enjoined upon them.”

What had once been a royal badge of sparkling blue had now deteriorated into a faded and yellowing badge of embarrassment. The color schemes of the illustrious period of Jewish history were replaced with colors of debasement and subjugation. History was discolored.

The return of blue

As part of our return to Israel and our return to history we have resurrected our original badge of honor. In his redemptive essay entitled “Ikvita D’meshicha” (the Messianic era), the Chofetz Chaim claimed that, toward the end of history Jews will be particularly committed to the mitzvah of tzizit !! We have begun to express his prophecy! We have recovered the full spectrum of tzizit, once again combining blue and white strings in a complete mitzvah. Once again, we walk proud in this world, with the royal blue dye on our tzizit and on our national flag.

Once again, we stand in Yerushalayim, gazing at our tchelet strings while glancing upward at the actual gates of heaven. The restoration of blue tchelet has dovetailed with the resurrection of Jewish history. Yellow has become blue, shame has become pride. We are back in blue.

A New color

To this palette of history, we have inserted an additional color. First the first time in 1900 years since the defeat of Rabbi Akiva and Bar Kochba, we have restored the tradition of Jewish soldier-scholars. As a teacher in a hesder yeshiva, I am exhilarated by the prospect that I am part of the restoration of this lost tradition. What a zechut!

As part of this shift, a new color has become synonymous with Jewish pride. Green uniforms of Israeli soldiers have become a symbol of national dreams and messianic hopes. For centuries we lived in abject terror of soldiers and policemen. We finally have a Jewish army to protect us, and Israeli soldiers dressed in army fatigues is a visual affirmation of the great shift in history.

One of the most gratifying scenes in Israel is watching an Israeli soldier dressed in a green army uniform, wrapped in blue tchelet tzizit. History is closing and all the colors are merging. Green and blue have replaced yellow and white, and our world has become colored with redemption.

