

The following essay is provided, complimentary, to further the knowledge of *tebbelet*. If you found the essay of interest, please consider purchasing the book in which it is published:

~~~~~

## Threads of Reason

*A Collection of Essays on Tekhelet*

by Rabbi Mois Navon

~~~~~

available at: <https://www.createpace.com/4597533>

About the Book

This collection of essays is the result of research spanning more than a decade, motivated by nothing more than the desire to reach a clear understanding of the issues surrounding the rediscovery of *tebbelet* through the *Murex trunculus*. Is it possible to renew a biblical commandment without a *mesorah* (tradition)? Must religious objects, like *tzitzit*, be made from kosher substances? Does one violate the *melakhab* (Shabbat labor) of trapping when obtaining a snail on Shabbat? Bringing together biology and halakhah, chemistry and *aggadah*, archeology and theology – and applying careful consideration and logical reason – these essays seek to address the numerous questions that arise in the endeavor to revive this unique commandment. And as *tebbelet* is a commandment that has been forgotten for over 1300 years, each essay is colored with the marvel of a lost biblical commandment returned anew to the Jewish people. This collection of essays, then, can be seen as a group of threads – threads of reason – spun into a cord strong enough to bind a new generation in the fulfillment of an ancient commandment.

False *Tekhelet*

Though there is a vast amount of evidence indicating that the true source of *tekhelet* has been found in the *Murex trunculus*, questions nevertheless arise regarding the halakhic consequences of wearing such *tekhelet* were it found not to be the authentic source of the precious dye. Is there some benefit or “*hidur*” that one forfeits if his *tzitzit* are wrongly colored? Does one miss out on fulfilling the positive mitzvah of *tzitzit*? Or worse yet, is one considered in violation of wearing a four-cornered garment without *tzitzit*? And finally, could one be liable to the divine punishment mentioned in the Gemara (Baba Metzia 61b) for wearing fraudulent *tekhelet*?

The “White” Strings – “*HaKanaf*” *Min HaKanaf*

From the verse, “And they shall place on the *tzitzit* of the corner a thread of *tekhelet*” (Num. 15:38), it is learned that the *tzitzit* tassel requires two types of strings, *tekhelet* and “white.”¹ From the words of this verse, “of the corner,” the Gemara (Men. 38a, Shab. 27b) learns that the “white” strings should be like the corner of the garment in color² and/or material³.

The Rambam (Hil. Tz. 2:8) and Rashi (Men. 41b, s.v. *meitvei*) maintain that the “white” strings should be the color of the garment – e.g., a red garment should have red strings. The Rama (Orah Hayyim 9:5), on the other hand, states that the custom of Ashkenazim is to use white strings even if the garment is colored. In order to reconcile these opposing views, a number of *poskim* recommend that one wear a white garment, thus fulfilling the requirements of both opinions.⁴ Furthermore, they note that in addition to fulfilling both opinions, there is an extra

preference to wear a white *talit*, for in so doing one emulates God, His *talit* being, as it were, “white as snow” (Daniel 7:9).⁵

On the other hand, R. Yosef Karo does not seem to be overly concerned as to which color one uses. For though in his *Beit Yosef* he writes, “one should be careful” to use colored strings matching the garment, he brings as practical halakhah the rather ambivalent words:

There are those who state that one is required to make *tzitzit* the same color as the *talit*, and the scrupulous (*medakdekim*) are accustomed to do so.

Shulhan Arukh (Orah Hayyim 9:5)

As for the Rama, he noted that it was “the custom” to wear all white strings based on the words of R. Israel Isserlein in his *Terumat Hadeshen*. In that work (Responsa 46), R. Isserlein explains that the custom is to wear white strings, not based on any halakhic reason, but simply because he has “never seen anyone wear strings other than white,” adding that “there is no issue (*ain kepeida*) with wearing colored strings.”⁶

The Tekhelet Placeholders – *Lo Yehei Ela Lavan*

The Gemara (Men. 38b) states that “if one has no *tekhelet*, he uses white.” That is to say, when no *tekhelet* is available, then the strings that were to be of *tekhelet* are made up of strings like the “white” strings. There is, however, no halakhic necessity that these *tekhelet* placeholder strings to be any specific color, as will be shown presently.⁷

The Gemara (Men. 40a) discusses the issue of wearing *tzitzit* on a linen garment. Given that the *tekhelet* strings must be made of wool (Yev. 4b),⁸ placing them on a linen garment would constitute a forbidden blend of materials known as *shaatnez*.⁹ However, since in so doing one is fulfilling the positive mitzvah of *tzitzit*, the act overrides the negative injunction forbidding *shaatnez*. Nevertheless, the Gemara explains that a decree barring such garments was made to ensure that people would not think that *shaatnez* was permitted in other, non-mitzvah related, instances.

This leads the sage Rava bar Rav Hana to raise a series of objections as to why the decree is unjustified, each of which Rava resolves. At one point, Rava explains

that the decree was issued in order to ensure that one would not violate the prohibition of *shaatnez* if he unwittingly wore the counterfeit dye, *kela ilan*,¹⁰ in place of *tekhelet*, since in such a case he would not be fulfilling the complete positive mitzvah necessary to override the prohibition. To this Rava bar Rav Hana exclaims, “let [the *kela ilan* string] be considered like a ‘white’ thread!” That is, though the *kela ilan* string is invalid to fulfill the commandment of *tekhelet*, it is valid as a “white” string and so one would still fulfill the mitzvah of *tzitzit* (albeit without *tekhelet*). What is astounding about this statement is that *tzitzit* tied, unwittingly, with *kela ilan* are not only considered valid for the fulfillment of the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, they are considered valid to override a biblical prohibition!¹¹

The Hazon Ish (Orah Hayyim 3:25) learns a number of crucial points from this statement of Rava bar Rav Hana:

- For those who maintain that, when there is no *tekhelet*, all the strings are considered like the “white” strings, this statement clearly permits the use of varying colors – even that of *kela ilan*¹² – to fulfill the requirement for “white” strings.¹³ That is to say, there is never any requirement that the “white” strings be the color of the garment.
- On the other hand, for those who explicitly demand that the “white” strings be the color of the garment (e.g., Rambam, Rashi), this statement of Rava bar Rav Hana would have to be understood as implying that the strings that were to be *tekhelet* could, when *tekhelet* is unavailable, be any color at all – even *kela ilan*, adds the Rashba.¹⁴

From this analysis, it is clear that if one unwittingly tied *kela ilan* in place of *tekhelet* (on a non-linen *talit*),¹⁵ he would still fulfill the mitzvah of *tzitzit* without *tekhelet*, *l'hathila*. Similarly, if one employed a blue dye believed to be *tekhelet*, even if it turned out to be inauthentic, he would nevertheless fulfill the mitzvah of *tzitzit* in no less an ideal manner than if he had used only white strings. The demand that the strings be the color of the garment applies only to the “white” strings, not to the *tekhelet* placeholders.¹⁶

The Divine Punishment

Having discussed the permissibility of wearing *kela ilan*, it is important to understand why and when it is absolutely forbidden to wear *kela ilan*.

Raba said, “Why did the Torah mention the exodus from Egypt in connection with interest, *tzitzit*, and weights?” God said: It is I who distinguished in Egypt between a firstborn and a non-firstborn; even so it is I who will in the future exact retribution from him who ascribes his money to a Gentile and lends it to a Jew with interest; or him who steeps his weights in salt; or him who attaches *kela ilan* to his garment and claims it is *tekhelet*.

Baba Metzia 61b

The Gemara here minces no words in conveying the absolute unacceptability of wearing *kela ilan* in place of *tekhelet*. Nevertheless, the punishment is not for merely wearing *kela ilan*, but rather for doing so with the intent of deception – as indicated by the words “and claims it is *tekhelet*.” This is clearly the import of the Gemara, which lists three acts of misrepresentation in which no one but the perpetrator would be able to discern the deception. So to those who might entertain the thought that perhaps “that which is not seen is not known,” God declares that He discerns that which on the surface is not noticeable,¹⁷ as He demonstrated in executing the plague against the firstborn of Egypt.

Alternatively, the Maharasha (ad loc.) explains that God is declaring to those who would try to increase their wealth through evil means that He will punish them as he did the Egyptians who tried to increase their wealth by the evil means of enslaving His “firstborn” Israel. Here, too, the punishment is for those who act out of impure motives. In the case of *kela ilan*, since it is a much less expensive dye than *hillazon*-based *tekhelet*, one would be punished for trying to find a cheap way out of the mitzvah or for selling it as real *tekhelet* to make a large profit.¹⁸

Conclusion

In conclusion, the fundamental problem with *kela ilan* – or any alternative dye for that matter¹⁹ – is when it is used deliberately to commit fraud. Otherwise, as Rava bar Rav Hana taught, there are no negative halakhic ramifications for using a blue dye one believed to be authentic *tekhelet*. And even if one is not utterly convinced that the dye is authentic, he is no worse off using faux-blue for the *tekhelet* placeholders than he would be using white for the *tekhelet* placeholders. I bring this argument here not to suggest that one should knowingly wear false *tekhelet*, but to emphasize that one has nothing to lose, halakhically, by wearing *tekhelet* that he thought might be genuine.²⁰ Indeed, in such a case, the principle of “*sfeika d’oraita l’humra*”²¹ calls for one to go out of his way to fulfill the biblical commandment in its entirety.²²

~ Notes ~

- ¹ While the Torah does not specify a color for the strings that are not *tekebelet*, the Mishnah (Men. 38a) does refer to them as white. The Rambam (Hil. Tz. 1:1) surmises that they are referred to as white because there is no commandment to dye them. Accordingly, I refer to them as “white” in quotation marks to denote that they may not necessarily be white.
- ² “When one begins, he begins with white, [because the verse states,] ‘the corner’ [implying] the same type as the corner” (Men. 39a). See Mishnah Berurah (9:5:15) quoting Pri Megadim.
- ³ See Mishnah Berurah (9:1:4). Rashi (Shabbat 27b, s.v. *min kanaf*).
- ⁴ See for example, Bach (Orah Hayyim 9:3; 24:3), Taz (Orah Hayyim 9:5:8), Magen Avraham (ibid.:6), Pri Megadim (ibid.:6), Beir Heteiv (ibid.:4), Mahatzit Hashekel (ibid.:6), Mishnah Berurah (ibid.:16).
- ⁵ Bach (Orah Hayyim 9:3), Taz (Orah Hayyim 9:5:7), Pri Megadim (ibid.:6), Mahatzit Hashekel (ibid.:6) and Mishnah Berurah (ibid.:15), while of the opinion that the “white” strings are to be actually white, note that those of the opposing opinion, who believe that the *talit* can be the color of one’s pleasing as long as he keeps the “white” strings the same color as the *talit*, have the advantage of fulfilling the ideal of “*ze eli v’amreihu*” – beautifying one’s worship of God. Furthermore, some believe that the need to have the “white” strings be the color of the *talit* is a biblical requirement learned from the words “of the corner.”
- ⁶ See R. Chaim Twerski, “Letters,” *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* XXXV (Spring 1998), pp. 126-7.
- ⁷ While this point is developed in the body of the text, for completeness I note here some of the *poskim* who support this notion: Arugot HaBosem (Helek 3, p. 217); Artzot Hahayim (9:32); Hazon Ish (3:25). Responsa Rosh (klal 2:9) – “two white strings would have sufficed, but we insert another two strings *zekber l’tekebelet*.” Notice that he doesn’t say “another two **white** strings.” Also Tos. (Men. 38a, s.v. *hatekebelet*) state that there is a need for four strings, whether of one type or two, to fulfill “*gedilim*” (which is understood to mean four).
- ⁸ It is interesting to note that, while the Gemara does not give an explanation as to why *tekebelet* must be dyed in wool, modern chemistry has shown that indigo bonds more fast to wool than cotton or linen (see Zvi Koren, “Color My World,” in *For the Sake of Humanity: Essays in Honour of Clemens Nathan*, (Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2006), p. 164.

⁹ See Lev. 19:19, Deut. 22:9-11. *Shaatnez* – the intermingling of wool and linen – is but one of a number of biblically forbidden mixes known as *kilayim*. I make this point here because the discussion in the Gemara refers to the prohibition by this general term.

¹⁰ *Kela ilan* is the plant source for indigo (see Arukh, s.v. *kela ilan*; Radvaz Responsa 2:685), used as an inexpensive, but halakhically invalid, substitute for the *billazon*-based blue dye.

¹¹ The only reason Rava bar Rav Hana's proposal was subsequently rejected was because it is learned that a prohibition (e.g., *kilayim*) can only be overridden by a unique positive mitzvah – i.e., only if there is no other way to do the mitzvah. In the case of a linen garment, one need not fulfill the mitzvah of *tzitzit* with wool, since the mitzvah of *tzitzit* in a linen garment can technically be fulfilled with linen *tzitzit*. This is because wool strings are only required when using *tekelet*. As such, when *tekelet* is not available, all the strings can be linen, and attaching them to a linen garment allows for the fulfillment of the commandment of *tzitzit* without transgressing the violation of *shaatnez*. Of course, the complete fulfillment of the mitzvah is with *tekelet*, but since there is a case that allows for the mitzvah without it, the principle of “*aseh dobeh lo taseh*” cannot be applied. See Rashi (Men. 40a, s.v. *gezeira mishum kela ilan*); Rabbeinu Gershom (Men. 40a, s.v. *keivan d'efshar*).

For the purposes of the present discussion, it should be clear that one could unwittingly place *kela ilan* strings along with “white” strings on a non-linen garment and fulfill the mitzvah of *tzitzit*.

¹² See Hazon Ish (3:24).

¹³ Indeed, the Smag (*Aseh* 26) states that there is no concern (*ain labush*) if one places colored *tzitzit* on a white *talit*. See also Radzyner (“Ein HaTekhelet,” in *Sifrei ha-Tekhelet Radzryn* [Benei Berak: Mishor, 1990], pp. 329, 331).

¹⁴ Rashba (Men. 40a). See also Radzyner, “Ein HaTekhelet,” p. 331.

¹⁵ It is forbidden by way of *gezeira* to wear even genuine *tekelet* on a linen talit (see fn. 11).

¹⁶ Radzyner (“Ein HaTekhelet,” p. 329). See also Anaf Yosef (Baba Metzia 61b, s.v. *u'mimi*). Note, however, that R. Hillel Glebstein (in his book *Ptil Tekhelet*), states that *kela ilan* is invalid (*pasul*) even when there is no genuine *tekelet* (quoted in R. Menachem Burstein, *Ha-Tekhelet* [Jerusalem: Sifriyat, 1988], p. 70, n. 48). This is if one knowingly used *kela ilan* for “white” strings; but if one was attempting to fulfill the mitzvah of *tekelet* with what he believed to be true *tekelet*, on this Rava bar Rav Hana ruled unequivocally: “let it be considered like a ‘white’ thread (*lo yebei ela lavan*).”

¹⁷ Sifri (Num. 115); Iyun Yakov (s.v. *amar Raba*); H. Freedman, *Soncino Talmud*, n. b4.

¹⁸ Rosh (quoted in Anaf Yosef on Baba Metzia 61b).

- ¹⁹ There are some who consider anything that is not *hillazon*-based *tekelet* to be in the category of *kela ilan* (see R. Burstein, p. 70, n. 52), while others consider the prohibition of *kela ilan* to be specifically on the plant source and only on the plant source (Tifferet Yisrael, Introduction to Mishnayot Moed, s.v. *oman hadavar*. Indeed, a number of *poskim* held that even synthetic dye could be used, as long as it was fast to wool and the right color [See R. Bezalel Naor, “Substituting Synthetic Dye for the Hilazon,” *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society* XXIV (1992), p. 105]).
- ²⁰ As discussed, the custom to wear white *tzitzit* is not based on any prohibition against wearing colored strings, but only because the mitzvah was never seen being performed otherwise. Nevertheless, some argue that there is a halakhic benefit to wearing white *tzitzit* because of the principle of “not abandoning the traditions of our forebears” (*al titosh torat imecha*). This principle, however, is inapplicable when the tradition is not one *accepted* by our forebears but one *forced* upon them due to negative circumstances. For example, no one would say that the Russian Jews who were prevented for generations from performing *brit milah* now have a tradition not to have *brit milah*. So too *tekelet*, which was quit by force of exile, must surely be reinstated at the first opportunity.

As to the claim that wearing *tekelet* connotes an air of arrogance toward our forebears who wore only white, again, their tradition was one born of duress, forced upon them due to the exigencies of exile. Thus, our wearing *tekelet* does not serve to belittle them but rather to extol them by virtue of our fulfilling the mitzvah they transmitted to us in part, now in all its fullness.

- ²¹ Some maintain that this principle (*sfeika d'oraita l'humra*) only applies when one unquestionably fulfills that for which he was previously uncertain. For example, if one were in doubt if he had said grace after meals, he would be required to say it again, thus absolutely fulfilling the commandment of saying grace after meals. In the case of uncertain *tekelet*, even after one has put it on, he still remains in doubt if he is fulfilling the mitzvah of *tekelet*.

Nevertheless, the application of *sfeika d'oraita l'humra* can be found in a number of cases which argue against such a limited understanding. For example, when writing a *Sefer Torah*, one is never sure if it was done completely or if perhaps a letter was missing; when giving *tzedaka*, one is not sure the person is really poor; when lost in the desert and unsure which day is Shabbat, one keeps the seventh day counting, though one is never sure if that day was really Shabbat. (See R. Burstein, pp. 141-142).

Indeed, it is told of the Vilna Gaon that, in order to be sure that he fulfilled the commandment of *pidion haben*, he would pay his own *pidion haben* to every man that came to his town claiming to be a Kohen. This he did, even though after paying, he still remained in doubt if indeed he had found a genuine Kohen.

R. Hershel Schachter writes in his letter of approbation to Ptil Tekhelet that even if one is in doubt, one should wear *Murex trunculus*-based *tekelet* because of the principle of *sfeika d'oraita l'humra* (<http://www.tekhelet.com/approbations/SchachterApprobation.pdf>).

See also Radzyner, "Ptil Tekhelet," p. 108, Radzyner, "Ein HaTekhelet," p. 333.

²² Of course, one must abide by the *gezera* not to wear even genuine *tekelet* on a linen *talit* as discussed in the Gemara (Men. 40a-40b). On this *gezera*, see Mishnah Berurah (9:6). See also R. Tavger, "Sadin V'Talit Shel Minim Aherim Be'Tzitzit," in *Kelil Tekhelet* (p. 130) for a thorough treatment of this issue.