

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP

Center for Modern Torah Leadership



חרות ואחריות

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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

SOME KIND OF BLUE? TRADITION, TEKHELET, AND THE RAV

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The color of an object can be defined by the wavelengths of light that it reflects, which means that objects really have no color at all. Identical reflected lightwaves can then hit human retinas and generate wholly different mental experiences. Wittgenstein thought that our capacity to communicate about color at all was miraculous. Regardless, there is no way to convey subtleties of color reliably through pure language.

For this reason, halakhic treatments of color are heavily based on practical tradition. Which colors create *niddah* and which don't is learned by show and tell, not by reading ArtScroll.

All this by way of introduction to the topic of tekhelet, the dye of uncertain color (sky-blue? sea-green? wine-dark like the Homeric ocean?) that was used in the High Priest's garments and that we have a mitzvah to place on our tzitzit. The fundamental halakhic difficulty with tekhelet is that it disappeared from history for a millennium. In "Two Types of Tradition" (שעורים לזכר אבא מרי ז"ל כרך א), the Rav made famous a family tradition about his great-grandfather the Beit Halevi's response to the Radziner Rebbe's attempt to recover tekhelet in the late nineteenth century.

ידוע מה שאירע

בין זקני הגאון רבי יוסף דוב הלוי ובין האדמו"ר הגאון מראדזין
בנוגע לתכלת שבציצית,

שהרבי מראדזין חידשה וציוה לכל חסידיו להטיל תכלת בציציותיהן.

האדמו"ר ניסה להוכיח על יסוד הרבה ראיות

כי הצבע הזה הוא באמת התכלת.

רב יוסף דוב טען כנגד ואמר

שאינן ראיות וסברות יכולות להוכיח שום דבר

במילי דשייכי למסורת של

שם אין הסברה מכריעה כי אם המסורה עצמה:

כך ראו אבות וכך היו נוהגים וכך צריכים לנהוג הבנים.

It is well known what happened

between my ancestor the Gaon Rav Yosef Dov Halevi and the

ADMOR Gaon from Radzin

with regard to the tekhelet in tzitzit,

that the Rebbe from Radzin renewed it and ordered all his chasidim to put tekhelet among their tzitzit. The ADMOR tried to demonstrate on the basis of many proofs that this dye is in truth the (halakhic) tekhelet. Rav Yosef Dov countered that proofs and rational arguments cannot demonstrate anything with regard to matters that affiliate with the tradition of *Ask your father and he will tell it to you*.

In such matters, reason is not decisive, but rather the tradition itself: This is what the fathers saw, and so they practiced, and so the children must practice.

The Rav understood the Beit HaLevi to be sealing the issue of tekhelet off from the realm of argument and discussion. What is not clear is exactly what aspect of tekhelet is off-limits to reason and evidence.

I always thought the issue was color; how could we possibly know that we had matched the Torah's intent or Chazal's practice? The discovery of ancient tekhelet textiles would not help with that, as surely even a colorfast dye will change significantly over a thousand years. The fascinating disputes about how best to restore medieval paintings suffice to demonstrate this.

But rereading the Rav's essay this week, it seemed more likely that he had in mind the identity of the *chilazon*, the creature from which the dye is produced. But this made his claim much harder to accept - why shouldn't archaeological or chemical evidence be sufficient to identify ancient dye works, and then the *chilazon*?

The Rav makes the identity of the *chilazon* a quasi-*halakhab l'Mosheb miSinai*, and analogizes identifying the *chilazon* to identifying the *etrog* as the *pri eitzy hadar* required by Vayikra 23:40. Let us accept the analogy for the sake of argument. If the identity of the *etrog* were lost for a thousand years, there would be a reasonable basis for claiming that it could not be restored on the basis of arguments from texts, no matter how clever or clear. But

if we found an ancient repository of palm, willow, and myrtle branches, and together with them the right quantity of one and only one species of fruit, would that not be sufficient grounds to reconnect us with the original tradition?

Proponents of contemporary *tekhelet* make this argument, with a shiur by Rav Herschel Schachter providing far and away the most coherent and compelling version I have heard or seen. But Rav Schachter adds a wrinkle. As part of the ongoing debate over his tekhelet, the Radziner published on p. 13 of the introduction to his Ein HaTekhelet a letter that he described as being an authorized representation of the Beit Halevi's position. That letter seems to undermine the Soloveitchik family tradition.

הגאבד"ק בריסק דליטא שיחיה
מסר כל טעמו ונימוקו בדבר מיאוננו במצות התכלת
לאחד ממיודעינו
שיכתוב ויאמר לנו משמו בזה הלשון:
כמע"ל לא ביאר בדבריו מה זאת מצא אחר שנשכח,
אם מציאת הדג או הוצאת צבעו,
ורק אחרי אשר כמע"ל יברר זאת, היינו האם היה בזה דבר הנשכח והוא
מצאה,
אז נהיה מחויבים לשמוע אליו וללבוש.
אכן אם נאמר כי הדג היה במציאות,
וגם הוצאת צבעו היה ידוע בכל זמן מהזמנים שעברו עלינו מעת שפסקה
התכלת בישראל,
ועל כל זה לא לבשוהו אבותינו ואבות אבותינו,
הרי הוא כאילו יש לנו קבלה ומסורה מאבותינו
כי זה הדג וצבעו איננו החלזון והתכלת
אף שהוא בכל הסימנים שמנו חז"ל,
כי אפילו נרבה כחול ראיות, לא יועילו נגד הקבלה והמסורה.
ורק אחרי אשר יברר לנו כי דג זה או מלאכת צבעו נפסק ונשכח מציאתו
או ידיעתו בשום זמן מהזמנים ונפסקה בזה הקבלה, אז יהיה לנו דברי
ההלכה לראיה.
"ע"כ דבריו שיחיה."

The Gaon Av Beit Din of Brisk in Lithuania, may he live, gave over all his reasons and rationales in the matter of his eschewing the mitzvah of tekhelet to one of our intimates, so that he would write and say to us in his name, as follows:
Your Honor did not explain in his words what it is that he found after it had been forgotten.
whether it is the finding of the fish or of the way to extract its dye, and it is only after Your Honor explains this, namely whether there was something here that was lost and that he found, that we will be obligated to heed him and to wear it.
However, if we say that this fish was in existence, and the extraction of its dye was known in all the times that have passed over us from the time that tekhelet ceased to be in Israel,

and that despite all this it was not worn by our fathers and our fathers' fathers, that would be as if we had a received tradition from our ancestors that this fish and its dye are not the chilazon and the tekhelet even if it fits all the identifying characteristics given by Chazal, and even if we multiplied proofs like sand, they would not prevail against a received tradition
Only after it became clear to us that this fish or the craft of making its dye had its existence or knowledge creased and forgotten at some time and this interrupted the reception,
then we would use the words of the halakhab as proofs.

Rav Schachter reads this letter as saying that empirical evidence is perfectly sufficient in the absence of a positive tradition, but cannot overcome a negative tradition. In this case the negative tradition was that no known creature and manufacturing process could yield tekhelet. Rav Schachter then cites Rav Elyashiv as finding the Radziner's letter a more plausible account of the Beit HaLevi's position than the Rav's report, and this seems clearly to be his own opinion, even though the Rav's report is confirmed by other branches of the Soloveitchik family.

Now the whole point of "Two Types of Tradition" is that students can challenge their teachers' intellectual traditions but must simply receive their practical traditions. Rav Schachter implicitly points out that this metatradition of the Rav is grounded in intellect, and therefore can be challenged and even rejected by his students.

I suggest that metatraditions by their nature as abstractions are always grounded in intellect rather than pure reception, and therefore can never have unchallenged authority. A claim of authority on the basis of tradition is therefore never self-sufficient. It can succeed only if there is a shared prior metatradition about the authority of tradition, and that metatradition will be accountable to the ordinary intellectual processes of Torah.

Even without Beit HaLevi's authority, however, I find the argument that color requires a live tradition to be powerful. Furthermore, Beit HaLevi seems to have been quite right in doubting that the Radziner had properly identified the *chilazon* with the cuttlefish, and I remain unconvinced by the partisans of *murex trunculus* (with the caveat that Rav Schachter argues that neither precision of color nor of mollusk are necessary). The barriers to reconstructing lapsed traditions such as tekhelet should not be impassable, but they can and should be quite high.

The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.