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## Threads of Reason

*A Collection of Essays on Tebbelet*

by Rabbi Mois Navon

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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 *melakhah* (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.

Shebeheyanu LaZeman HaTekhelet¹

In the hope that this collection of essays has served to inspire the reader to fulfill the mitzvah of *tzitzit* in all its fullness – i.e., with a thread of *tekehelet* – I will close with an analysis of whether it is appropriate to say the blessing of *shebeheyanu* upon wearing *tekehelet* for the first time.

Q: Should one say *shebeheyanu* the first time wearing *tekehelet*?

A: Not explicitly on the *tekehelet*, but rather on a new *talit gadol*.

There are two primary sources which discuss saying *shebeheyanu* on mitzvot: *kisui hadam* (Yoreh Deah 28:2) and wearing a *talit* (Orah Hayyim 22:1).

On *kisui hadam*, the Rama (Yoreh Deah 28:2) states that one should say *shebeheyanu* the first time he performs *shebitah*. Nevertheless, the Shach (ad loc., 5) quotes the Tosafot who explain that *shebeheyanu* is not said upon donning *talit* or *tefillin* for the first time because the blessing is only said on *simbah*. Apparently fulfilling these mitzvot for the first time does not qualify as the appropriate *simbah*. The Shach then quotes the Ran who explains that *shebeheyanu* is not said on these mitzvot because they don't come up from "time to time" (i.e., at fixed recurrences, like holidays). The Shach also brings the Rokeah who quotes the view that any mitzvah done for the first time requires the blessing of *shebeheyanu*. The Shach, however, shows that this only applies to mitzvot which arise on a regular time schedule – i.e., from time to time.

In his discussion of saying *shebeheyanu* on wearing a *talit*, R. Yosef Karo (Beit Yosef, Orah Hayyim 22) brings the Rambam who appears to follow the Tosefta in teaching that one says *shebeheyanu* upon performing various mitzvot

when using a new mitzvah object – including a *talit*. R. Karo, however, rejects this understanding of the Rambam, quoting R. Abuhav who explains the Rambam to mean that the blessing is not made explicitly on the mitzvah of *talit* but on the fact that one has acquired a new “garment.”² And so R. Karo rules in his Shulhan Arukh (Orah Hayyim 22:1).

The Taz (ad loc.), noting the *psak* of the Rama (Yoreh Deah 28:2) that one is to say *shebeheyanu* the first time he does *shebitah*, explains that, regardless of whether one says the blessing on a new mitzvah object, one should say *shebeheyanu* the first time he does any mitzvah – like *tzitzit*.³ Commenting on the Rama, the Vilna Gaon (ad loc., 4) cryptically adds that “we bless on *kisui hadam* like we bless on all mitzvot, like *talit* ...” However, while it might seem that he concurs with the Taz, the Vilna Gaon ends with a reference to the ruling of the Shach who goes to great lengths to explain that the *shebeheyanu* blessing on a *talit* is not made on the mitzvah of *tzitzit* but on the acquisition of the new garment.⁴ The Biur Halakhah (Orah Hayyim 22, s.v. *kanah*) quotes the Vilna Gaon as being of the opinion that one makes the blessing either on the new garment itself, or on a new mitzvah for which the individual *made* the mitzvah object himself (e.g., tied the *tzitzit*), but not necessarily when one performs the mitzvah for the first time in his life.

Without a clear consensus on whether performing a mitzvah with a new mitzvah object or performing the mitzvah for the first time in one’s life warrants saying *shebeheyanu*,⁵ the Biur Halakhah concludes that one should try to obligate himself to say *shebeheyanu* for some other reason (e.g., eat a new fruit) and then have in mind the fulfillment of the new mitzvah. Accordingly, for one who can tie his own *tekebelet*, he should say *shebeheyanu* on this new mitzvah along with being obligated to say the blessing for some other, indisputable, reason. However, for one who cannot tie his own *tekebelet*, he could avail himself of the advice of the Biur Halakhah only if he was doing the mitzvah for the first time in his life.

The question then becomes, does putting on *tekebelet* for the first time – if one had been wearing white *tzitzit* all his life – qualify as doing a mitzvah for the first time? The Rambam makes clear that, though the mitzvah is comprised of two distinct components – white and *tekebelet* – when combined, they form but one mitzvah of *tzitzit* (Hil. Tz. 1:3, 5).⁶ Ideally, the mitzvah is fulfilled with both white and *tekebelet*, but it may also be fulfilled with white only (Men. 4:1).⁷ Now, while it is universally agreed that one fulfills the mitzvah of *tzitzit* with white

strings when *tebbelet* is not available,⁸ it is a matter of dispute if one fulfills the mitzvah with white strings when *tebbelet* is available.⁹

One school of thought, which holds that there is no fulfillment of the mitzvah of *tzitzit* with solely white strings when *tebbelet* is available, would say that one who started wearing white *tzitzit* sometime after 1991 (the time from which Ptil *Tebbelet* started making *tebbelet* available) never actually fulfilled the mitzvah of *tzitzit*; thus when he does put on *tebbelet*, he would be performing the mitzvah of *tzitzit* for the first time. However, for one who had been wearing white *tzitzit* before 1991, that performance would be considered a fulfillment of the mitzvah, and thus his inaugural wearing of *tebbelet* would not be considered a fulfillment of the mitzvah for the first time.

On the other hand, there is a second school of thought, composed of the majority of *risbonim*, that maintains that wearing white only *tzitzit*, even at a time when *tebbelet* is available, is a fulfillment of the mitzvah, albeit *bidi'avad*. They would argue that regardless of when one began wearing white only *tzitzit*, the subsequent inaugural wearing of *tebbelet* would not be considered a first time fulfillment of the mitzvah.

It would seem, then, that according to the first school of thought, only a person who never wore *tzitzit* before 1991 would be fulfilling the mitzvah of *tzitzit* for the first time when he wears *tebbelet*. Conversely, according to the second school of thought, only a person who never wore *tzitzit* in his life could be considered to fulfill the mitzvah of *tzitzit* for the first time when he wears *tebbelet*.¹⁰ In these cases, and only in these cases, may one act on the advice of the Bior Halakhah and don *tebbelet tzitzit* in conjunction with some other act for which the recital of the *shebeheyanu* blessing is unambiguously required (e.g., eating a new fruit).

These cases notwithstanding, one who has already fulfilled the mitzvah of *tzitzit* but dons *tebbelet* for the first time in his life, as joyful and inspiring as it is to be able to fulfill a biblical commandment lost for more than 1300 years, may only say the blessing of *shebeheyanu* if he is donning a new *talit gadol*.¹¹ Then, when first wrapping himself in the *talit* with *tzitzit* the color of God's holy throne, he may acknowledge the moment –

*shebeheyanu, vekiyemanu, vehigyanu lazeman hazeh!*¹²

~ Notes ~

- ¹ I would like to thank Rabbi Baruch Rubanowitz for his indispensable comments.
- ² Support for this understanding could be found in the Rambam's (Responsa 141) writing that a *talit* engenders the *shebeheyanu* blessing only because it is not to be considered "worse than a new garment." Nevertheless, see Biur Halakhah (Orah Hayyim 22, s.v. *kanah*) who brings others who read the Rambam as implying that one says *shebeheyanu* on a *talit* because of the mitzvah aspect (and not because of the garment aspect).
- ³ As an aside, the Hatam Sofer (Orah Hayyim 55), while opposing this opinion, wrote that for people with the custom to say *shebeheyanu* the first time they do a mitzvah in their life, one need not protest. However, others (e.g., Birkei Yosef 200) write that one should, in fact, protest against anyone who says *shebeheyanu* in such a case.
- ⁴ The Vilna Gaon's opinion on saying *shebeheyanu* the first time one performs a mitzvah in his life is not entirely clear. Though he brings a source for the Rama's opinion that one does say *shebeheyanu* in such a case, he ends with a reference to the Shach who opposes said blessing.
- ⁵ For further discussion, see Yehaveh Daat (2:31).
- ⁶ See the introduction to my essay, "Threads of Reason" (herein, p. 2, esp. fn. 1).
- ⁷ Ibid., (fn. 4).
- ⁸ With the exception of the Baal HaMaor (Shab. 11-12, Rif pagination) of whom the Ramban writes, "we have testimony that he never wore a *talit*" (Milhamot 5, ad loc.).
- ⁹ See the introduction to my essay, "Threads of Reason" (herein, p. 5) and especially fn. 5. There I refer to the positions of R. Shmuel Ariel and R. Yehuda Rock. R. Ariel *poskins* like the R"Y and the Shaagat Aryeh, that, when *tekehelet* is available, there is no fulfillment of the mitzvah of *tzitzit* without *tekehelet*. Conversely, R. Rock *poskins* like the Rosh MiDrosh, the Rambam, the Ritva, et al., who believe there is a fulfillment of the mitzvah, albeit *bidi'avad*.
- ¹⁰ Of course, this school of thought would consider the wearing of white only *tzitzit* a first fulfillment of the mitzvah, but I phrased the sentence to focus on the question at hand – i.e., when would one be considered to fulfill the mitzvah of *tzitzit* when first wearing *tekehelet*?
- ¹¹ Note that a *talit katan* does not, in general, qualify as a garment for *shebeheyanu* (Yalkut Yosef, Tzitzit 22:2; Igrot Moshe, Orah Hayyim 3:80).
- ¹² R. Rubanowitz suggests that one need not go out of his way to purchase a new *talit* but should simply say the *shebeheyanu* blessing without *shem u'malkhut*.