



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

IN THE PARSHA

True Blue

This week, I begin by taking the liberty of sharing two very personal experiences with you. Neither experience felt momentous at the time they occurred, but both experiences had a significant impact on my “inner” spiritual life.

The first occurred several decades ago when a group of Israeli scholars visited Baltimore, where Chavi and I then resided. They scheduled a lecture at a local synagogue and entitled the lecture “A New Discovery.” The title evoked my curiosity, and so I decided to attend.

This lecture was perhaps the first delivered in the United States to present the findings of this group about the discovery, or perhaps

more aptly, the recovery, of the authentic *tekhelet*, the blue dye which was used extensively in ancient times by royalty and, more importantly, from our Jewish perspective, to color some of the fringes of the *tzitzit*.

In this connection, I remind you of the following passage in this week’s Torah portion, *Shelach* (Numbers 13:1-15:41). The passage reads:

“The Lord said to Moses as follows: Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages; let them attach a cord of blue to the fringe at each corner. That shall be your fringe; look at it and recall all the Commandments of the Lord and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge...” (Numbers 15:37-39)

We are thus enjoined to attach *tzitzis* or fringes to our four-cornered garments and to add to these fringes a “cord of *tekhelet*” or “cord of blue.” The source for the dye which colored the cord of blue was a sea animal known as the *chilazon*, whose exact identity was lost over the ages so that until recent times observant Jews only attached colorless fringes to their *talitot*.

A nineteenth century rabbi, Rabbi Gershon Henoch Leiner, who was also the leader of the Hasidic sect of Radzin, spent years

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searching for a sea creature which fit the description of the *chilazon*. His investigations led him to conclude that the *chilazon* was a sub-species of squid from which the blue dye could be extracted. The rabbi was unsuccessful in convincing the other leading rabbis of his time that his identification was accurate, but his followers, Hasidim of Radzin, adopted the practice of using this particular dye for their “cord of blue.”

In the twentieth century, Rabbi Isaac Herzog, who would eventually become the Chief Rabbi of Israel, wrote a dissertation disproving Rabbi Leiner’s contention, and suggested instead that the true *chilazon* was a type of snail, specifically the *Murex trunculus*.

The scholars who visited Baltimore and delivered the lecture which I attended were representatives of a then recently formed organization called *Ptil Tekhelet* (see www.tekhelet.com). They reported that their organization had not only corroborated Rabbi Herzog’s findings but had resolved the various questions which he had left unanswered. Furthermore, this organization was producing *tzitzis* with the proper “cord of blue” and marketing their product.

Need I say more? I was convinced there and then that I would procure this new product and would wear the “true blue” *tekhelet* from that time forward. I continue to do so to this very day, *baruch Hashem*.

When I began using this “cord of blue,” I could not have predicted the profound impact it would have upon me. I am neither a mystic nor the son of a mystic, but nevertheless, I experience a numinous mystical

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mood each morning when I wrap myself in my *tallit* to pray.

This was the first of the two experiences that I share with you today.

The second experience occurred that same year. I was privileged to lead an expedition to Eastern Europe, mainly to visit sites of Jewish significance. Tragically, most of those sites are neglected cemeteries or synagogues in ruins. My special interest is visiting graves of famous Jews, particularly the graves of great rabbinic scholars.

I've guided quite a few similar expeditions over the years and have developed the practice of studying the published works of the rabbinic scholars whose graves I visit. That year, we visited the city of Prague and stood on line behind a large group of non-Jewish tourists who were attracted to the grave of the great *Maharal*, allegedly the creator of the famous Golem and thus an attraction even to non-Jews.

Rather than wait patiently behind that group, I suggested that we visit another famous grave, that of *Maharal's* successor in the Prague rabbinate, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim of Lunshitz, known by the title of his masterwork, *Kli Yakar*. At his grave, I

made a silent vow to familiarize myself, not only with *Kli Yakar*, but with its author's entire *oeuvre*.

That ordinary episode led to what some would call serendipity, and others would call divine providence. For, you see, having adopted the "cord of blue," I began to search the sources to better understand its significance. Particularly, I was puzzled by *Ramban's* insistence that it was the "cord of blue," not at all the "cords of white," that effectively enable us to "recall the Commandments of the Lord and observe them" and not follow our eyes' and hearts' and lustful urges. What's the secret of the cord of blue's magic?

I found many answers to this question, but my favorite one is to be found in the *Kli Yakar's* commentary toward the end of this week's Torah portion. He begins with the Talmudic passage which reads, "The blue of *tekhelet* evokes the image of the deep blue sea, from there to the blue of heaven, and from there to the Almighty's 'throne of glory.'"

He proceeds to describe the grand works of nature which faithfully obey the Lord's design. The heavens, with the sun and the

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moon and the stars, never fail to follow the Lord's will. Furthermore, they do so joyously, without protest or resistance, happily and out of love.

The sea behaves differently. Its waves strive to overcome their boundaries and to deluge the shore. They are contained, however, by their fear of the Lord and not by the love they have for Him. As the prophet Jeremiah puts it, "Should you not tremble before Me, who sent the sand as a boundary to the sea... not to be transgressed? Though its waves toss, they cannot prevail..." (Jeremiah 5:22)

Kli Yakar thus reminds us that there are two basic motives to religious behavior: fear or awe of the Almighty on the one hand, love and attachment to Him on the other. By contemplating the sea, we acknowledge His power to contain our "waves," our "lustful urges." By moving on to contemplate the heavens, we are inspired to worship him joyously and lovingly. We are then positioned to stand before His "throne of glory."

There are many paths open to us in our search for spirituality. The "cord of blue" provides us with one easy path—the color blue, and only the color blue, prompts us to contemplate the deep blue sea and the blue of heaven. From there, we can glimpse the Almighty's "throne of glory," the highest level of spirituality!

I can't assure you that you will glimpse the Almighty's "throne of glory" the instant you begin to wear the "cord of blue." But I encourage you nevertheless to wear *tekhelet*, contemplate both the sea and the heavens, and patiently await the next glorious spiritual achievement. ■



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