



Parashat Shelach
By Rabbi David Silverberg
Maimonides on Tekhelet

In the final verses of Parashat Shelach (15:37-41), the Torah introduces the *mitzva* of *tzitzit*, which requires affixing fringes to the corners of one's four-cornered garment, as a reminder of our religious obligations. The Torah establishes that a "*petil tekhelet*" – a string colored with a special bluish dye – be included among the *tzitzit* strings. (The tradition identifying the source of this dye was lost many centuries ago, and ever since, *tzitzit* have been worn without the *tekhelet* string. Approximately one decade ago, a group in Israel claimed to have rediscovered the *tekhelet*, and have been attempting to reinstate this *mitzva*.)

The *Rishonim* debate the question of how many *tekhelet* strings must be affixed to each corner together with the standard *tzitzit* strings. Tosafot (Berakhot 9b) maintained that the *mitzva* requires that two out of the four *tzitzit* strings tied to each corner of the garment must be dyed with *tekhelet*. According to this view, one must wear an equal number of *tekhelet* strings as ordinary strings.

Some writers have challenged Tosafot's view on the basis of a famous Midrashic passage in the *Midrash Tanchuma* (Korach, 2), cited by Rashi in his commentary to the first verse of Parashat Korach. The Midrash describes how Korach, in waging his revolt against the authority of Moshe and Aharon, sought to discredit Moshe by presenting him with a garment made entirely of *tekhelet*. Moshe ruled that such a garment requires *tzitzit* – both ordinary strings as well as *tekhelet*. Korach then ridiculed this ruling, shouting, "Is it possible that for a garment made from a different material, a single *tekhelet* string suffices, and this one, which is made entirely of *tekhelet*, cannot suffice for itself?" The clear implication of Korach's remark is that only one *tekhelet* string is required to fulfill the *tzitzit* obligation, and not two strings, as Tosafot maintained.

Indeed, the Ra'avad, in his critique of Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* (1:6), maintains that a single string among the four strings on each corner must be dyed *tekhelet*. Thus, according to the Ra'avad, when the four strings are folded along the corner of the garment to form eight strings, two of those eight strings will be colored *tekhelet*.

Maimonides presents a third view, claiming that only half of one string on each corner requires *tekhelet*, such that when the strings are folded, one of the resulting eight strings is colored *tekhelet*. A number of writers raised the question as to the rationale underlying Maimonides' view. The Torah, as mentioned, speaks of a "*petil tekhelet*" – which seems to refer to one complete string. On what basis did he determine that only half a string requires *tekhelet*?

Rav Asher Weiss of Jerusalem, in his *Minchat Asher* (Parashat Shelach), explains that Maimonides' view on this subject corresponds with his approach in defining the *tzitzit* obligation generally. Toward the beginning of his *Hilkhos Tzitzit* (1:3), Maimonides describes the two-step process that comprises this *mitzva*: "It thus turns out

that this *mitzva* consists of two commands: that one makes on the corner [of the garment] fringes made from the same material [as the garment], and that one wraps around the fringes a *tekhelet* string..." It is clear from Maimonides' presentation that the sole function of the *tekhelet* string is to be wrapped around the other strings. In his view, the Torah does not establish two equivalent obligations – to affix white strings, and to affix *tekhelet* strings. Rather, the Torah requires affixing white strings, which constitute the essential *mitzva*, and these strings should be wrapped with the *tekhelet* string. We might say that the *tekhelet* string is not required independently as one of the four *tzitzit* strings. Rather, the Torah commands wrapping the *tzitzit* strings with *tekhelet*.

This wrapping is done only after the four strings have been inserted through the garment's corner and folded over the corner to become eight strings. One of the resulting eight strings – half of one of the four original strings – is then wrapped around the group of strings. For this reason, Rav Weiss explains, Maimonides requires that only a half-string be dyed *tekhelet*. Since the *tekhelet* is required only for the wrapping, and the wrapping is done with a half-string, only half a string must be dyed. Maimonides did not view the *tekhelet* obligation as requiring a combination of ordinary strings and *tekhelet* strings. He rather understood that the *tekhelet* is necessary strictly for the purpose of wrapping around the other strings, and he therefore required that only the half-string used for wrapping be colored with *tekhelet* dye.