

Parshat Tetzaveh: The Unity of the Gemstones

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Upon the heart of the Kohen Gadol, the high priest, lay the *Choshen*, displaying twelve gemstones meant to represent each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Each stone, like each of the tribes and each one of us, had its own color, character, and temperament, highlighting how God embraces and celebrates our unique differences. Some shine like rubies, others are tough like diamonds – but we all stand beloved before God as the high priest carries us, in all our variety, upon and within his heart.

The two final gemstones, representing the tribes of Yosef and Binyamin, were the *Shoham* and *Yashpeh*, traditionally identified as onyx and jasper ([Shemot 28:20](#)). These stones, placed side by side in the *Choshen*, meet again elsewhere in Tanach, in a vision of the Messianic age. The prophet looks ahead to the bright future of the Jewish people, when the tempest-tossed nation will settle firmly upon the ground, with towers built of ‘*Kadkod*’ and gates of shimmering gemstones ([Yishayahu 54:11-12](#)).

‘*Kadkod*’, it seems, is a precious stone, but its identity is somewhat unclear. The Talmud [Baba Batra 75a](#), noting this ambiguity, claims that the uncertainty about the *Kadkod* has roots in a debate between two Talmudic sages, and perhaps even in a debate between the ministering angels Michael and Gabriel. There in the heavens, the angels quarrel over the true identity of the *Kadkod* – is this just another name for *Shoham*, or for *Yashpeh*? Suddenly, God is asked to settle this geological debate. Hashem states: *Kadkod* is ‘*kadein v’kadein*’, ‘like this and like that.’ In other words, the *Kadkod* is a melding of both the *Shoham* and the *Yashpeh* stones, a mixture of jasper and onyx together.

What is so significant about the identification of the *Kadkod* to the point where, in the Talmudic story, God is called upon to settle the debate?

In his commentary to the Talmudic story, R. Shmuel Eidels (Maharsha) draws our attention back to the representation of Yosef and Binyamin in the *Choshen*, the final two stones *Shoham* and *Yashpeh*, respectively. The synthesis of these two stones, Maharsha argues, reminds us of a deeper synthesis upon which the ultimate redemption lies: the partnership between the physical and the spiritual.

In rabbinic literature, the two characters Yosef and Binyamin reflect two components necessary to bring about the Messianic age: the physical salvation of the Jewish people, along with the spiritual uplifting of society.



Yosef is tasked with tending to the physical and financial needs of his brothers. The *Shoham*, the stone of Yosef, represents the responsibility to ensure the physical sustenance of our people. Indeed the idea of a Mashiach ben Yosef, a messiah from the tribe of Yosef is one who, like his forebear Yosef, ensures that the physical and material infrastructure for the Jewish people is developed.

The tribal inheritance of Binyamin includes the section of the Beit Hamikdash containing the Holy of Holies. Binyanim, and its representative *Yashpeh* stone, represents the pursuit of our spiritual rejuvenation, through their connection to those hallowed grounds, the very site of “God’s place” in this world.

God advocates the admixture of *Shoham* and *Yashpeh*. For it is the combining of the physical and the spiritual facets that are necessary for true redemption, recognizing that each is necessary to ensure the emergence and development of our ultimate redemption.

It is nothing short of a miracle to live in this generation, to be witness to and to participate in the melding of *Shoham* and *Yashpeh*, the combination of physical and spiritual advancement that propels us towards redemption. We live at a time when we have a Jewish state with soldiers on the front lines protecting us from harm. They are bringing tzitzit, tefillin, and sefarim along with them to their bases, tanks, and armored personnel carriers. They are sending countless *sheilot*, halakhic questions, to their respective rabbinic authorities to ensure they conduct themselves in a manner consistent with the dictates of the Torah. These past few months have seen numerous grassroots initiatives emerge throughout Israel and the Diaspora in both the physical and spiritual realms, from food collection to clothing distribution and from tzitzit tying to recitation of Tehillim. We are seeing the synthesis of our physical and spiritual needs come to life, paving the way towards the redemption we so eagerly await.

May the *Shoham* and the *Yashpeh* continue to join together into *Kadkod*, and may God save us, physically and spiritually, from all those who wish to do us harm.