

Customs and Laws from the Parsha: Korach

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And they rose up before Moses... (Bamidbar 16:2)

The commandment of tzitzit (fringes tied to the corners of a four-cornered garment) includes a law to dye one of the fringes on each corner with a blue dye called techeilet derived from the chilazon, a type of sea animal (Bamidbar 15:38). The techeilet which is the colour of the sea, sky and throne of glory, reminds us of God himself (Menachot 43b).

Korach tried to ridicule Moses by asking him if a tallit (prayer shawl) made entirely of techeilet still needed one small string of techeilet on each corner to fulfil the commandment. Moses confirmed that it did, triggering Korach to holler to the crowds over the seemingly illogical nature of the commandments (Bamidbar Rabbah 18:3).

This episode highlights that the command to include a p'til techeilet (blue fringe) is a Torah obligation. For generations, the source of this blue dye had been lost. Recently however, some claimed to have rediscovered the source through the Murex Trunculus, a type of sea-snail. There still some controversy as to whether the dye is the real techeilet or not.

The Babylonian Talmud records a maxim which indicates that we act strictly in cases of doubt relating to a Torah command (Beitza 3b). This implies that although there is some uncertainty regarding the authenticity of this rediscovered techeilet, it should nonetheless be worn.

While many authorities encourage techeilet, there are those who oppose it. Rabbi Moshe Shternbuch states that the principle of being strict in a case of doubt only applies when action will definitely result in fulfilling an obligation. Since doubt remains as to whether the obligation will be fulfilled, the new techeilet should not be permitted.

Korach sought to create friction and argument, yet we must remember that provided differences in the application of Jewish law are based on Torah principles, they should not be the source of discord and conflict. Hillel and Shammai disagreed about many critical areas of Jewish law including marital laws. Yet they accommodated one another so that their children would be able to marry (Yevamot 14b).

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