

Blue and White / כחול ולבן

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Some 50 years ago, a young Bnei Akiva couple on a Misrad haKeshet mission to the refuseniks in the Soviet Union smuggled out the words to the song כחול זה וזה לבן (Blue and white is my colour), written by Yisrael Rashar, of Minsk. They also managed to somewhat learn the tune.

It was a patriotic song written in Hebrew, in order to express a connection to far-away Israel. The song became an anthem of Soviet Jewry. Today it is an "amami" folk song, sung by school children, and familiar to their parents and grandparents - just as the commandment of tzitzit says: "לדורותם" - throughout the generations!

The writer refers to the Israeli flag whose colours are based on the talit. Those colours are based on the tzitzit: white with a string of tekhelet, as commanded in parshat Shlach Lecha. The colour tekhelet is defined as a sky blue or a sea blue in rabbinic sources. The dye was obtained from the glands of a specific type of snail in the Mediterranean, and it was very expensive. This dye produced a lasting colour which was worn only by aristocracy and priests in the ancient world. But that distinctive, expensive tekhelet string worn by every Jewish male on the corners of his garment, reminded him both of his status as a Jew and of his duty to the mitzvot.

The exact dye source (a sea snail / hilazon, the Murex, trunculus) and the dyeing technique were lost in the political upheavals in Eretz Yisrael, the exile of the Jewish communities, and the dispersions of the galuyot (exiles). Midrash Tanchuma and Midrash Raba Shmot (8th century) wrote: "and now we have no tekhelet, but only white (ed- threads for the tzitzit); for tekhelet has been hidden."

The knowledge and art of procuring the dye from the snails was lost, but the mitzva of tzitzit was kept as best as it could under the circumstances. (The Talmud, Baba Metzia, discusses a "fake" vegetable based dye; those using such were lambasted for "counterfeiting" the dye.) The Zohar associates that special sky / sea blue colour, tekhelet, with justice, and the white with Divine compassion, "rachamim".

Rav Soloveitchik wrote that white is clarity – logic-based comprehension. And tekhelet signifies the mysterious and irrational side of the world. He explains that the blue and white are interdependent, and they are tied together in tzitzit.

Ptil tekhelet is a mitzva which had been lost to us, and "re-discovered" in a redeemed Medinat Yisrael. Tekhelet dye is available again thanks to intense research and work by the Ptil Tekhelet organization and others, based on the doctoral thesis of the first Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel, Rav Dr. Isaac Herzog.

The "ptil tekhelet" of the tzitzit offers an astounding lesson. The word "לדורותם" -for their generations" is written without 2 vav letters. (One vav should be in the middle of the word "dor: generation" and one in the plural form: "dorot - generations"). Perhaps this is a hint that over the generations, some aspect of the mitzva would go missing. But as multiple generations passed on our heritage, the strings would again unite: tekhelet blue and white -

שלנו צבע זה ולבן כחול (Blue and white is our colour).

The pasuk states: "for their generations"/ "לדרתם". So too, the smuggled-out song reflects that idea "these are my colours, all my days forever!" (ed: perhaps all OUR days forever). Three psukim (Shmot 15: 38-40) with some outstanding science, philosophy, nationbuilding, and commandment orientation are all packed into Shlach Lecha's mitzva of tzitzit. Three psukim with some astounding history and perspective!

This techelet information in this dvar Torah is based on an article "The Meaning of Techelet" – Baruch Sterman, published in B'Or HaTorah #11 (1999)

מקדש לרפואת כל חולי ישראל - The words to the songs:

<https://shironet.mako.co.il/artist?type=lyrics&lang=1&prfid=806&wrkid=4312>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_MpzEgWL5Y

Shanen Bloom Werber shares Parshat Shlach Lecha with her husband, her son, and a daughter – as "our" birthday parsha. A community activist, she was Em Bayit for the first Torah MiTzion in Chicago, and lives in Gush Etzion.

מוקדש לרפואת כל חולי ישראל

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