

ON CONCEALING *TEKHELET* AND REVEALING THE *SHEKHINAH*

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In the article "The Mystery, Meaning and Disappearance of the *Tekhelet*" (*JBQ*, Vol. XXXIX:2, April-June 2011) it is suggested that the disappearance of the biblical blue dye was due to a deliberate concealment devised to curb overly enthusiastic mystics. It is my contention that this theory is entirely baseless, as is the proposed application of the term *nignaz* (concealed). To support their theory, the authors bring only two proof texts regarding one individual, R. Meir.

The first text quoted is one in which R. Meir famously articulates the unique quality of *tekhelet* as being a reminder of God's throne through gradations (TB *Menahot* 43b). The authors see in this simile a crossing of normative boundaries and an expression of practical mysticism that was to be shunned. They write: "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." But surely attempting to behold the Divine Presence is not, and was never, beyond the pale of normative Judaism. Indeed, throughout the Talmud, Midrash, and halakhic literature, it is taught that performing certain acts endows the practitioner with the merit of beholding the *Shekhinah*. Examples of this are: 1) Going from the *beit kenneset* to the *beit midrash* (TB *Berakhot* 64a); 2) Not viewing illicit scenes (*Mesechet Derekh Eretz*, Arayot 13); 3) Giving a *perutah* to a beggar (TB *Bava Batra* 10a). 4) Last, but not least, "by being punctilious in the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*," R. Shim'on Bar Yohai teaches, "one is worthy of seeing the Divine Presence" (TB *Menahot* 43b). Although one might argue that this refers to wearing *tekhelet*, the *Shulhan Aruch* (*Orah Hayyim* 24:6) and others quote this statement long after the *tekhelet* was lost, thus applying it to those wearing *tzitzit* without *tekhelet*.

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Clearly *tekhelet* was not unique in its ability to provide access to the Divine Presence; and, in any case, seeking the *Shekhinah* was never viewed as something to be shunned. On the contrary, it was, and is, something to which one should aspire.

The second proof text brought in support of the theory that *tekhelet* was concealed to curb mystical enthusiasm is an anecdote describing R. Meir's great loyalty toward his apostate teacher, Elisha ben Avuyah, in an effort to save him from hell (TJ *Hagigah* 2:1). The authors surmise: "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." First of all, there is absolutely no indication that *tekhelet* plays any role in the story. But more importantly, the conjecture that R. Meir intended to exert special powers to circumvent God is unfounded, unnecessary and wholly uncharacteristic. A simple reading of the story shows that R. Meir intended to use the merit of his teaching Torah as a demonstration of the merit of his teacher. And although R. Meir's students argue that this is only efficacious for a son to a father, R. Meir responds that a teacher is like a "*tashmish kedushah*" (accessory to holiness) for his student, and the student's merits can therefore elevate the teacher.¹

Having dismissed the claims of purported mystical excesses associated with *tekhelet* as being the impetus for the deliberate removal of *tekhelet*, it is also important to note that the term "*nignaz*" (stored away) has varying applications in the Talmud and Midrash. One usage is that brought in the article: deliberate concealment of "questionable" biblical books. A different usage of the term is brought in the Mishna (*Me'ilah* 17:2), the Tosefta (*Pe'ah* 4:18) and the Gemara (TB Sanhedrin 104a). Here the word refers to a ruler storing away precious items for safekeeping. Rabbi Eliyahu Tavger² cites the Ramban (Ex. 28:2) who writes in this vein: "Today, no one but kings dare wear *tekhelet*." The implication being that *tekhelet* was stored away by the kings for royal use, thus creating dangerous circumstances which made its use impossible by anyone outside the royal court.

In consonance with this understanding, the *Yeshu'ot Malko* does indeed argue that *tekhelet* had become too dangerous to wear. However, he makes the

astounding conjecture that owing to this danger, the Rabbis annulled the biblical *mitzvah* of *tekhelet*. This argument is very difficult, for it is unheard of that a biblical commandment can be annulled for all time. In his refutation of the *Yeshu'ot Malko*, Rabbi Gershon Hanokh Leiner asks how such an extraordinary annulment could be made without a single mention anywhere in the Talmud!³

Rabbi Isaac Luria, the Ari, mentions the time of this "storing away" in connection with the destruction of the second Temple (c. 70 CE) – "For the truth is that at this time, after the destruction of the Temple, we do not have the power to wear *tekhelet*."⁴ However, by all accounts *tekhelet* was still in use following the Temple's destruction, the earliest date given for its loss being 474 CE. Commenting on this discrepancy, Rabbi Yehiel Tykochinski explains: "It is therefore understood that only during the time of the Temple was it found in abundance, following which it was *nignaz* - not stored away completely, but less often to be found."⁵

In conclusion, there is no compelling reason to assume that *tekhelet* was annulled in general or deliberately hidden away to curb the spiritual aspirations of immortal teachers such as R. Meir, whose only desire was to be worthy of the Divine Presence through Torah learning and *mitzvot*.

NOTES

1. See the commentary *Korban ha-Edah* (JT, *Hagigah* 2:1).
2. "The Meaning of Nignaz in the Writings of the Sages", http://www.tekhelet.com/pdf/Nignaz_Tavger.pdf
3. *Ein ha-Tekhelet*, (Benei Berak: Mishor, 1999) p. 381.
4. See Rabbi Isaac Luria, *Pri Etz Hayyim*, Sha'ar ha-Tzitzit, ch. 5. Some have seen in these words a nullification of the *mitzvah* of *tekhelet* at the present day: see Rabbi Borshtien, *Ha-Tekhelet*, (Jerusalem: 1998) p. 138, n. 35; others have understood them to be merely a statement about the spiritual status of Jewry, but not an invalidation of the possibility to fulfill the *mitzvah* (see Borshtien, p. 139, n. 36). Rabbi S. Taitelbaum explains that it is absurd to suppose that the Ari would nullify a biblical command: see *Lule'ot Tekhelet, Petil Tekhelet*, (Jerusalem: 2000) p. 40. Indeed, he brings the letter of the Lubavitcher Rebbe (Rashab) who, though he held the Ari's word to imply that we do not wear *tekhelet* today, nevertheless writes that "the *mitzvah* is an eternal one, and when we will be able to fulfill it, we must do so" (*Lule'ot Tekhelet*, p. 52).
5. Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Tykochinski, *Ir ha-Kodesh ve-ha-Mikdash*, vol.5 (Jerusalem, 1970) p.50. See also *Lule'ot Tekhelet*, p. 20, for a similar argument.