

TEKHELET: A COLOR OF THE COVENANT
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God conveys some of His most precious covenant truths through the use of various colors. Accordingly, the Bible speaks of white, gold, purple, and red. In this essay, we would like to focus on one of those symbolic hues, the color blue.

The Hebrew word used in the Bible to denote this special blue is *tekhelet*, תכלת. Tekhelet is a word that does not necessarily connote only the shade of blue, but also the source and procedure used to produce a special blue dye. Most sources agree that the source for the dye is the chillazon sea snail, found in the eastern Mediterranean, especially along the coast of ancient Phoenicia (modern Lebanon and parts of Israel). The process to produce the dye is complicated. Accordingly, ever since ancient times, tekhelet has been expensive. Of course, cheap copies of the dye have been used by Jewish people and others when they could not afford the true tekhelet dye.

For example, several years ago archaeologists found some important remains in the Bar Kokhba Caves of the Judean wilderness. These artefacts, associated with the second Jewish revolt against the Romans that ended in the year 135 CE, included a *tallit* (a prayer shawl worn by Jewish religious men) with a blue cord attached to each of the four corners of fringes. These blue strings were dyed with a cheap imitation of tekhelet.

Royal Blue

The Hebrew Scriptures speak of at least four uses of tekhelet. First, tekhelet was used to decorate the robes and buildings of royalty. For example, Ezekiel 23:5–6 mentions that Assyrian nobles were dressed in tekhelet. Another good example is in Esther 1:6, where we see a description of the lavishly decorated Persian royal palace, complete with white and blue (tekhelet) wall hangings. From these, and other examples from the Ancient Near East, one might conclude that to wear or to possess tekhelet was to be associated with royalty.

Pure Blue

A second use of tekhelet is in the formal ritual clothes of the Israelite High Priest. We are told in Exodus 28:6, 15, 31, and 37 that the ephod, the breast piece, and the headpiece all had tekhelet in them.

Moreover, the High Priest's robe was to be entirely of tekhelet (Exodus 28:33).

In order to understand what the Holy One might have been teaching by these uses of tekhelet in the wardrobe of the High Priest, we need to explore a series of Hebraic, biblical thoughts. Our journey begins in Genesis 1:6–7. Here, the text says that when God created the heavens and the earth, He separated the water under the expanse from the water above it. Having done this, it is easy to see that God made the seas to reflect the sky.

As we read further in the Scriptures, we begin to notice that a pattern was set back in Genesis: God made the visible world to reflect some of His invisible realities. This becomes especially evident in two places in Exodus. Firstly, in 25:9 God instructed Moshe to make the *mishkan*, מִשְׁכָּן, (tabernacle) exactly like the pattern that He showed to Moshe. There was/is a heavenly mishkan and God wanted Moshe to make an earthly one to picture it, so that we can understand the invisible one, by learning about the visible one here on earth.

Secondly, and more pertinent to our purposes here, Exodus 24:9–10 tells us that, Moshe and Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up Mount Sinai and “saw the God of Israel. Under His feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself” (24:10).

In this remarkable passage we are told that the throne of God was couched in blue (sapphire). Then, we are informed that this blue was like the sky itself. What appears to be unfolding is that the throne of God is reflected by the sky and the sky is reflected by the seas. In other words, the invisible realities in God's realm are reflected in God's visible creation.

Hence, Psalm 97:1–6 says:

The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad;
let the distant shores rejoice.
2 Clouds and thick darkness surround him;
righteousness and justice
are the foundation of his throne.
3 Fire goes before Him
and consumes His foes on every side.
4 His lightning lights up the world;
the earth sees and trembles.
5 The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,
before the Lord of all the earth.
6 The heavens proclaim His righteousness,
and all the peoples see His glory.

Notice, we see, especially in 97:2 “that righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.” Then, 97:6 indicates that “The heavens proclaim His righteousness, and all the peoples see His glory.” In other words, the righteous of God’s throne, symbolized by tekhelet, is reflected in the pure blue of the skies. This, in turn, is reflected by the water below. The invisible is made visible by that which God has created.

What does this have to do with the fact that the High Priest wore tekhelet? To answer this question, we must remember that the High Priest represents us before God, while at the same time representing God to us. When we see the garb of the High Priest, with its abundant use of tekhelet, we catch a symbolic glimpse of the invisible righteousness and purity of God, which is made visible for us to see and to learn.

We can take this idea in one more direction. The High Priest is a picture of the perfect and great High Priest Himself, Yeshua the Messiah. The Scriptures say, “In Messiah all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). In other words, Yeshua was the perfect reflection of the purity and righteousness of God who was made flesh and dwelt on earth. He made the invisible qualities of the eternal God

visible by His very presence on earth, living among us. Thus, color Yeshua tekhelet!

Finally, we note that this same Yeshua is in each and every one who trusts in Him. He is desirous of living His life in us and through us, ministering God's righteousness and purity — ministering God's tekhelet to all with whom we come into contact.

Our Blue Identity

The third use of the word tekhelet in the Scriptures is in relation to the fringes that the Israelites were enjoined to wear, described in Numbers 15:37–41. Here, the Holy One instructed His people to put fringes on the corners of their four-cornered garments. In each of the fringes they were to place a cord of blue (tekhelet).

We can learn a number of lessons from this use of tekhelet. Firstly, the Torah itself explicitly states that when one looks upon the fringes, he/she does so “to look at and remember all the commandments of the Lord, so as to do them” (15:39). Based on what we have seen thus far about tekhelet, this makes perfect sense. When one sees the blue, one is reminded of God's Words. In turn, he is then reminded of the purity and righteousness of God Himself. The invisible purity of God is made visible by the tekhelet.

The second lesson we can learn from the blue fringes is that Yeshua, according to John 1:1 and 1:14, is the Torah made flesh. He is the Living Torah, the very personification of the Written Torah. Thus, when we see the fringes, we are reminded of Yeshua in us, the Hope of glory. Thirdly, doing the instruction to wear fringes also reminds us of who we are as new creations in Messiah. Specifically, the tekhelet fringe reminds us that we are royalty, for the Bible states, 1 Peter 2:9, quoting Exodus 19:5, “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”

Let us delve deeper into that precious truth. The Scriptures tell us that in Yeshua we have been made into new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). Moreover, we are also informed that when we became believers in

Yeshua, we were so radically changed inside that now we are now actually *constituted* as righteous people (2 Corinthians 5:21 and Romans 5:19). We are no longer the sinners we once were. It is true that we sin in our flesh, but the good news is that this flesh is now circumcised from us (Colossians 2:11). Sin is not our basic identity any more like it once was. We are new people in Messiah. Indeed, the good news is even better than most of us realize! When we see the fringes with the tekhelet, we are reminded that in Messiah, God has constituted us righteous. It is as if He colored us tekhelet!

Many believers have learned these biblical truths since their childhood. Yet, they are so easily forgotten. Thanks be to our loving and understanding Father in Heaven Who, millennia ago, described in the Torah a gracious system of gentle reminders to help us along the way when we are so forgetful. Part of this system of reminders is the fringes with their cord of blue.

The Blue of God's House

The fourth and final way that tekhelet is used in the Scriptures is in relation to the construction of the mishkan. When Israel participated in the mishkan, with the pure blue Middle Eastern sky, and the blue of the High Priest, they were literally surrounded by blue. However, Exodus 26 specifically says that tekhelet was a major feature of the color scheme of the curtains for the Tent of Meeting. In fact, Exodus 26 provides for us an amazing amount of detail concerning the construction of those curtains with the tekhelet. Given the fact that there were many details that we wish we knew, one must wonder why did the Holy One provide so much information concerning the construction of those curtains?

Perhaps the answer to this question might come clearer to us when we realize that the Tent of Meeting was, among other things, the Family Home for God and His people. Hence, if we can understand how this house was constructed, it might teach us something about how God puts together His family of believers in all ages. To do this, we must explore the beginning of Exodus chapter 26.

First, we see that the cover for the Tent of Meeting was actually comprised of 4 layers of coverings. We are interested in the innermost layer, the covering that one saw upon entering the Mishkan. This covering was made from 10 strips of material that went the entire length of the Mishkan and stretching across the width of the Tent (north to south). According to Exodus 26:3, these ten strips of materials were divided into two equal sections of 5 curtains each. They were joined to each other very closely. Hence, if one could look down upon the top of the Mishkan, from a bird's eye view, he would see two equal sets of curtains, consisting of five equal strips each and joined to each other very closely. Patterns were woven into these inner curtains and tekhelet was a main part of the color scheme (Exodus 26:1).

Exodus 26:6 then indicates that these two sets of five curtains were joined to each other by a series of loops with gold clasps in the loops, "that the Mishkan will be one unit." Notice this, however, these connecting loops were to be made of tekhelet (26:4)!

One may wonder, what might the Holy One have been teaching by designing the mishkan with these two equal sets of curtains, joined by gold clasps in loops of tekhelet? One suggestion, of course, is that this construction made it easy for transportation. Although this fact is true, one cannot help but to wonder if there is more to it than that. We think so. May we explain? We cannot, of course, be dogmatic about what we are about to share — it is just an idea. Yet, given the context of the Mishkan construction, we think it is a very viable suggestion.

Perhaps the two equal sets of curtains might picture for us how the Body of Messiah is constructed. After all, the Body of Messiah is also God's house, just in a different form than the Mishkan. One set of curtains might picture the Jewish believers, the remnant of true believers in Messiah from the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The second set of curtains might picture the gentile believers, the remnant of true believers in Messiah from among the other nations of the world. Each set of curtains is equal. Accordingly, each set of believers has the same invisible constitution: we all have

Yeshua in us, and we are all constituted the righteousness (tekhelet) of God. This is, after all, how the family of God is made. Moreover, the Body of Messiah is specifically referred to as God's holy place (1 Corinthians 3:16 and Ephesians 2:21). Thus, this picture seems to fit. The Torah seems to be painting one more important aspect to this picture. Exodus 26:3–4 says that the Israelites were to "Make loops of blue [tekhelet] material along the edge of the end curtain in one set and do the same with the end curtain in the other set." What the Torah seems to be saying in this verse is that the two equal sets of curtains that constitute God's House, are joined by what they have in common — the tekhelet!

If we are correct, this would picture a wonderful and profound reality about the Body of Messiah. It tells us that the Body of Messiah, God's House, is comprised of two main groups of people: Jewish believers in Yeshua and Gentile believers in Yeshua. Each group has their own distinctive and cultural expressions of their faith. Yet, each group is equal to each other, one is not more important than the other. Yet, there is a precious point of unity: we are joined by our tekhelet. We both have the same Yeshua in us. Remember, He is God's perfect tekhelet, the perfect representation of God's purity and righteousness. He lives in each and every one of us, desiring to live out God's Torah in each of our lives. Moreover, the Yeshua in Jewish believers is the same Yeshua that is in Gentile believers; it is the same tekhelet.

In addition, both Jewish believers and Gentile believers are constituted with the same righteousness and purity. There is no difference. We both have the same tekhelet. God does not have one different purity and righteousness for Jewish believers and a different one for Gentile believers. God's Word is the same because we have one God, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We are joined by the tekhelet that we both have in common. There is one Torah and it is the same for both Jewish and gentile believers in Yeshua.

We realize that this understanding of the construction of the Mishkan may sound rather midrashic (allegorical). Indeed, the Torah does not specifically spell out the points we have made. However, one must ask, why did God provide us with so many details about this part of the construction of His House, while He leaves out many details concerning other things He has revealed? We are not being dogmatic at this point. We are simply offering what we consider to be a viable explanation for some of the meaning of the construction of the Mishkan and its use of tekhelet.

If we are correct, however, understanding the Mishkan in this way provides for us encouraging truths concerning the unity of the Body of Messiah. We are Jewish believers in Yeshua and Gentile believers in Yeshua. We can express our faith in Yeshua through our own cultural norms. Indeed, the Body of Messiah contains much diversity. Gentile believers do not become Jews when they believe in the Messiah of Israel nor do Jewish believers in Yeshua give up their Jewish identities upon believing. However, the color tekhelet reminds us of that which we have in common: Yeshua in us, God's Word, and God's righteousness in our new creation selves.

Other colors carry significant meanings, as well. Tekhelet, however certainly stands out because the Holy One instructed us to wear it, to look upon it, and to remember it in our daily lives.