

Sublime Tekhelet¹

Mois Navon, 5767

R. Meir used to say: Why is tekhelet differentiated from all the other dyes? It is because tekhelet is like the sea, and the sea is like the sky, and the sky is like [God's] throne of glory.”

(Men.43b, Sot.17a).²

Rashi (ibid., s.v. *mab*) explains that the essence of R. Meir's rhetorical question is: why did God choose this color for the mitzvah [of tzitzit³]? 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 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 color of the throne, the sky being closer to it in resemblance. This response then 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 then explain 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 Midrashic explanation they acknowledge that R. Meir's statement is not to be taken literally. Indeed, R. Herzog⁶ analyzes at length R. Meir's homily and concludes with the unequivocal statement, “R. Meir's object in this instance, be it duly emphasized, is not to give a *definition* of *tekhelet* but merely to explain its symbolic significance” (R. Herzog, p.90).

¹ I would like to acknowledge Professor Sam Fleischacker (Philosophy Dept., UIC) for his indispensable comments.

² The Gemara (Hullin 89a) provides a slightly different version inserting the likeness to “sapphire” between sky and throne. This rendition accords with the other two instances in that they too provide a quote linking the color of the throne to sapphire. Indeed, the point in bringing “sapphire” is merely to establish the color of the throne and not to interpose a stage between in the procession. As will be demonstrated in this paper, 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 “*nogal*” in the list of similitudes, we will confine our analysis to the Bavli's version and propose explanation for the other versions in a concluding footnote: fn. 14).

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 tekhelet in tzitzit.

⁴ Rashi (Sotah 17a, s.v. *sh'ha'tekhelet*); Ritva (Hul. 89a, s.v. *mab*).

⁵ Rashi (Men. 43b, s.v. *domel*), Ritva (Hul. 89a, s.v. *yesh*).

⁶ Chief Rabbi Dr. Isaac Herzog, “Hebrew Porphyrology”, *The Royal Purple and The Biblical Blue*, ed. Ehud Spanier (Jerusalem, 1987), pp. 88-97.

That is, R. Meir's use of the progression of similitudes is to convey the underlying meaning behind the selection of tekhelet for its use in the mitzvah of tzitzit.

In consonance with this, I propose that R. Meir is conveying the notion that tekhelet, as a beautiful color, is not to be appreciated in and of itself, but rather as a symbol of the sublime filling nature (i.e., the sea and the sky), and that is in turn to be appreciated as a reflection of the Creator – His throne being a symbol of the transcendent⁷. Thus tekhelet is the symbol that reminds us to appreciate this world as the awesome result of the work of the Creator.⁸ Indeed R. Soloveitchik⁹ explains that for the aesthetic experience to be meaningful it must aspire to the absolute, to the transcendent, it “must always be encountered as a reflection of Divine beauty.” Appropriately, to instill such an association, the Talmud (Berachot 54a) prescribes a special blessing when encountering the sublime in nature – e.g., exceptionally large mountains, rivers, deserts, *seas*, or a perfect *sky*¹⁰ – “Blessed are You ... Who makes the works of creation.”¹¹

More specifically, the sea is something that Kant would describe as “mathematically sublime” – overwhelming in its proportions.¹² But then even the sea's dimensions pale in comparison 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”. Kant¹³ explains such a progression as follows:

Nature is therefore sublime in those of its phenomena, whose intuition brings with it the Idea of their infinity. This last can only come by the inadequacy of the greatest effort of our Imagination to estimate the magnitude of an object. But now in mathematical estimation of magnitude the Imagination is equal to providing a sufficient measure for every object; because the numerical concepts of the Understanding, by means of progression, can make any measure adequate to any

⁷ R. Soloveitchik, pp.55-6. Rashi (Men. 43b, s.v. *v'rakia*) explains that tekhelet 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*). Tanhuma (Shelach 15) “... when he sees [the tekhelet] he remembers his Maker.”

⁸ “... the whole of nature reminds man of the divine presence” (R. Herzog, p.93).

⁹ R. Soloveitchik, p. 52.

¹⁰ The Gemara (Berachot 59a) explains that the blessing for the sky is only to be made on a perfectly clear sky the likes of which has not been seen since the destruction of the Temple; nevertheless, the point remains that the sky, in all its splendor, is sublime in nature capable of bringing one to appreciate the Divine. Indeed, the Gemara (Berachot 34b) states that one should *only* pray in a synagogue in which there are windows, upon which Rashi (s.v., *halonot*) explains, “in order that one may be awed upon looking at the sky.” So too is this idea enunciated halachically by Shulhan Aruch (see esp. Magen Avraham, Orech Hayim 90:4:4). As such, perhaps it would not be incongruous to suggest that the Gemara's annulment of the special blessing to be said on the sky is a kind of “*zecher l'mikdash*” enactment and not that the sky itself ceased to be a source of sublime inspiration.

¹¹ The blessing is brought as halacha in Shulhan Aruch (Orech Hayim 228)

¹² Immanuel Kant, *The Critique Of Judgement* (1790), Part I: Critique Of The Aesthetical Judgement, ch. 25. (http://oll.libertyfund.org/Home3/HTML.php?recordID=0318#hd_lf0318_head_130).

¹³ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique Of Judgement* (1790), Part I: Critique Of The Aesthetical Judgement, ch. 26. (http://oll.libertyfund.org/Home3/HTML.php?recordID=0318#hd_lf0318_head_131).

given magnitude. Therefore it must be the *aesthetical* estimation of magnitude in which it is felt that the effort towards comprehension surpasses the power of the Imagination to grasp in a whole of intuition the progressive apprehension; and at the same time is perceived the inadequacy of this faculty, unbounded in its progress, for grasping and using, for the estimation of magnitude, a fundamental measure which could be made available by the Understanding with little trouble. Now the proper unchangeable fundamental measure of nature is its absolute whole; which, regarding nature as a phenomenon, would be infinity comprehended. But since this fundamental measure is a self-contradictory concept (on account of the impossibility of the absolute totality of an endless progress), that magnitude of a natural Object, on which the Imagination fruitlessly spends its whole faculty of comprehension, must carry our concept of nature to a supersensible substrate (which lies at its basis and also at the basis of our faculty of thought). As this, however, is great beyond all standards of sense, it makes us judge as *sublime*, not so much the object, as our own state of mind in the estimation of it.

Thus, the idea of infinity comes about by our estimating the unfathomably great in succession – one thing being bigger than that which preceded it, until we reach that which the mind can simply not grasp as it is infinite.¹⁴ This perhaps is a reason why R. Meir didn't immediately liken tekhelet to the sky itself, but rather through progression.¹⁵ Encrypted in R. Meir's answer lies a profound teaching about the aesthetic gesture¹⁶ of man in the service of the divine, of using the powerful emotions borne of aesthetic appreciation to commune with the transcendent.¹⁷

¹⁴ Based on this analysis we can understand the midrashic variations on the original statement of R. Meir which insert various objects as perhaps providing various “rungs on the ladder” as one reaches from the sublime to the infinite. *Asavim*, translated as “grasses” might refer to fields and meadows, of even, suggests R. Herzog (p. 93) as blue plants or flowers. Trees are amongst the objects of nature that one makes a blessing in appreciation of their beauty (Orech Hayim 228). As such the *asavim* and trees are amongst the aesthetically pleasing objects in nature which can thus be used in the procession toward the infinite. Clouds, rainbow and *nogah* are described by Yehezkel (1:28) as providing a likeness of God's glory and are used as such (instead of simply “the throne of glory”) in the alternate version of R. Meir's homily (see Mid. Tehillim 90:18); and thus these objects are not to be taken as part of the procession to the infinite, but rather as metaphors for the transcendent goal.

¹⁵ Though this might seem to be attributing too much to R. Meir's statement, he was known to be a very deep thinker – one whose colleagues admit to not having been able to fathom the depth of his thinking (Eruvin 13b).

¹⁶ R. Soloveitchik divides human experience into three “gestures”: intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic; for an in-depth discussion of the this subject see: R. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart* [Toras HoRav Foundation, KTAV, NJ, 2003], *The Human Condition and Prayer*, pp. 37-50, *Exaltation of God and Redeeming the Aesthetic*, pp. 51-72.

¹⁷ “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” (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” (R. Soloveitchik, p.59).

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

Tekhelet in the strands of tzitzit, cannot of course be categorized as “sublime”. That is, by gazing upon tekhelet tzitzit one cannot be said to perceive the aesthetically sublime, for indeed by using it as a *symbol* of the sublime one is necessarily calling upon the cognitive experience.¹⁸ It can however be used as a “reminder” of the sublime, evoking the emotions associated with perceiving the sublime.¹⁹ This accords with the directive of the Torah (Num. 15:39) itself which teaches that tzitzit are to serve as a “reminder” of the Creator’s obligations, the tekhelet coming to remind us of the Creator Himself.²⁰ And this reminder, provided by the tekhelet strand, is not only to serve as a cue to jog one’s memory, since for that really any color might suffice; but rather, as R. Meir teaches, the tekhelet strand is to serve as an object of contemplation which leads one to apprehend, to the extent feasible, the Divine, as the Midrash (Sifri, Shelah 115) teaches – “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 like the sky and the sky like the throne of glory”.²¹

the other a feeling of awe and veneration. Prof. Fleischacker, explains that such a dichotomy is to be found in 18th century writers such Kant.

¹⁸ “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” (Immanuel Kant, *The Critique Of Judgement* (1790), Part I: Critique Of The Aesthetical Judgement, ch. 26. (http://oll.libertyfund.org/Home3/HTML.php?recordID=0318#hd_lf0318_head_131).

¹⁹ R. Aryeh Kaplan (Jewish Meditation, [Schocken Books, New York, 1985], p.72) explains that tekhelet can be used as an object of meditation which is to serve 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.

²⁰ “Upon seeing the tekhelet strand one remembers his Creator” (Tanhuma, Shelah 15); so too Rashi (Men. 43b, s.v. *v’rakia*). Recanati (Num. 15:37-40) quotes Bahir (92-93) which explains that the 32 tzitzit strands are a symbolic reminder of the “ways” of the King (i.e., the commandments), and the tekhelet is a symbol of the King Himself. See also herein fn. 7.

²¹ Pesikta Zutra (Lekach Tov, Shelah 112b) puts these words in the mouth of R. Meir himself. See also Midrash Aggada ([Buber] Bam. 15:38), Yalkut Shimoni (Shelah, Remez 750), Yerushalmi (Brachot, ch. 1, 3a). “All the time that we look at the [tekhelet] it is as if we are seeing the Divine presence” (Mishnat R. Eliezer ch. 14, p.264). “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.