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## Threads of Reason

*A Collection of Essays on Tekhelet*

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 *melakbab* (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.

Sublime *Tekhelet*¹

R. Meir used to say: How is *tekhelet* different from all other colors? Because *tekhelet* is like the sea, and the sea is like the sky, and the sky is like [God's] throne of glory.

Menahot 43b²

Rashi (ad loc., s.v. *mal*) explains that the essence of R. Meir's rhetorical question is, why did God choose this color for the mitzvah of *tzitzit*?³ That is, given that all colors hold aesthetic appeal, what is the unique significance of *tekhelet* within the context of the mitzvah of *tzitzit*? R. Meir responded with a progression of three similes: sea, sky, throne.

Ultimately, the uniqueness of *tekhelet* is in its similitude to God's throne of glory. But if all that R. Meir wanted to teach was that *tekhelet* is to remind us of the divine throne of glory, why did he employ the intermediary stages of "sea" and "sky"? Rashi and Ritva answer this question by explaining that the color at each stage is merely similar to the next in succession.⁴ Thus *tekhelet* is more similar in color to the sea than to the sky, the sky being yet closer in resemblance to the color of the throne than both the sea and *tekhelet*. This response begs the question, why not then use a dye which more closely approximates the color of the sky, as opposed to a color reminiscent of the sea? Both Rashi and Ritva respond by explaining that in using the color of the sea, one is reminded of the miracles that were performed at the sea during the exodus from Egypt.⁵

By employing a symbolic explanation, they acknowledge that R. Meir's statement is not to be taken literally. Indeed, R. Herzog⁶ analyzes R. Meir's homily at length

and concludes with the unequivocal statement, “R. Meir’s object in this instance, be it duly emphasized, is not to give a *definition* of *tebbelet* but merely to explain its symbolic significance.”⁷ That is, R. Meir used the progression of similitudes to convey the *purpose* of *tebbelet* in the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, not the *color* of *tebbelet*.

To understand the symbolic significance of *tebbelet* articulated in the words of R. Meir, I turn to Immanuel Kant’s treatise on aesthetics, “The Critique of Judgment.”⁸ For Kant, the aesthetic experience is one in which we judge some thing or some phenomenon as either “Beautiful” or “Sublime.” He writes, “The Beautiful in nature is connected with the form of the object, which consists in having boundaries.”⁹ The classic example of the Beautiful is a flower, which can be apprehended in its totality. “The Sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless object, so far as ... *boundlessness* is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought.”¹⁰ The Sublime, then, refers to boundless entities such as the sea and the sky.¹¹

Here we are reminded of Rabbi Meir’s progression. The sea is something that Kant would describe as “mathematically sublime” – overwhelming in its proportions.¹² But then, even the sea’s dimensions pale when compared to the expansiveness of the sky. The feeling brought about by contemplating these sublime elements in nature directs one toward infinity, denoted in the Talmud as God’s “throne of glory.”¹³ One does not, however, achieve an appreciation of the Sublime simply by looking at vastness in nature. Rather, writes Kant, the idea of infinity comes about by our estimating the unfathomably great “by means of progression”¹⁴ – comparing one thing with another, each thing being larger than that which preceded it – until we reach that which the mind can simply not grasp, as it is infinite.¹⁵

This, then, is the reason why R. Meir did not immediately liken *tebbelet* to the sky itself but rather through progression.¹⁶ Through this mental progression from the sea to the sky, we bring ourselves toward the infinite, toward God’s transcendent “holy throne.” Encrypted in R. Meir’s answer, then, lies a profound teaching about the aesthetic gesture¹⁷ of man in the service of the divine, about using the powerful emotions born of aesthetic appreciation to commune with the transcendent.¹⁸ This is of great import, as R. Soloveitchik explains:

Only through coming in contact with the beautiful and exalted [i.e., the sublime] may one apprehend God instead of comprehend Him...¹⁹

The thread of *tekhelet* cannot, of course, be categorized as Sublime; and by gazing upon it, one cannot be said to perceive the Sublime. Indeed, the thread of *tekhelet* is a “bounded” object, and by using it as an object of contemplation one is necessarily calling upon the cognitive faculty – and the experience of the Sublime must challenge cognition itself, rather than depend on it.²⁰ The thread of *tekhelet* can be used, however, as a reminder of the Sublime, evoking the emotions associated with perceiving the Sublime.²¹

This accords well with the directive of the Torah (Num. 15:39) itself which teaches that *tzitzit* are to serve as a reminder of the Creator’s commandments, the *tekhelet* reminding us of the Creator Himself.²² This reminder, provided by the *tekhelet* thread, not only serves as a cue to jog one’s memory, since for that any color might suffice; but rather, as R. Meir teaches, the *tekhelet* thread serves as an object of contemplation which leads one to apprehend, to the extent possible, the infinity of the divine. In consonance, the Midrash teaches that all the time one gazes at the thread of *tekhelet* it is as if he is gazing at the divine presence.²³

~ Notes ~

- ¹ I would like to acknowledge Professor Sam Fleischacker (Philosophy Dept., UIC) for his indispensable comments.
- ² Also Sotah 17a. The Gemara (Hullin 89a) provides a slightly different version, inserting the likeness to “sapphire” between “sky” and “throne.” The point in bringing “sapphire,” I believe, is merely to establish the *color* of the throne and not to interpose a stage in the procession. As will be demonstrated in this essay, the procession of “sea, sky, throne” is of critical importance.

(It should also be noted that though there are midrashic variations which insert “*asavim*,” trees, clouds, rainbow and “*nogah*” in the list of similitudes, we will confine our analysis to the Bavli’s version and propose an explanation for the other versions in a concluding footnote: fn. 15).
- ³ From the context of the Gemara, which is talking about *tzitzit*, it is clear that when Rashi states, “this mitzvah,” he is referring to *tekbelet* in *tzitzit*.
- ⁴ Rashi (Sotah 17a, s.v. *sh’ha’tekbelet*); Ritva (Hul. 89a, s.v. *mal*).
- ⁵ Rashi (Men. 43b, s.v. *domeh*), Ritva (Hul. 89a, s.v. *yesh*).
- ⁶ R. Isaac Herzog, “Hebrew Porphyrology,” in *The Royal Purple and The Biblical Blue* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1987), pp. 88-97.
- ⁷ R. Herzog, p. 90.
- ⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Kant’s Critique of Judgement*, translated with Introduction and Notes by J.H. Bernard (2nd ed. revised) (London: Macmillan, 1914). *Second Book: Analytic Of The Sublime*, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1217/97494>.
- ⁹ Ibid., Chapter: § 23.: *Transition from the faculty which judges of the Beautiful to that which judges of the Sublime*, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1217/97496>.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Apparently the concept of the Sublime was not foreign to the sages, for these are precisely the kinds of things the Talmud (Berakhot 54a) noted are worthy of a special blessing of praise: “Blessed are You ... Who makes the works of creation.” The blessing is brought as halakhah in Shulhan Arukh (Orah Hayyim 228).
- ¹² Kant, § 25.: *Explanation of the term “sublime”*, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1217/97502>.

¹³ R. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart* (New Jersey, Ktav: 2003), pp. 55-56. “Upon seeing [the *tekbelet*] strand one remembers his Creator” (Tanhuma, Shelah 15). Rashi (Men. 43b, s.v. *v’rakia*) explains that *tekbelet* reminds one of He Who sits on the throne; Sheeta Mekubetzet (Men. 43b, #7) emphasizes that the color of His throne serves to cause one to recognize He Who sits on that throne. (So too Hagahot HaBach [1] on Rashi, s.v. *v’rakia*). Recanati (Num. 15:37-40) quotes the explanation of the Bahir (92-93) that the 32 *tzitzit* strands are a symbolic reminder of the “ways” of the King, and the *tekbelet* is a symbol of the King Himself. R. Isaac Luria says that *tekbelet* is the symbol of God’s Kingship (*Pri Eitz Hayim*, Shaar Hatzitzit, ch. 4).

¹⁴ Kant, § 26.: *Of that estimation of the magnitude of natural things which is requisite for the Idea of the Sublime*, <http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/1217/97504>.

¹⁵ Based on this analysis, we can understand the midrashic variations on the original statement of R. Meir, which insert various objects (*asavim*, trees, clouds, rainbow and *nogah*) in the progression to the throne of glory, as providing various “rungs on the ladder” as one reaches from the Sublime to the infinite. *Asavim*, translated as “grasses,” might refer to blue plants or flowers (R. Herzog, p. 93). Trees, accordingly, are larger elements in nature that too must have some blue aspect. As such, the *asavim* and trees are objects in nature which might be used in the procession toward the infinite. Clouds, rainbow and *nogah* are described by Ezekiel (1:28) as providing a likeness of God’s glory and are employed as an alternate reference to “the throne of glory” (see Mid. Tehillim 90:18). These objects are not to be taken as part of the procession to the infinite, but rather as metaphors for the transcendent goal.

¹⁶ Though this might seem like attributing too much to R. Meir’s statement, he was known to be of profound intellect, his colleagues admitting to having been unable to fathom the depth of his thinking (Eruvin 13b).

¹⁷ R. Soloveitchik divides human experience into three “gestures”: intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic. For an in-depth discussion of this subject, see R. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart*, “The Human Condition and Prayer,” pp. 37-50, “Exaltation of God and Redeeming the Aesthetic,” pp. 51-72.

¹⁸ “God not only addresses Himself to man through the logos, by emanating wisdom and knowledge to the finite mind; not only through the ethos, revealing to natural man, driven by insensate desires and impulses, a great order of absolute values and ideals – but also through aesthesis – the immediate sensible apprehension of reality which is beautiful and grandiose” (R. Soloveitchik, p. 57). “Only through coming in contact with the beautiful and exalted may one apprehend God instead of comprehend Him, feel the embrace of the Creator, and the warm breath of infinity hovering over a finite creation” (ibid., p. 59).

In each of these remarks, R. Soloveitchik notes “beautiful” and “exalted/grandiose” which seems to be in line with the notion that the aesthetic gesture is divided into “beauty” and

“sublime.” Both are to be appreciated within the context of the divine, yet both function in very different ways – the one effectuating a feeling of satisfaction and comfort, the other a feeling of awe and veneration. Prof. Fleischacker, in a personal conversation, explained to me that such a dichotomy is to be found in 18th century writers like Kant.

¹⁹ R. Soloveitchik, p. 59.

²⁰ “A pure judgement upon the sublime must, however, have no purpose of the Object as its determining ground, if it is to be aesthetical and not mixed up with any judgement of Understanding or Reason” (Kant, *The Critique Of Judgement*, ch. 26). The *tekhelet* strand, like other bounded objects, can be used in helping one reach the Sublime through progressive estimations; however, these objects themselves are not Sublime, nor is the feeling one has when contemplating them.

²¹ R. Aryeh Kaplan (*Jewish Meditation*, [New York: Schocken Books, 1985], p. 72) explains that *tekhelet* can be used as an object of meditation, serving as a starting point through which one then imagines the sea, the sky, and finally God’s throne. Indeed, R. Kaplan seems to understand that this is the intent of R. Meir’s statement on *tekhelet*.

²² “He who fulfills the mitzvah of *tzitzit* is as if he is perceiving the divine presence, since *tekhelet* is like the sea, and the sea is like the sky, and the sky is like the throne of glory.” Midrash (Sifri, Shelah 115). Pesikta Zutra (Lekah Tov, Shelah 112b), Midrash Tanhuma (Shelah 16) puts these words in the mouth of R. Meir himself. See also Midrash Aggadah ([Buber] Num. 15:38), Yalkut Shimoni (Shelah, Remez 750), Yerushalmi (Brakhot, ch. 1, 3a). “When Israel looks upon the *tekhelet* strand, it appears to them as if the Divine presence is amongst them” (Tanhuma [Buber] Shelah 30). Similarly Midrash Tehillim ([Buber] 90:18), Yalkut Shimoni (Tehillim, Remez 841). See also Men. 43b.

²³ Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer (ch. 14, p. 264). Similarly, “They should not imagine they are wearing *tekhelet*, but rather ... they should look upon their *tzitzit* as if the divine presence was upon them” (Midrash Tehillim 90:18). See also fn. 22.