

Living on the (Blue) Fringe

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When I became a bar mitzvah, I was presented with the tallis that my father wore at his bar mitzvah in 1963. The tallit was one of the old-style, scarf-like *talleisim*. Not particularly ornate, its silky cloth hung close to my neck and its fringes were wrinkled and unkempt from years of remaining folded and unused. A few years after my bar mitzvah, as I was blossoming into my own, independent Jewish life, I decided to buy myself a gift. I went to the local Judaica store, and with money I had saved up from my summer job as a life guard at the JCC, I purchased my own tallit...one that I thought better represented my own Jewish identity than the one I had received for my bar mitzvah. It was a large, multi-colored tallit that draped nearly to the floor. It was bold...and it reflected the bold rebelliousness of my own teenage Jewish coming of age. Nobody in my Reform congregation wore tallises like this, and I got more than a few stares the first time I walked into services wearing it! After an Israel trip at 16, and years of positive youth group experiences, I was literally wearing a mantle of Jewish pride and excitement. When I bought the tallit, sometime in the 80's, these big colorful tallises were just becoming popular. Nowadays it is common to see people in very unique, very artistic, even hand crafted tallises. I wore that tallit all through my teenage years, college, and even rabbinical school. The next tallit I received was a beautiful white, wool tallit from my bride, Sari, as a gift on the day of our wedding. Like many ritual and Judaica items, the tallit is now undergoing another transformation. A few years ago before one of our congregational trips to Israel, Dennis Kehlmann asked if I could bring back *techeilet* for Kayla and Lindsey's b'not mitzvah tallises. *Techeilet* is the blue colored fringe that was initially woven into the tzitzit, but then, due to interesting historical circumstances, stopped being used, for over a millennium. I of course obliged, and while in Jerusalem, I purchased *techeilet* for the Kehlmanns...which they indeed wore at their *b'not mitzvah*.

The color blue has long been associated with royalty. Archeological digs have recovered evidence from Crete in 1750 BCE, where the ancient Minoans were refining sea purple for the wealthy classes even then. At the Tel Shikmona excavation, near the modern Israeli city of Haifa, stains on an ancient clay vat reveal the residue of the *murex trunculus* snails, a sea mollusk that secretes the mucus that was used to create the blue dye that Jews in this ancient city used to make the blue fringes of their garments. When Numbers, Chapter 15 requires the tallit to contain a fringe of blue, it assumes the availability of this snail and its dye. Throughout the ancient world, we know that this was a highly sought after product. In Persia, when Mordecai was paraded through the imperial city of Shushan, and hailed as a national hero, the Book of Esther says Moredecai was wearing "*levush malchut, techeilet va'chur*," (8:15) royal robes of blue and white. All throughout the ancient near east, whether it was Persia or Rome or Greece or Media, blue was the color associated with royalty. And that is precisely, it seems,

why the Torah required **every** Israelite to wear the color blue in their daily garb. Remember, Israelites wore the fringed garment every day. Only when four cornered garments went out of style did the fringes get transferred to a specifically religious garment, worn for prayer. Originally though, tzitzit, fringes, were part of one's daily attire. Recall that the Torah refers to Israel as a *mamlechet kohanim ve'goy kadosh*...a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Throughout the Torah, in one formulation or another, God says to *b'nai Yisrael: v'avdil etchem min ha'amim lihiyot li*, 'I have set you apart from other peoples to be Mine.' But those words were not just for Moses or for Aaron and his priestly family...those words were meant for the entire people...for the rich and the poor, the wise and the uneducated, for people in high positions as well as menial jobs...for men, for women, and for children. And *techeilet*, royal blue was not to be restricted to priests or the monarchy...everyone among the Jewish people was to be considered holy, and distinguished in their own right! What a powerful, liberating message for a nation that had just emerged from the humiliation and the degradation of slavery. Not only are you no longer to be considered a slave, but you must see yourself as royal...precious...important in God's economy and within this new Israelite community that sees all of its members as significant and indispensable.

Now most of us, if we look down into our laps...whether we are wearing our own tallit or one borrowed from the synagogue, will notice overwhelmingly that there are only white fringes in our tzitzit. Now the story I was told, since I was a kid, was that even though we still read about the commandment about the blue fringe every day in the third paragraph of the Shema, that somehow the *Hilazon*, the *murex trunculus* snail went missing, and we are no longer able to obtain that special blue dye. Another version of that myth is that people forgot how to make the special die. In either case, the Midrash Tanchuma, an 8th century collection, laments "we no longer have blue dye, only white." And since then, though the body of the tallit became more colorful over time, the fringes largely remained white. I never questioned that story about the snail mysteriously disappearing, and like so many other aspects of Jewish life, I am extremely deferential to the *major* trends in Jewish tradition. If Jewish tradition no longer demanded blue fringes, I was okay with that. Recently, though, after an intensive process of both chemical analysis and halakhic verification, *techeilet* has made another appearance. Rav Eliyahu Tavger along with a team of scientists became convinced that they had found the biblical source of blue dye allegedly lost 1,300 years ago, and they created a new cottage industry of producing the blue dye. Indeed some folks here at Beth Torah (like Kayla and Lindsey) have woven this *techeilet* into their tallises. This is all very intriguing. And I was intrigued even when I bought the *teichelet* for the Kehlmanns. But I still never bought it for myself. But I will...this summer.

Everything changed when I read an article written by a rabbi in Cleveland who had a very profound and inspiring effect on me when I was a teenager going to shul by myself, learning week by week, and little by little the liturgy and melodies of the Conservative movement. Rabbi Joshua Skoff, a dynamic, brilliant rabbi whose sermons I listened to intently nearly every Shabbat of my high school years, wrote an article that changed my view of *techeilet* and finally has convinced me to make it part of my Jewish life. He wrote that the great Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, who taught at my Seminary alma mater for over a half century, had a radically different theory about the disappearance of the blue fringe. "He explained that Jews gave up the blue

fringe because the deep bluish purple color traditionally used for fringes resembled the color worn by Roman aristocracy in the 3rd and 4th Centuries. Jews under Roman rule did not dare wear 'royal' blue threads lest their Roman masters consider it an act of rebellion against the Roman rulers."¹ Kaplan thought that Jews essentially **invented** the story of the disappearing or extinct mollusk because it was a more palpable story to tell themselves and their children. What people wants to perpetuate a story of harassment and discrimination? Rabbi Kaplan, who was a theological radical...he was the first, for example, to preside over a BAT mitzvah ceremony in the United States, began wearing a blue fringe in his tzitzit long before Tavger and his team of Israeli scientists claimed to have recovered the snail. He wore the blue fringe because he believed it was time for Jews to transform their identity from one of oppression to one of freedom. That for Judaism to thrive and perpetuate, we have to think like free people, like a self-determining nation, like a people with self respect, and a positive sense of who we are and why we exist. "Free people," as Rabbi Skoff wrote, are "allowed to wear blue." And how significant it is that blue became the prominent color of the flag of the State of Israel, the ultimate modern symbol of Jewish sovereignty and self-determination. How extraordinary that of all the colors that the founders of the State could have chosen for a national flag, that it was *davka blue* that came to symbolize "*lihiyot am chofshi be'Artzeinu*," *being a free people in our own land*, to quote Hatikva. On Tuesday the Jewish community throughout the world will celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut...an extraordinary modern holiday celebrating Jewish independence, freedom, and the mastery of our own collective destiny. No boycott or divestment or sanction can rob us of the overarching pride we have in our Jewish state, and how much that pride affects our identities not just as Zionists, but also as Jews. Israel is not perfect. Not all of its people are angels. We may disagree from time to time with its policies. But with all of its imperfections, Israel testifies to the world that the Jewish people are still alive, still vital, and that we still have a stake in this world. I will not only wear blue on Tuesday as part of my Yom Ha'atzmaut observance, but I will come back from Israel this summer with *petil techeilet*, fringes of blue to weave into my tallit, so that each day that they pass before my eyes or touch my lips I will celebrate the precious freedom to be a Jew, and my gratitude for being free to choose a rich and meaningful Jewish life for myself and for my family...symbolized in that historic royal blue fringe of *teichelet*. *Am Yisrael Chai*...The people of Israel are so very alive, both here and in our ancestral homeland; Now and forever.

Shabbat Shalom and Yom *Ha'atzmaut Samei-ach!*

¹ Skoff, Rabbi Joshua. "True Blue." *From the Pulpit; A Message from Rabbi Skoff*. The Park Synagogue Bulletin. April 2010, Nisan/Iyar 5770.