

"ON SHOWING YOUR TRUE COLORS"

This morning's portion concludes with the famous passage concerning the commandment to wear fringes, tzitzit, on our garments. The Torah demands that one of the four threads, which are to be doubled over into eight, should be colored tekhelet, a heavenly blue. The law requires that this dye be prepared from the blood of a special mollusk or snail called the halazon. Today we no longer know exactly the identity of this halazon; even in the days of the Mishnah it was scarce. Therefore, the overwhelming majority of Jews today do not wear any tekhelet in their tzitzit, although some few groups maintain that they can definitely identify this mollusk and therefore do wear one thread of tekhelet in their fringes.

Now, far beyond the emblematic or symbolic value of the tzitzit, this commandment is full of deep religious meaning and mystical significance. But in addition to this, permit me to commend your attention to a sensitive ethical-moral point regarding the tekhelet proposed by the Talmud (B.M.61b). The Sages quote God as saying, ani hu she'atid li-para mi-mi she' toleh kala ilan be'vigdo v'omer tekhelet hu, "I will punish one who affixes a thread of blue dyed with kala ilan and announces that it really is tekhelet." Now, the tekhelet, coming from the rare mollusk halazon, is expensive and scarce; kala ilan is a common and cheap vegetable dye, called indigo. One who dyes his fringes with kala ilan and proclaims it to be tekhelet is therefore palming off the artificial as genuine. The

statement in the Talmud is, therefore, a protest against hypocrisy and deception.

How often we witness -- or, indeed, are ourselves the victims of -- such sham piety and duplicity. We all too often have personal experiences with people who pretend to be righteous and decent, but are really quite ignoble and selfish. And we wonder: why should such people get away with it? The Talmud, therefore, promises us that God, in His good time, will exact justice of such people. He, as the embodiment of emet, truth, will not abide for long such disimulation by unprincipled people.

Two instances of recent events come to mind, in both of which we Jews collectively were the victims of this prevarication of people posing in kala ilan as if it were tekhelet, in indigo substituted for true blue.

The first of these is the official proposal of the Vatican this week that Jerusalem be internationalized. The Vatican is, of course, deeply troubled by the safety of the shrines in the Holy Land. Indeed, how touching, how moving! So profound is its concern that it desires all of Jerusalem to be put under international control. For twenty years no Jews were permitted to visit the Wailing Wall, whereas members of other faiths were permitted access to their shrines. During all this time, the Pope was silent. He acted like a true reincarnation of one of his predecessors who will go down in history as the Pope of Silence. The man who considers himself the

symbol and leader of all religions of the world did not utter a single word of protest as long as an Arab flag was flying over Jerusalem, but the minute the Israeli flag was hoisted over the Holy City, he has become exercised. He apparently was untroubled by the slaughter of human beings; he is moved by concern for holy places -- provided it is the Israelis who are in control.

No, this is not the tekhelet of righteous concern; this is kala ilan -- his true colors are showing! Let all those amongst us who were the proponents of theological dialogue with the Vatican, all those who considered those who were reluctant to engage in these dialogues as discourteous and uncivilized in not accepting an invitation to talk -- let them ponder what has happened this week. Talk, unfortunately, is cheap. Actions speak far louder. The Vatican is the one who proposed "fraternal dialogue" as part of its new doctrinal structure. Look what has come of it: it is the ersatz-blue of kala ilan, not the authenticity of tekhelet.

The second item that comes to attention is the important speech of the French Ambassador to the United Nations a day or two ago. Now, I do not refer to the major contents of his speech. As a compassionate people, we must be profoundly sympathetic with an ambassador who must attempt to make seem logical, moderate, and ethical a position taken by his chief of state which is not only illogical but almost absurd, totally immoderate despite its protestations of "objectivity," and not only not ethical but treacherous because it represents a unilateral abrogation of a solemn treaty with the State of Israel.

What I say, therefore, I intend as a footnote to an important address.

In the course of his speech, the Ambassador averred, in attempting to demonstrate France's objectivity and neutrality, that France has never been guilty of racialism against the Jews. What a jejeune and empty remark that is! Forgetting the famous Dreyfus case, his statement is particularly unfelicitous considering that this very day, June 24, 1322, exactly 645 years ago -- after the Jews were accused of poisoning the wells, after massacres and slaughter of Jews in many cities in France, and after the French government levied an enormous fine on all Franco-Jewish communities -- on this very day in 1322 another head of France by the name of Charles, King Charles IV, expelled all the Jews from France! For 37 years thereafter, no Jews were to be found in this country.

No, not every country, especially in Europe, can boast of no anti-Semitism tainting its questionable past. It would be much better for France never to use its own lily-white record as proof of its "objectivity" towards Israel... The Ambassador's tzitzit are showing; and though he would like them to appear blue, they are kala ilan, not tekhelet.

However, there is no need to berate a human failing that is all too common. I know you will agree with me in condemning hypocrisy, and that I am therefore preaching to the converted. Permit me, rather, to commend to your attention what was said on this Talmudic passage by the late and sainted thinker and scholar, R. Abraham Chen,

("Be'malkhut Ha-yahadut", Vol. II, p.161): the reverse is true as well! God is also displeased with toleh tekhelet be'vigdo v'omer kala ilan hu, one who possesses the genuine tekhelet and yet proclaims that it is merely the artificial kala ilan. God not only will punish the hypocrite who passes off the artificial as genuine, but He also dislikes the coward who disguises the authentic as the inauthentic. In other words, there is a strong, neurotic tendency for some people to have the courage only of other people's opinions -- but not their own! They are afflicted with a moral weakness: they are ashamed of their elementary decency, they are apprehensive lest they have too good a reputation; they are fearful lest their virtue prove anti-social.

Does that sound strange? Yes -- but it is a fact nonetheless. There are, apparently, those who wear tekhelet, but proclaim that it is only kala ilan.

Have you ever seen a man enter a restaurant in the company of colleagues or business associates, be handed the menu, and with nervous eyes darting in all directions clear his throat and apologetically whisper that he is a vegetarian? Of course, the real reason is that he is kosher... Buy why attribute to kala ilan when it is really tekhelet!

Or, a man is invited to participate in a Friday night engagement, and he declines by explaining that Friday nights he reserves as "family night." Family night? How about Shabbat? Why not call

tekhelet by its own name instead of announcing it as kala ilan?

There are some parents who send their children to Day Schools and who explain to their neighbors that they do so because they prefer "smaller classes." But why not say outright that the only way to survive meaningfully is through providing a Torah education for your child? Why call it kala ilan when in fact it is tekhelet?

There are even some people who believe their own propaganda when they proclaim that they support Israel, "because it is the only democracy in the Near East." How foolish! And if Syria were a democracy? -- And if Nasser were elected by parliamentary procedure, as was Hitler? And if Israel were not an American-style democracy in all essentials? -- Would we then be unconcerned with the fate of Israel? Is our loyalty only political and nothing more? Does not the love of Israel and our solidarity with the people and the state transcend the political considerations? Let us call tekhelet by its right name!

It sometimes happens that a Jew comes to me after I have "caught" him in an act of mitzvah, and he will apologetically assert, "Rabbi, don't get me wrong: I am not really religious!" What kala ilan! I just do not believe it. After witnessing the fantastic religious spirit that overcame our people when we liberated the Wailing Wall, I firmly believe that every Jew possesses the spark of Godliness, the nitzotz of Jewishness. I know of no non-religious Jews. I know only of Jews who have fulfilled their religious potential to a greater extent, and those who have not yet done so. Jews wear tekhelet!

I cannot bring myself, in all honesty, to declare it kala ilan.

There is one Biblical personality who symbolizes this attempt to disguise tekhelet as kala ilan, and that is Judah. You recall that he played a special role in the unfortunate episode of the maltreatment of their brother Joseph. The brothers had planned to kill Joseph. But Judah, who was a natural leader, saved Joseph's life by telling the brothers, mah betza ki naharoa et abinu, "what profit will it bring us if we kill him?" Let us better sell him into slavery.

Now, the Rabbis were quite harsh on Judah for this statement. They declared (Sanh.6b) that kol ha-mevarekh et Yehudah harei zeh mena'etz, whoever praises Judah is considered a blasphemer, and they applied to such person the verse from the Psalms, botzeia berekh nietz ha-Shem, he who blesses the profit-taker (one who is involved in betza) has blasphemed the Lord.

But why, indeed, were they so harsh on Judah? Did he not, after all, save Joseph's life?

The answer, I suggest, is that Judah did not really believe what he said -- that they ought to save Joseph only because it will bring them betza, profit. In fact, immediately after his statement of mah betza, he says to them: Ve'yadenu al tehi bo, let us not injure him, ki abinu besarenu hu -- because he is our brother, our own flesh and blood. In other words, Judah was posturing. Out loud, as his ostensible reason for not killing Joseph, he said mah betza,

it will bring us no profit if we kill him; but sotto voce, whispering quietly his real reason, he said that Joseph must not be harmed, ki ahinu besarenu hu, because one does not destroy his own brother, his own flesh and blood! Judah thus was a man of tekhelet -- but he posed as nothing more than a penurious person of kala ilan! His reasons were noble, but he expressed them in the sinister language of the market place. No wonder that the verse ends with the words va-yishme'u ehav, "and his brothers hears." But of course they hears; he was after all addressing them! (It is because of this that the Targum and Rashi are constrained to explain this phrase in a different manner.) What the Torah means is that they heard Judah's real reason. They listened with an inner ear. They were not impressed with the betza argument, but understood the real, underlying motivation of Judah: the ethical reason that one does not harm his own brother.

That is why our tradition considers him a blasphemer; for indeed it is a blasphemy and a desecration of the Divine Image to disown your own innate nobility, to deny your inner genuineness. We must, by all means, show our true colors!

As we make our way to vacation or travel this summer, and no doubt come into contact with many new people, let us take along with ourselves this lesson of tekhelet and kala ilan. Never, never, Heaven forgid, may we dissemble, and declare as tekhelet what is but a cheap



imitation. Neither is it incumbent upon us to flaunt our tekhelet in the eyes of others, to draw unnecessary attention to our Jewishness. But, we must also not submit to the moral cowardice of disguising our tekhelet as kala ilan.

We have heard much about resisting the yetzer ha-ra; let us not strive so mightily to resist the yetzer tov.

Let us show our true Jewish colors -- and be proud of them.