



In Parashat Teruma, the Torah introduces us for the first time to the term *tekhelet*, a bluish dye that is listed among the materials *Benei Yisrael* were to donate for the construction of the *Mishkan* (25:4). This dye was used in the production of several items in the *Mishkan* as well as for the *bigdei kehuna* (priestly garments). More familiarly, the *mitzva* of *tzitzit* requires coloring one of the *tzitzit* fringes with *tekhelet* (Bamidbar 15:38).

Maimonides, in *Hilkhot Tzitzit* (2:1-2; see also *Hilkhot Kelei Ha-mikdash* 8:13), identifies the color of *tekhelet* as the color of the daytime sky and then proceeds to describe the manner of its preparation. The dye, he writes, is extracted from a *chilazon*, "a fish whose color resembles the color of *tekhelet* and its blood is black as ink; it can be found in the Dead Sea." When the blood of the *chilazon* is mixed with certain ingredients and brought to a boil, it becomes a bluish dye which is then applied to the *tzitzit* string.

In the year 5647 (1887), Rabbi Gershon Henoch of Radzhin published a treatise entitled *Sefunei Temunei Chol* advocating the reinstating of the *tekhelet* through a concentrated effort to discover the *chilazon* and begin producing dye from its blood. Among the sources he cites as a basis for his campaign is the aforementioned discussion of Maimonides, from which it appears that Maimonides definitively identified the *chilazon* and knew precisely to which species of snail this term referred. Furthermore, the *Kesef Mishneh* commentary to *Hilkhot Tzitzit* (2:7) cites an exchange between the scholars of Lunel and Maimonides concerning a ruling he issued relevant to *tekhelet*. The Rebbe of Radzhin read this exchange as an indication that *tekhelet* was worn (at least in some communities) during Maimonides' time, and he therefore addressed practical questions relevant to this practice.

As the Rebbe of Radzhin notes, however, elsewhere in Maimonides' writings he indicates that *tekhelet* was not worn in his time. In his commentary to the Mishna (*Menachot*, beginning of chapter 4), Maimonides writes, "It [*tekhelet*] is not available to us today because we do not know how to produce its color, for not every type of blue dye in wool is called *tekhelet* – only the specified *tekhelet* which cannot be produced today." Similarly, in one of his responsa (55), he writes explicitly that in his day no *tekhelet* strings were worn with the *tzitzit*. The Rebbe of Radzhin reconciles these conflicting sources on the basis of their historical contexts. Maimonides wrote his commentary to the Mishna as a young man, as he fled from the Almohad persecution in Spain. It is likely, the Rebbe speculates, that during this period of persecution Jews were unable to produce the *tekhelet* dye. *Mishneh Torah*, by contrast, was written much later, when Maimonides he lived in Egypt and enjoyed a close relationship with the Caliph. It is

likely that by this point conditions had improved and communities therefore began once again producing and wearing *tekhelet*.

Rabbi Menachem Kasher, in his *Torah Sheleima* (Parashat Teruma, appendix 3), dismisses this claim of the Rebbe of Radzhin, noting that the aforementioned responsum, in which Maimonides makes explicit mention of the suspension of *tekhelet*, was actually written during the period in which *Mishneh Torah* was composed. Clearly, then, even during Maimonides' later years, *tekhelet* was not produced and not worn on the *tzitzit*. Rabbi Kasher therefore concludes that in Maimonides' view, a direct, oral tradition was necessary for identifying the *chilazon* and producing *tekhelet*. Contrary to the Radzhiner Rebbe's claims, the fact that Maimonides definitively describes the *chilazon* and is able to identify the species from which *tekhelet* is to be produced, and yet he himself testifies to the impossibility of producing *tekhelet* despite his stature and governmental connections, proves that an oral tradition is indispensable. Even though Maimonides identified the *chilazon* as a specific species of snail in the Dead Sea, he nevertheless made no effort to reinstate the production of *tekhelet* given the absence of an oral tradition.

(Of course, this discussion addresses only Maimonides' position on this issue, and is not intended as a practical conclusion with regard to the contemporary movement to reinstate the *tekhelet*, which indeed has the support of several distinguished halakhic authorities.)