

Korach, Fringes, and Flags

Parashat Korach, Numbers, Chapters 15-18 | June 30, 2022

We have no flag, and we need one. If we desire to lead many men, we must raise a symbol above their heads.

So Theodor Herzl wrote in his famous pamphlet, *The Jewish State*. And though some early versions of the Israeli flag that we know today were already being used by Zionist groups in America, it is to Herzl's friend, David Wolffsohn, that Herzl's own support for the Zionist flag is accorded. Before the First Zionist Congress, Wolffsohn found inspiration in a very Jewish item. As he described it,

At the behest of our leader Herzl, I came to Basle to make preparations for the Zionist congress...Among many other problems that occupied me then was one which contained something of the essence of the Jewish problem: What flag would we hang in the Congress Hall?...Then an idea struck me. We have a flag—and it is blue and white. The *tallit* (prayer-shawl) with which we wrap ourselves when we pray: that is our symbol. Let us take this *tallit* from its bag and unroll it before the eyes of Israel and the eyes of all nations. So I ordered a blue and white flag with the Shield of David painted upon it. That is how the national flag, that flew over Congress Hall, came into being.

The blue and white of Israel's flag came from the blue and white stripes on some versions of the *tallit*, the Jewish prayer shawl. Those, in turn, were taken from the colors with which Israel is commanded to adorn the edges of Israelite garments. In these two colors—blue and white—we can gain a deeper understanding of this week's Torah reading, which immediately follows the commandment of *tzitzit*.

The tale of blue and white begins with an obligation involving Israel's sartorial splendor:

And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying,

Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make themselves fringes on the corners of their garments...and that they put with the fringes of each corner a thread of blue wool. (Numbers 15:37-38)

The exact construction and proportion of these strings has long been debated, but what is clear is that among these fringes, which are called *tzitzit*, some strings were blue and some were not. Originally, *tzitzit* were not attached to special garments created for prayer, but rather to the standard four cornered cloaks that were worn in ancient times. Then the Almighty adds,

And it shall be unto you for fringes, that you shall look upon it, and remember the commandments of the Lord, and do them; that you go not after your own heart and your own eyes after which you go astray... (Numbers 15:39)

For Maimonides, the meaning here is that the blue strings standing out amidst the other fringes are meant to remind us of God and of His commandments. In understanding this, we must review ancient Middle Eastern fashion. The two main sartorial symbols of splendor in biblical society and throughout much of the ancient world were known in Hebrew as *argaman*, wool dyed purple, and *tekhelet*, wool dyed blue. Another material that is mentioned is *tola'at shani*, which seems to be scarlet. As Baruch Serman and Judy Taubes Serman explain, these materials were extremely precious in the ancient world:

The recent archeological find in Timna of several scraps of purple-dyed fabrics dating from c. 1000 BCE, approximately

during the reign of King David, analyzed by Dr. Naama Sukenik of the Israel Antiquities Authority, underscores how purple textiles were already a valuable commodity in the Southern Levant far earlier than the Roman period. Purple dyed cloth (*argamanu* in Akkadian) is the *argaman* mentioned throughout the Bible, most prominently along with sky-blue *tekbelet* and *tola'at shani*, in the list of luxurious materials used in the *Mishkan* and in the garments of the priests who served there. *Tekbelet* is also, of course, the blue thread which the Bible commands each Jew to affix to the *tzitzit* on the corner of his garment.

Tekbelet and *argaman*, royal blue wool and royal purple wool: both are materials that, according to Exodus, were collected for the creation of the Tabernacle, and both were used in the creation of the priestly garments. Yet, even as both *argaman* and *tekbelet* are woven into the garments of the priesthood, when it comes to the fringes known as *tzitzit*, blue wool is specified—indicating that purple is the primary color of ancient royalty, but blue is the color of Jewish faith. The Stermans, in their article, cite Rabbi Meir of the Talmud, and join biblical color with themes in modern art:

Though purple was prized above all other colors by the ancient cultures surrounding Israel, the Jews esteemed the sky-blue *tekbelet* as the most cherished and holiest of all colored fabrics. Purple, though beautiful, is raw and earthy, but *tekbelet*, like the deep, fathomless ocean, and the vast, soaring sky, reaches out to infinity. “Why is *tekbelet* singled out from all the colors?” Rabbi Meir asks, “Because *tekbelet* is similar to the sea, and the sea is similar to the sky, and the sky is similar to the Holy Throne” (Sota 17a). Along the same lines, though from an entirely different milieu, the great Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky, who had the fascinating neurological condition known as synesthesia, where

he experienced color not only visually but also audially, writes, “The deeper the blue, the more it beckons man into the infinite, arousing a longing for purity and the supersensuous. It is the color of the heavens just as we imagine it.” Gazing upon the color of *tekbelet*—as the Torah enjoins us to do with the *tzitzit* strings, “and you shall look at it” (Numbers 15:39)—inspires us to lofty, transcendent contemplation.

The sky-blue wool utilized by the priesthood in the holy is also meant to be tied to the ends of the garments of Israel as a sign of the transcendent. Israelites are described in Exodus as “a nation of royal priests, a holy people.” The *tekbelet*, the strings of blue that adorn the corners of their garments and that match a color of the priestly clothing, highlight the fact that the transcendent God dwells amidst the people.

It is with this in mind that we see a possible connection to what follows immediately in Numbers after the laws of *tzitzit*, Chapter 16:

Now Korach, the son of Yitzhar, the son of Kabat, the son of Levi, took, and Datan and Aviram, the sons of Eliav, and On, the son of Pelet, sons of Reuvein.

And they rose up in the face of Moses, and certain of the children of Israel...

And they assembled themselves together against Moses and against Aaron, and said unto them, Ye take too much upon you, seeing that all the congregation is holy, and the Lord is among them: wherefore then do ye place yourselves above the assembly of the Lord? (Numbers 16:1-3)

Korach here challenges Aaron’s right to the high priesthood. And he does so by rhetorically drawing on one of the central themes of the *tzitzit*, that the Lord dwells among Israel. But how sincere is Korach? Ponder again the opening phrase, “*Vayikach Korach*” in the Hebrew, which means, “And Korach took.” But whom, or what, did he take? No object is given, only the verb.

One possible explanation is that he took *himself*. Korach does bring his entourage, and he speaks in its name; but it's really all about himself. He is a demagogue seeking to honor himself, but a brilliant demagogue he is, and he uses reason to put forward his argument. Why, he asks, do we need Aaron if everyone in Israel is close to God, if God's covenant is with all of us?

There are many answers to Korach's argument, but the fundamental response, of course, is that God chose Aaron as High Priest, just as God chose Israel as his covenantal people. Thus here, Korach, who may be drawing on one symbolism of the *tekhelet*, the blue strings of the *tzitzit*, misses out on another symbolism: that ultimately we must recognize our own limited nature as human beings and obey all that God commands.

Here again, we turn to the colors of blue and white. The traditional color of the non-blue strings of the *tzitzit* is white, and Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik once suggested that the symbolism of the aesthetic union of white and blue is the Jewish combination of rationality and mystery, reason and faith. The white strings, he said, denote clarity, that which is self-evident. They bespeak the power of the human mind to perceive, to deduce, to innovate. But then there is *tekhelet*, blue, the color of heaven itself, capturing the unfathomable mysteries at the heart of creation. White strings and blue strings together connote the human ability to understand, as well as the mysteries which human beings cannot understand.

Judaism does not deny the power of reason, but it also calls for us to recognize and remember that there is Someone far greater than ourselves. It is God Who chose the Jews, and it is God Who chose Aaron and Aaron's children to minister before Him. It is therefore significant that Moses responds to Korach's request for the priesthood by focusing on another ritual that also symbolizes the humility of the human mind and the aspects of life understood only by the Almighty: the offering of incense, which, as Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein has noted, creates a cloud that limits the perception of those who stand in the sacred sphere as a sense of mystery envelopes all. Moses instructs Korach, and his mob:

And take ye every man his fire pan, and put incense upon them, and bring ye before the Lord every man's fire pan, two hundred and fifty fire pans; thou also, and Aaron, each his fire pan. (Numbers 16:17)

Aaron's incense is accepted. Korach and his men are swallowed up by the earth, their challenge denied by God. Their pans are beaten into a crown for the altar of incense, a reminder of the election of Aaron and his children. The incense of the Tabernacle continues to be brought twice daily by the *kobanim*, the priests, on behalf of Israel. Its symbolism is like that of the blue fringes. Both are signs of God's indwelling in Israel, but they are both also a reminder that God's infinite wisdom profoundly surpasses our own. And it is our humility before him and our faith in his wisdom that is the source of our obedience.

We can now return to the theme of blue and white and what it means for Jewish history. Over the centuries, the art of creating blue wool, *tekhelet*, was lost, and most Jews therefore wore only white strings, attaching them to special four cornered garments used for prayer. Some remembered the covenantal color scheme by placing blue stripes upon these white garments.

It was this color scheme that inspired Wolffson's design for the Zionist flag. And perhaps we can now appreciate how appropriate it is that white and blue, ingenuity and mystery, ultimately adorned the symbol of the Jewish state. Israel was indeed an immense human achievement; but Israel is also a sign of the Divine acting within history. Those who built Israel made a desert into a flourishing garden, created a modern state, a mighty military, and a source of scientific breakthroughs. But as the British Catholic historian Paul Johnson wrote:

In the last half-century, over 100 completely new independent states have come into existence. Israel is the only one whose creation can fairly be called a miracle.

Israel truly is white and blue, simultaneously a modern democratic marvel and an enduring reminder of the mystery that is the endurance of the Chosen Peo-

ple. And the colors on its flag—like those of the *tzitzit* that inspired it—remind us of the miracle of the Jewish people throughout the ages, a miracle that is the true tie that binds, connecting us to God and to each other.

Discussion Questions:

1. Demagogues claims to speak for, and on behalf of, the people. How can Korach's story help us tell the difference between leaders who have the best interests of the nation at heart and those who seek only self-aggrandizement?
2. Rabbi Soloveichik connects the rituals of incense and of *tzitzit* by noting how they both embody Judaism's embrace of reason as well as mystery. Are there any other Jewish rituals which combine these two elements of Jewish thought and theology?