YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT BAMIDBAR**

**The Coverings of the *Mishkan***

Our *parasha* contains the final details of the structure of the *Mishkan*, conveyed within a description of the tasks of the *Leviim* in the *Mishkan’s* journeys. As we shall see, this description highlights elements of the *Mishkan*’s structure that appear nowhere else.

As part of the description of how the *Mishkan* is carried after it is dismantled (*Bamidbar* chapter 4), the Torah specifies that the vessels must be covered with various coverings while journeying. Clearly, their purpose goes beyond merely protecting the vessels, since if that were their only purpose, there would be no need for different coverings for different vessels, and the Torah would not list the composition of each one.

This series of *shiurim* usually deals with the “*peshat*” level of the text, but we have deviated slightly from that policy when discussing the *parashiot* of the *Mishkan*. It must be clear from the outset that when we try to understand the purpose of each of the coverings, we are treading a fine line, which rests on a meticulous reading of the text and the attempt to understand it. However, when we try to understand the meaning of the commands, we must add another layer over and above the plain, literal meaning of the verses, and there is a danger of deviating significantly from the plain meaning. We can only hope that our discussion will remain true to the broader framework of the *peshat* of the text.

**The Coverings**

In order to try to understand the need for coverings for the vessels, let us set forth the various coverings in the form of a table:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **The vessel** | **Covering I** | **Covering II** | **Covering III** | **Placement of auxiliary vessels** |
| *Aron* (Ark) (*Bamidbar* 4:5-6) | *Parokhet* | *Tachash* skin | Pure *tekhelet* | No auxiliary vessels |
| *Shulchan* (Table) (4:7-8) | *Tekhelet* | Crimson (*tola’at shani*) | *Tachash* | Between the *tekhelet* and the crimson[[1]](#footnote-1) |
| *Menora* (Lamp) (4:9-10) | *Tekhelet* |  | *Tachash* | With the *Menora* |
| Golden altar (for incense) (4:11) | *Tekhelet* |  | *Tachash* | No auxiliary vessels |
| Service vessels[[2]](#footnote-2) (4:12) | *Tekhelet* |  | *Tachash* | No auxiliary vessels |
| *Mizbeach* (Sacrificial altar) (4:13-14) | Purple |  | *Tachash* | Between the purple and the *tachash* |

A number of principles become immediately apparent:

1. Different vessels have different coverings.
2. Each of the vessels inside the *Mishkan* (in the *Heikhal*)has a covering of *tekhelet*. The *Mizbeach*, which stands outside of the *Mishkan*, is not covered with *tekhelet*.
3. Two vessels – the *Aron* and the *Shulchan* – have three coverings; all the rest have only two. It seems that the *Aron* and the *Shulchan* have the extra covering because these are the two innermost vessels.[[3]](#footnote-3)
4. The outermost covering of all the vessels is *tachash* skin, except for the *Aron*, which has a covering of pure *tekhelet* over the *tachash* skin.

In order to understand these principles, we must go back and recall certain relevant elements of the *Mishkan’s* structure.[[4]](#footnote-4) The *Mishkan* is made of curtains that are fashioned out of six-ply flax thread and threads of wool dyed *tekhelet*, purple, and crimson (*Shemot* 26:1). Above these curtains are goat skins (v. 7), and above these, reddened ram skins and then *tachash* skins (v. 13). The courtyard, where the *Mizbeach* stands, is surrounded by curtains made of six-ply flax thread (27:9). The same type of thread is used for the garments worn by the regular *kohanim* (with the possible exception of the sash), while the garments of the *Kohen Gadol* are made of the threads of the curtains, with the addition of gold thread. On Yom Kippur, the *Kohen Gadol* wears white garments, made only of six-ply flax thread.

Like the outermost curtains covering the *Mishkan*, the outermost coverings of its vessels (with the exception of the *Aron*) are made of *tachash* skin. It would seem, therefore, that when the *Mishkan* is standing, all the vessels are in one place, and all are covered by a single covering; when the *Mishkan* is dismantled and on the move, each separate vessel stands alone, each with its own covering. Therefore, the *tachash* curtain covering the *Mishkan* when it is standing becomes a covering of *tachash* skin that covers each of the vessels when the *Mishkan* is dismantled.

If we analyze the table more closely, we see that each vessel has a color that characterizes it, and all these colors are woven into the curtains of the *Mishkan*. Thus, the curtains, comprising all of the different threads, reflect the fact that they cover all of the vessels together. The garments of the *kohanim* are made of six-ply linen thread and gold, indicating that the *kohanim* belong to the courtyard of the *Mishkan* (which is made of six-ply linen thread) as well as to the *Mishkan* itself (made of dyed wool thread) and its vessels (made of gold). On Yom Kippur, the *Kohen Gadol* makes atonement for the *Mishkan*, which has become defiled by the transgressions of Bnei Yisrael (as explained at length in the *shiur* on *Parashat Shemini*). Since these transgressions caused the Divine Presence to be exiled, as it were, from the *Mishkan*, the *Kohen Gadol* enters the *Kodesh* *ha*-*Kodashim* wearing white linen garments, associated with the courtyard, rather than with garments of dyed wool thread, whose materials are associated with the *Mishkan*.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Covering of *Tekhelet* (Blue)**

As we saw in the above table, all the vessels in the *Heikhal* (the inside of the *Mishkan*) have coverings of *tekhelet*. It is therefore clear that *tekhelet* is in some sense representative of the *Heikhal*. We also saw that the outermost covering of the *Aron* is pure *tekhelet*, and we may therefore conclude that *tekhelet* is especially representative of the *Aron*.

Seemingly, we might have proposed that *tekhelet* somehow symbolizes purity and sanctity, and for this reason the Torah always mentions it first among the various dyed threads (with purple and crimson following).[[6]](#footnote-6) But this turns out not to be so. The vessels of the *Heikhal* are covered with *tekhelet* and then with *tachash* skins, suggesting that the inner covering (*tekhelet*) is more important, but by that logic, the inner covering of the *Aron* (which is made from a mixture of all the types of thread) is more important than the pure *tekhelet* covering on the outside!

Indeed, if we recall other places where pure *tekhelet* appears, we find that its role is always secondary. In our *parasha*, the *tekhelet* serves to cover the vessels; in the case of the *efod* (apron of the *Kohen Gadol*), the *tekhelet* connects it to the *choshen* (breastplate); in the case of the *tzitz* (forehead plate of the *Kohen Gadol*), *tekhelet* is used to tie it to the head; and in the case of the curtains, the *tekhelet* serves to connect the clasps. Even the *me’il* (coat of the *Kohen Gadol*), which is made of pure *tekhelet*, is worn not so much for itself as for the purpose of the bells sown along its hem, so that the *Kohen Gadol* can be heard as he enters the *Kodesh*.[[7]](#footnote-7) The technical role of the *me’il* itself is of lesser importance than those of the *choshen* and the *efod*, for example, which serve to have the names and fate of Bnei Yisrael constantly upon the heart of the Kohen Gadol.

On the basis of all the above, it seems that the level of *tekhelet* that is combined with the other dyed threads is higher than the level of pure *tekhelet*. How can this be? Perhaps, in fact, the level of *tekhelet* itself is higher than that of the other dyed threads; however, the combination of *tekhelet* and the other threads is on an even higher level. The conceptual ramification of this is simple: a collective that comprises only a single color – even if it is *tekhelet* – ultimately achieves a lower level than a collective that comprises different shades. For this reason, *Chazal* place in Korach’s mouth the question, “A garment that is all *tekhelet* – does it require *tzitzit*?”[[8]](#footnote-8) For it is Korach who argues that “the entire congregation is holy,” just like a garment that is made of pure *tekhelet*. It turns out, however, that Am Yisrael is not made to be uniform. Although the entire nation is referred to as a “kingdom of *kohanim*,” within this magnificent kingdom there are *kohanim*, *leviim*, and *yisraelim*.

**Coverings for the Vessels vs. Curtains of the *Mishkan***

The comparison between the curtains of the *Mishkan* and the coverings for the vessels gives rise to an interesting question: Why do the vessels not have four coverings, like the *Mishkan*? Why are they not also covered with goat skins and reddened ram skins?

With regard to the goat skins, the answer is relatively simple. I have noted elsewhere that the role of the goat skins relates to Bnei Yisrael’s standing with regard to the *Mishkan*.[[9]](#footnote-9) When Am Yisrael would move on to the next station in its journeys, the *Mishkan* would first be dismantled and then carried ahead of the camp. Thus, during the journey, it would not be located in the midst of the camp, and therefore there was no room for goat skins; they were replaced by the *tekhelet*. Similarly, we might explain why there is no six-ply linen among the coverings of the vessels. This thread represents the courtyard and Bnei Yisrael’s standing within the setting of the *Mishkan*, and therefore it has no place in the framework of the vessels in and of themselves. The six-ply linen thread is found only in the *parokhet*, since the *Aron* has a role in relation to Am Yisrael even while traveling.

The *tachash* skins serve as a barrier between what is inside of them and what lies outside. Therefore, they are not part of the screen that covers the entrance to the *Mishkan*, since entry is via this opening. The vessels, on the other hand, are covered with *tachash* skins to symbolize the separation between themselves and Bnei Yisrael, since there is no access to the vessels during the journey.

The need for a barrier between the vessels and the nation while on the move may explain another puzzling detail in the description of the coverings. The Torah repeatedly emphasizes that the vessels must be carried by means of poles attached to their sides. But when it comes to the *Menora* and the vessels that have no poles, we are told that they must be placed on a carrying beam (*mot*). Since the vessels have several layers of coverings and will not touch whatever is under them, it is not clear what the purpose of the beam is. And indeed, the Torah emphasizes the need for a covering to prevent the death of the *leviim*, without addressing the poles. In light of this, we might propose that the Torah seeks to emphasize that the *kohanim* and *leviim* are separate from the vessels during the journey; proximity to the vessels is permitted only when the *Mishkan* is in the midst of Bnei Yisrael.

The *Aron*’s first two coverings represent its dual function during the journey.[[10]](#footnote-10) On one hand, it is cut off from Bnei Yisrael during their travels; on the other hand, it scouts their next resting station. To represent both aspects, it has an internal covering as well as an outer *tachash* skin, all wrapped in *tekhelet*.

**Ram Skins**

We are left with the question of the reddened ram skins. Why is the *Mishkan* covered with these when it is set up, and why are the vessels not covered with these skins?

To answer this question, we must pay attention to the fact that the structure of the *Mishkan* offers several examples of a four/three model – in other words, elements which might from one perspective be viewed as numbering four, while from a different perspective they number three. The following are some examples:[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. Three garments are stipulated for a regular *kohen*: the *ketonet* (tunic), cap (*migba’at*), and belt (*avnet*). In practice, however, he wears four garments: in addition to the above, he wears pants (*michnasayim*), which serve the practical function of covering his private parts, and hence the command in their regard is given separately.[[12]](#footnote-12)
2. Three (additional) garments are stipulated for the *Kohen Gadol*: the *efod* (apron), *choshen* (breastplate), and *me’il* (coat). The *tzitz* (forehead plate) is not a regular garment,[[13]](#footnote-13) and is therefore not included in the command concerning the priestly garments at the beginning of *Parashat Tetzaveh* (*Shemot* 28:4).[[14]](#footnote-14)
3. The threads used for the *Mishkan* are made of three threads of dyed wool and a single thread of flax.[[15]](#footnote-15)
4. The *Mishkan* is covered with curtains, goat skins, *tachash* skins, and reddened ram skins. The *Tannaim* are divided as to whether the two upper coverings are considered separate or one single layer – i.e., whether the *Mishkan* has three coverings or four.
5. There are three main vessels inside (*Aron*, *Shulchan*, *Menora*) and a fourth outside (*Mizbeach*). Alternatively, we might say there are three vessels in the *Heikhal* (including the golden incense altar) and a fourth in the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim*.
6. Bnei Yisrael encamp around the *Mishkan* in a formation comprising four sets of three tribes (3x4), and the arrangement of the stones on the *choshen* is the same.
7. The *Mizbeach* has four horns at its corners, but only three of them have a foundation (an extension at the base of the *Mizbeach*).[[16]](#footnote-16)

Some of the above examples are set forth explicitly in the text, while others are deduced by *Chazal* – proving that *Chazal*, too, took note of this four/three model and invoked it in different instances.

If we broaden our perspective to all of Tanakh, the four/three model appears in many other places as well. At the very dawn of Am Yisrael’s existence, we find four patriarchs and three matriarchs. The discrepancy between the number of patriarchs and the number of matriarchs gave rise to various problems over the course of Jewish history. This gap was the source of the schism between the Kingdom of Israel and the Kingdom of Yehuda – a schism that will disappear in the time to come.

Is this the ideal situation? Perhaps the ideal would be four patriarchs, or perhaps just three matriarchs? In the past we discussed the disagreement between Yitzchak and Rivka concerning Esav’s place amongst Am Yisrael.[[17]](#footnote-17) To Yitzchak’s view, Esav should be part of the nation, and therefore Leah should have married Esav, creating a balanced model of four patriarchs and four matriarchs. Ultimately, it is Rivka’s view that prevails; Esav is not included within Am Yisrael. However, the plan was for Am Yisrael to have three patriarchs and three matriarchs. Because Yaakov obtained the blessings from Yitzchak through deceit, he is forced to flee from Charan; Lavan tricks him and gives him his elder daughter in marriage, and we end up with the odd model of three patriarchs and four matriarchs.

Thus, the discrepancy between the four and the three represents a certain deficiency within reality. Our reality did not achieve full actualization, and therefore there is a discrepancy between the number of patriarchs and the number of matriarchs.

The limited scope of our present discussion does not allow for detailed discussion of why there is a contradiction between the three and the four in each of the above examples. I shall comment only on the instance of the coverings: as we have seen, the coverings of the *Mishkan* describe the residing of the Divine Presence and the Revelation to Am Yisrael within the *Mishkan*. When the *Mishkan* is dismantled, and God is not residing amongst the nation, all the vessels are protected with only three coverings, representing a less than ideal situation, which finds its repair only when the *Mishkan* is erected once again.[[18]](#footnote-18)

(Translated by Kaeren Fish; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. We might explain that the covering of *tekhelet* covers the *Shulchan*, while the covering of crimson is the covering for the auxiliary vessels, since the text stipulates, “And they shall spread over **them** a garment of crimson,” while in relation to the *tachash* skin, it says, “and they shall cover **it** with a covering of *tachash* skin.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is not clear whether the “service vessels” are vessels for the golden altar or other vessels; see the various commentators ad loc. In any event, owing to their relatively lower status, there is no requirement to **cover** them with a covering of *tekhelet*, as in the case of the *Menora* and its vessels; rather, they are **wrapped** in *tekhelet*. The scope of our discussion does not allow for elaboration on this distinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In every place where the Torah describes the structure of the *Mishkan*, the *Shulchan* always precedes the *Menora*; hence, it is considered more “internal” than the *Menora* – even though it is placed opposite it in the *Mishkan*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We noted some of these in the *shiurim* on the *parashiot* of the *Mishkan*. That discussion is pertinent to our present discussion, but each stands independently. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Note that this is why *Chazal* maintained, in contrast to the Sadducees, that the *Kohen Gadol* must first enter the *Kodesh ha-Kodashim* and only then offer the incense – because the Divine Presence is not found in the *Mishkan* prior to the process of atonement. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Shesh* – the six-ply flax thread – sometimes appears before the dyed wool and sometimes afterwards. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The role of the *me’il* may depend on whether the bells were inside the decorative pomegranates or in between them. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As cited by Rashi (*Bamidbar* 16:1, s.v. *ve-Datan ve-Aviram*) from the *Midrash Tanchuma*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See my *shiur* on *Parashat Teruma*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This would seem to be the source of the disagreement among the *Rishonim* as to whether there was one *Aron* or two. However, that issue is beyond the scope of this *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. To the examples listed here we might also add that *tzitzit* (which is related to the *Mishkan,* as will be explained in a future *shiur*) have three regular woolen threads and one (or a half) thread of *tekhelet*. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See *Shemot* 28:4, 40-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For this reason, *Chazal* teach that the *tzitz* makes atonement for Bnei Yisrael even when it is not upon the forehead of the *Kohen Gadol*. [See *Yoma* 7b-8a – SR.] [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The command regarding the *tzitz* is found in *Shemot* 28:36. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. As with all the other points here, I am keeping my comments brief, and will merely note that the commentators debate what the various threads are. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. As understood by the researchers at Makhon Ha-Mikdash, based on a variety of sources. For more on the foundation, see illustrations [here](https://templeinstitute.org/illustrated-tour-the-mizbeach/). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See *shiur* #6, on *Parashat Toldot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. To clarify further, we might add the following, in brief. A garment has two functions: it covers a person, while at the same time revealing something about him outwardly. These two functions are realized in the *Mishkan* in two places: the coverings of the *Mishkan* serve the first function, revealing nothing beyond the *tachash* skins, but revelation takes place via the screen at the entrance, which is fashioned out of the four different types of threads that are woven and embroidered to create *keruvim*. Both functions find expression when the *Mishkan* is standing, but when it is dismantled, there is no possibility of seeing the four threads covered by *tachash* skins; all that is visible of the *Aron* is *tekhelet*. This is similar to the three forefathers, who need David to complete the four legs of the Chariot. Only David – who comes as a repair for Esav (since he is both similar to him, with red hair, and different from him, as a righteous example) can complete the Chariot and cause the Divine Presence to be revealed in the world, and for this reason, the construction of the Temple began with him. Therefore, when the *Mishkan* is dismantled, it has only three coverings; revelation comes only with *tekhelet*. When the *Mishkan* is built and standing, both functions of the covering are realized. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)