

KORACH (NUMBERS 16:1-18:32)

True Blue

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

Walk into any synagogue and you will see the standard Shul “uniform”-- the *Tallis* (or *Tallit*), sometimes mistranslated as “prayer shawl.” The word “*Tallis*” means simply, “garment.” What makes the *Tallis* different from other garments is the fact that it has four corners, each with a tassel called *Tzitzis*. Every four-cornered garment, whether it is worn for prayer or to protect you from the elements (e.g., a poncho) requires *Tzitzis*. (The reason we don’t see more *Tzitzis* these days is that most clothes today don’t have four corners; togas went out of style millennia ago. It is, however, standard practice to wear a smaller *Tallis*, aptly called a *Tallis Katan* -- *little Tallis*, under one’s shirt, to be worn throughout the day.)

We read at the end of last week’s Torah Portion that one of the strings of the *Tzitzis* should be dyed a shade of blue with a pigment called *T’cheiles*. (*T’cheiles*, which comes from a sea animal called a *Chilazon*, is not currently available. It is not clear which sea animal it comes from. [Although some groups claim that they have successfully identified the *Chilazon*.] Therefore, today we make *Tzitzis* that are totally white. The stripes on a *Tallis* serve as a reminder of that segment of the Mitzvah.)

The *T’cheiles*, according to the Talmud, is supposed to remind one of all the Mitzvahs. The blue strand is similar to the color of the sea, which, in turn is similar to the sky, which is the same color as G-d’s throne. This progression of color association should lead one to thoughts of G-d and His Commandments. (See “Fringe Benefits” for more details.)

Enter Korach and his gang. Korach, a Levite and relative of Moses, resented the fact that another relative, Elitzafan, had been chosen for a leadership position that Korach coveted. Therefore, Korach decided to challenge Moses’ authority and integrity. The conversation went something like this (with a bit of literary license on my part):

“Hey, Moses, I have a question for you. You see these 250 men? Each one of them is wearing a *Tallis*. You’ll notice that I dyed the entire *Tallis* with *T’cheiles*. Tell me, does a *Tallis* that is *T’cheiles* in color need to have *Tzitzis* on each corner?”

Moses responded that it does. The Torah does not make any distinctions as to the color of the garment. If it has four corners, it requires *Tzitzis*. Period.

“Didja hear that, fellahs?” mocked Korach. “Have you ever heard anything so ridiculous? If a single thread of blue *T’cheiles* on each corner is sufficient for the Mitzvah, certainly a whole *Tallis* that is *T’cheiles* is sufficient, without adding those silly little fringes!

“But I have another question for you, Moses. You told us that every doorway of every house has to have a *Mezuzah*. You said we have to copy two paragraphs from the Torah onto a small sheet of parchment and attach it to the doorpost. Tell me, what if I have a house that is filled with Torah scrolls. Do the doorposts of such a house need *Mezuzahs* on the doors?”

Again, Moses responded affirmatively. Any doorway of any room, unless it is a bathroom, or laundry room containing soiled clothing, etc., needs to have a *Mezuzah*. Our sages tell us that the *Mezuzah* is symbolic of the Divine protection that is provided to our homes and businesses.

Again, Korach laughed. “Moses, what are you talking about?! That is totally irrational! If two little paragraphs of Scripture can be used to fulfill the Mitzvah, a house full of Torahs can certainly do the job! Listen, Moses, you’re making up rules that make no sense!”

In this fashion, Korach endeavored to convince the Nation that Moses was a fraud. After all, he reasoned, the Israelites only heard the Ten Commandments from G-d. After that, Moses went up the mountain, returning 40 days later, with a list of 613 Commandments. Where did those Commandments come from? Moses CLAIMED they were from G-d, but who could prove it?

Korach argued, “*You (and your brother Aaron) have gone too far! The entire Nation is holy, and G-d is with them. Why have you placed yourselves above G-d’s congregation?*” (Numbers, 16:3).

What was this fight all about? Any logically thinking person should realize that Korach was barking up the wrong tree. It seems that Korach was grabbing at straws, trying to find anything that could discredit Moses.

I recently heard an interesting explanation from Rabbi Moshe D. Tendler, based on the Ari.

Moses and Korach were arguing about details. Moses was concerned about the minutiae of Jewish Law. A *Mezuzah* must be written in such-and-such a way, placed at such-and-such a particular point on the door. There is a specific way that *Tzitzis* must be made, and they must be placed upon particular categories of garments.

Korach took a more global view of religion. What difference does it make whether the blue is on the string or on the clothes? For that matter, does it really matter what type of dye you use? You want blue? You’ve got blue! What difference does it make whether the *Mezuzah* paragraphs are on the doorpost or in the room? You want Shema Yisrael? You’ve got *Shema Yisrael*!

Jewish Law is filled with tiny details. There are 613 Mitzvahs with thousands upon thousands of rules, regulations, and nuances. There are rules as to how and when to recite particular prayers and blessings. The Shofar on Rosh Hashanah must be blown according to specific requirements as to how long each Shofar sound is. If you don't get it right, you have to repeat the Shofar blast. *Tefillin* must be placed just so on the head and arm; if they are not in just the right place, you haven't fulfilled the Mitzvah. When slaughtering a kosher animal, the knife must be held just the right way; if not, the meat is not kosher.

WHY?! Does G-d really care about the tiny little nitty-gritty specifics down to the last tiny detail? Does He really care if a tree branch hangs over my Sukkah or if my Chanukah lights are light bulbs instead of candles?

I look at it this way. I have a body that consists of millions of cells, and thousands of miles of veins, arteries, and nerves. I have a heart that is responsible for pumping oxygen-rich blood to nourish every cell in my body. I have a brain that has jobs to do that are far beyond the capacity of a computer.

Do I care about those little details? I sure do, and I hope and pray that G-d maintains each and every one of them with microscopic precision.

The least I can do is put my *Tefillin* and *Mezuzah* in the right place.

The Talmud (Bava Basra, 74a) reports that somewhere out in the Sinai Desert there is still a small hole where the ground opened up and miraculously swallowed Korach and his cohorts. If you put your ear to the ground, you can still hear the voices: "Moses is true and his Torah is true!"

I guess Korach changed his mind.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz