



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
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IN THE PARSHA

The Blue Above the White

It may not sound like much of a story to you, but to me it was meaningful at many levels. I've heard the story three times now, each time from a different person. Each of the three went through a remarkably similar experience and shared their story with me. I'd like to share the story with you, but some background will be necessary.

You must already have guessed that the background will derive from this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Shelach* (*Numbers* 13:1-15:41). At the very end of the *parsha*, we read:

"The Lord said to Moses, as follows: Speak to the people of Israel and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout

all their generations; 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... Thus you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God..." (*Numbers* 15:37-40).

The Torah's word for "fringes" is *tzitzit*. This *mitzvah* is punctiliously kept by observant Jews to this very day, consistent with the verse's insistence that it is a practice mandated for "all their generations." The *mitzvah* entails affixing strings to four cornered garments, so that the strings hang loose. Jewish men wear these garments, and the stringent view, codified by the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 8:11), requires that the garment be worn above one's other clothing "so that one will constantly look at the *tzitzit* and thereby remember the commandments."

More lenient views allow the garment to

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be worn under one's other clothing, but still encourage the practice of letting the strings themselves protrude from one's clothing so that the wearer can see them, reflect upon them, and call to mind the Almighty's commandments. This is the practice of very many observant Jews nowadays.

Now we come to the story told to me by three young men who had identical experiences with these strings while wearing them in their everyday business settings. To my knowledge, these three men do not know each other and indeed dwell and work in communities geographically distant from each other.

Each of them approached me with his story, convinced that I would be especially interested in what had occurred to them. Each of them was approached, and I should emphasize respectfully approached, by a non-Jew, and each of them was asked if there was any significance to the strings protruding from their sweaters or shirts. Each of them replied that the strings had religious significance and that they wore them in keeping with a biblical command.

Each of them was surprised when the non-Jew immediately understood that this practice traced back to the Bible; in his words, to the Old Testament. Two of them even knew the chapter and verse of the passage in the Bible, quoted above. "Of course," they said, "these strings are the 'fringes' which must be attached to your garments."

All three "storytellers" were similarly taken aback by the expertise shown by their non-Jewish acquaintances and by their familiarity with "our" Bible. But none of the three stories ends quite here.



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All of the three non-Jews then persisted to ask, "But where are the blue strings? Doesn't the Bible prescribe that a blue cord be attached at each corner? Where are your blue cords?"

The Torah's word for the "blue cord" is *tekhelet*. In Biblical times, and for centuries thereafter, one of the cords, and according to some opinions two of them, were dyed blue before being attached to the four-cornered garment. The dye was extracted from a sea creature known as the *chilazon*. Over the course of Jewish history, this practice was discontinued. It became difficult to procure this specific dye, and eventually the precise identity of this sea creature became unknown.

Two of my "storytellers" were able to share the reason for the absence of the blue cord with their non-Jewish questioners.

One had to simply admit that he did not know why he did not keep the precise biblical command in his personal practice.

Permit me now to briefly tell you another story; namely, the story of the discovery of the identity of the sea creature, the recovery of the knowledge necessary to extract the dye from that creature, and the renewed ability to observe this *mitzvah* exactly as prescribed by the Torah, in the portion we read this Shabbat. The story begins in the late 19th century with the efforts of Rabbi Gershon Henoch Leiner to travel to the museums and aquariums of the Mediterranean coast in search of the *chilazon*. He identified the creature as a subspecies of a squid, and his followers to this day derive the blue dye from this creature and color their *tzitzit* with it. However, rabbinic authorities of that time disagreed with this rabbi's opinion.

Closer to our time, the late Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Isaac Herzog, wrote his doctoral thesis on the topic of the identification of this sea creature and brilliantly defended his thesis: The *chilazon* was not a type of squid, but was rather a type of snail, known scientifically as the *murex trunculus*.

Even closer to our time, barely two decades ago, a group of Israeli scholars found a source in the ocean near Israel for this snail, and through a fascinating process too long to describe here, began to produce the dye and made *tzitzit* dyed blue available to the public. Nevertheless, a great number of rabbinic scholars remain unimpressed by these discoveries.

For a full description of this entire topic, one should consult the following website:

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What was my response to the three "storytellers" and their tale? I chose not to share with them my own private reflection to the effect that had these three non-Jews met me, they would have found the blue cord of which they were informed by their own biblical study. Rather, I chose to share with the storytellers one of the explanations given for the blue cord.

This explanation is to be found in a book entitled *Sefer HaChinuch*, written by a medieval rabbi whose identity is uncertain. The book is an enumeration of all 613 Torah commandments, with an explanation given about the "root" of each command. By "root" he means, in contemporary terminology, the symbolic significance of the commandment. Here is what the author writes, in my own admittedly free translation:

"The underlying reason for this *mitzvah* is apparent. What can be a better reminder of God's commandments than an appendage attached to one's everyday apparel? But more than that, let us analyze the colors of the cords: blue and white. White is symbolic of the body, which our tradition (see *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer* 3) teaches us was primordially created from the snow, which is white. Note too, that the body in its early embryonic stage resembles intertwined cords or strings (see Tractate *Niddah* 25b). The blue cord is reminiscent of the blue sky, of heaven, and is symbolic of all that is spiritual about mankind. Therefore, the blue cord is wound around the white to emphasize that ultimately, the soul is above, and the body is below; the soul is primary, and the

body but secondary."

For those of us who wear *tekhelet* nowadays, and I am proud that I am among them, a powerful image that comes to our mind's eye every time we gaze upon our *tzitzit* is the image of a blue cord wound around a white one, and it is a constant reminder that our "white body" is best enveloped by our "blue soul," that our earthly selves must be subservient to our heavenly spirit.

Will the beautiful explanation given by the *Sefer HaChinuch* convince those who do not yet wear *tekhelet* to begin to do so? Perhaps not. But perhaps you, dear reader, with the addition of so many similar rabbinic passages available on the tekhelet.com website, will be convinced to add this new spiritual dimension to this important everyday *mitzvah*. ■



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