

Dazzling Blue: Color Symbolism, Kabbalistic Myth, and the Evil Eye in Judaism

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Abstract

The color blue is thought to protect against the evil eye in Mediterranean cultures. This article unfolds the yet-unstudied role played by kabbalistic theology, symbolism, and myth in the construction of the color blue as a protective color for Jews. It traces particularly the development of a medieval kabbalistic myth of a dazzling blue garment of the feminine aspect of the godhead, protecting her from contact with evil forces. The article shows how this myth became the foundation for various practices against the evil eye among Jews in the modern period and contextualizes this myth within theories about the evil eye.

Keywords

color symbolism – Kabbalah – Judaism – blue – evil eye – myth – ritual – magic

Color symbolisms are found in many religions, with specific colors ascribed diverse and sometimes opposite meanings in different religious settings.¹ As such, colors in religions do not only represent reality; they are often used to

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1 The body of literature on colors is immense. For a useful bibliography, see Osborne 2013.

manipulate reality through practices such as apotropaic magic.² Against a widespread image of Judaism as a religion in which the visual aspect is suppressed, a reader finds Gershom Scholem's 1979 classical essay, "Colours and Their Symbolism in Jewish Tradition and Mysticism." In that essay, Scholem argued that colors also play a significant role in Judaism, primarily in kabbalistic sources. However, Scholem's essay did not span beyond the medieval period and also neglected the magical or apotropaic aspects of color symbolism in kabbalistic texts. After Scholem, relatively few studies related to and discussed the place of color in Jewish mysticism. With the exception of Moshe Idel (1988a, 1988b: 103–111, 1994, 2015, 2016), most of these studies treated colors *en passant*, and, like Scholem, focused on medieval texts and neglected aspects of magic.³

This article seeks to shed new light on apotropaic aspects of the color blue in Judaism from the medieval through the modern period. The color blue, whose Hebrew term is *tekhelet* (תכלת),⁴ plays a prominent role in Judaism. It is required for the personal commandment of the tassel, needed for the communal liturgy of the tabernacle and temple, and used in the flag of the State of Israel. However, this color has not become a subject of scholarly research, and the few references to *tekhelet* that can be found in the scholarship neglected kabbalistic sources (which elaborate on colors more than philosophical, legalistic, and other sorts of texts do) or did not address the apotropaic aspects of colors (Scholem 1979: 90–92; Patai 1983; Idel 2005: 32–36).⁵ Concurrently, the extensive Jewish religious writing on *tekhelet* in recent decades, which aimed to promote the ritualistic usage of *tekhelet* in contemporary Jewish religious life, neglected both aspects of Kabbalah and magic.⁶

2 For the purpose of the current discussion, I will bypass the scholarly discourse on the definition of the term *magic* and focus primarily on apotropaic magic.

3 For example, see Farber-Ginat 1986: 259–302, 468–479; Kallus 1992: 19–25; Wolfson 1994: 299–301, 380–383; Zabolotnaya 2004; Garb 2005: 167–169; Schneider 2007: 191–211; Porat 2012: 429–437.

4 I will use the term *tekhelet* throughout the article. It should be noted from the outset that the color term *tekhelet* has been associated with a range of bluish hues (among them green, light-blue, dark-blue, and violet), rather than just one exclusive and well-known shade of it.

5 However, Idel mentioned one source with such an apotropaic role (2011: 43).

6 On the contemporary religious discourse on *tekhelet*, see Sagiv 2015. The most prominent source representing this discourse is Serman and Taubes-Serman 2012. For an extensive electronic library on *tekhelet*, see the website of *Ptil tekhelet*, an Israeli association dedicated to the production and distribution of *tekhelet* from a religious perspective: <http://tekhelet.com> (accessed 2 October 2015).

This lacuna of research is striking in light of the fact that the color blue in general did attract the attention of scholars in recent decades, maybe more so than any other color (Pastoureau 2001; Nelson 2009; Mavor 2013; Fallon 2014). That popularity may have resulted from the paradoxical character of this color in various cultures and various times. On one hand, blue has signified infinity and sacredness. On the other hand, it has often been considered demonic and dangerous (Pleij 2004: 86–87).

In Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures, the color blue was also perceived as having protective powers against the evil eye (Dalman 1937: 340–347; Maloney 1976: 80, 108, 310–311; Harfouche 1981: 95; Hardie 1981: 109–111; Dundes 1981: 283–284). Scholarly explanations for this phenomenon usually share the following characteristics: (1) They are based on evidence from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; (2) they usually depict beliefs regarding the evil eye as folk or popular culture and do not consider them part of a solid religious tradition; and (3) the explanations for the power of the color blue are usually hypothetical and based on speculations on the part of the scholars (usually folklorists or anthropologists) or their informants. Such explanations, for example, are that the user of blue attaches himself to the divine, thereby uplifting himself above the earthly threats (Patai 1983: 87–88), or that blue objects have homeopathic magical powers against blue-colored threats, such as people with blue eyes (Jones 1951: 12).

The major argument of this article is that using blue against the evil eye in Jewish culture is not just a result of an influence of surrounding non-Jewish cultures. In addition to being a product of external influence, it was also the result of an internal Jewish religious development. I will introduce a genealogy of religious texts that explicitly discuss the symbolism and function of the color *tekhelet*, which gradually developed into a protecting color against the evil eye. At the center of this genealogy lies a medieval kabbalistic myth of cloaking the feminine aspect of the godhead with a *tekhelet* cloth. Sixteenth-century kabbalists enriched this myth, providing it with a magical formulation as well as a sexual interpretation. Finally, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this mythical-magical construct became the basis for legitimizing and popularizing various non-Jewish practices of using the color blue against the evil eye, to protect both individuals as well as the Jewish people at large.

To the best of my knowledge, these texts have not been discussed yet, at least not from a perspective of the history of colors. On the basis of this genealogy, I will offer a new understanding of the power of the color blue in the Jewish context, taking into consideration general theories about the evil eye as well.

This discussion, even if not comprehensive, contributes to the study of colors in Judaism. It continues Scholem's investigation beyond the medieval

period and also carves out a discussion on the neglected aspect of color magic. Moreover, this study employs a historical, textual, and hermeneutical approach, emphasizing not only the color symbolism but also its construction, interpretation, and application. As such, this study is expected to contribute to the study of the evil eye as well as to the study of colors in religion in general.

Some Preliminary Notes about *Tekhelet*

In the Jewish religion, *tekhelet* is indeed a special and prominent color. In the Bible, it appears in two contexts: one is the liturgy of the tabernacle and the temple; the other is the commandment to put a thread of *tekhelet* on the tzitzit (which was later understood as the fringe or tassel of the prayer shawl and an undergarment worn every day generally under a shirt). In either context, *tekhelet* is a color of a ritual object; thus, it is actually not only a color term but also a term that denotes a color substance, pigment, or dye. While the Bible did not describe this dye, rabbinic literature required that it be produced from the secretion of a marine mollusk (termed *hillazon* in Hebrew) that is often understood as a snail, probably in a manner similar to the production of the *purpura* dye of antiquity. Although there were probably Jews who did make *tekhelet* from snails, the knowledge of how to do it was lost sometime between the seventh and the ninth centuries CE. This does not mean that Jews did not use bluish textiles. On the contrary: blue costumes were not only worn by Jews but were also sometimes compulsory (along with other colors) due to sumptuary laws (Rubens 1967: 40–58), and sometimes were even favorable and fashionable (Goitein 1983: 173–175). The formal ritualistic *tekhelet* was considered by rabbinic Jews to be lost or concealed for almost a thousand years until the 1880s; at that time, Rabbi Gershon Hanokh Leiner of the Polish town Radzyń-Podlaski announced that he had rediscovered *tekhelet*, began producing it, and distributed it to his followers and to everyone who requested it. A century later, in the middle of the 1980s, another *tekhelet* dye was introduced. Whereas Leiner's *tekhelet* was accepted only by marginal Hasidic groups, the newer *tekhelet* was accepted by wider circles of Orthodox Jews; that acceptance constituted a remarkable phenomenon in contemporary Jewish Orthodox culture, which is a milieu not accustomed to religious innovations, particularly ones that are external and visible (Sagiv 2015).

In rabbinic texts, *tekhelet* is portrayed in various ways, and it is important to highlight those that will be relevant to the current discussion. The Talmud asserts that *tekhelet* is special among all colors, basing this opinion on a chain of homologies (Herzog 1987: 87–88; Scholem 1979: 90 n. 11), such as the following

version of the Palestinian Talmud: “*tekhelet* is like the sea and the sea the grass, and the grass the firmament, and the firmament the throne of glory and the throne of glory is like the sapphire” (*y. Berakhot* 1.2). This chain of homologies seems to be leading the worshipper from the *tekhelet* thread, through the sea, to the divine, thereby imbuing *tekhelet* with mystical significances. However, it should be noted that the word *tekhelet* can refer to various shades of blue. Just as *tekhelet* can be the color of a daylight sky, it can also be the color of the sky at night.

In contradistinction to the spiritual promise of *tekhelet*, there are sources that introduce threatening aspects to this color. One characteristic of *tekhelet*, which has its origins in the first centuries CE, associates the word *tekhelet*/תכלת with the Hebrew roots *klh*/כלה (denoting annihilation) and *škl*/שכל (denoting bereavement). Hence, *tekhelet* is an end, and sometimes even a divine power of destruction and death.⁷ In a similar vein, according to one Talmudic source, “all colors bode well in a dream except the color *tekhelet*” (*b. Berakhot* 57b). Separate from the destructive denotation of the root *klh*/כלה, it also denotes completion. In this vein, medieval texts associate the word *tekhelet*/תכלת with *takhlit*/תכלית (denoting purpose) as well as with *kol*/כל (denoting wholeness and unification), thereby implying that *tekhelet* is the purpose, unification, and completion of all colors.⁸

These linguistic traits of the Hebrew word *tekhelet*/תכלת refer to the signifier of *tekhelet* rather than the signified; namely, to the color term rather than the visual appearance of the color. As such, these characterizations are independent of the hue of *tekhelet*, whatever that may be. This focus on the signifier rather than the signified hints at a broader phenomenon: at the root of all discussions surrounding *tekhelet* since medieval times lay the fundamental diversity of the designation of the hue of the color term *tekhelet* and its corresponding meaning. Although in modern Hebrew *tekhelet* is associated with light blue, it would be anachronistic to assume that that has always been the case. Talmudic sources allow for different interpretations, and in medieval times one can identify a range of hues, spanning from green to light blue, dark blue to violet. Concurrently, *tekhelet* functioned as a color that brought together opposites, either by mediation or inclusion. That diversity, particularly striking in medieval texts, might result from the fact that in medieval

7 *Sifre to Numbers* associates *tekhelet* with the annihilation of the elder sons of the Egyptians and the sinking of the Egyptian soldiers in the sea (Neusner 1986: 178). The Onkelos translation of the Bible into Aramaic translates the Hebrew root of bereavement (שכל) as תכל.

8 See, for example, Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary on Exodus 25.4 and Nachmanides' commentary on Numbers 15.38.

times *tekhelet* was already absent from Jewish material culture; medieval writers did not themselves see *tekhelet*. But the imaginary character of this color opened new horizons in the Jewish imagination, especially in Kabbalah, as we shall see in the next section.

Kabbalistic Symbolism of the Color Blue

Medieval kabbalistic symbolism played an important role in constructing the color blue as a powerful color: it provided blue-colored objects with the power of the godhead, thereby turning them into talismans. In Kabbalah, the godhead is described as a complex of ten manifestations or gradations called *sefirot*; each gradation is a distinctive aspect of the godhead, such as mercy or judgment. One of the prominent characteristics of kabbalistic language is the usage of symbols to describe every gradation and the system as a whole. These symbols are not only signifiers of the divine; every symbol is also an embodiment of the corresponding gradation, carrying some of its divine characteristics.

Colors are one of the clusters of symbols of the godhead in Kabbalah, in which every gradation is symbolized by specific colors that represent distinctive characteristics of that gradation. For example, the color white often symbolizes the gradation of mercy, whereas the color red usually symbolizes the gradation of harsh judgment. The case of *tekhelet* is more complex because *tekhelet* carried diverse meanings, as mentioned above. In early medieval Kabbalah, *tekhelet* was associated with two gradations that are two extremes of the system. On one hand, it was associated with the highest realms of the godhead, such as *hokhma* (wisdom) when it is described as the highest gradation (Azriel of Gerona 1997: 34; Wolfson 1994: 299). On the other hand, it was associated with *malkhut* (kingdom), the lowest gradation. The association with *malkhut* is more common: for example, it appears in the early *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Abrams 1994: 159), is hinted at by Nachmanides (in his commentary on Numbers 15.31), and is mentioned by Joseph Gikatilla (Séd 1987: 18). *Hokhma* is the primal source of all divine energy that flows throughout the entire system of gradations, whereas *malkhut* is the destination of this energy, the receptor and integrator of all that comes from the upper gradations. Accordingly, in associating *tekhelet* with *hokhma*, this color is described as having no hue (Azriel of Gerona 1997: 34),⁹ whereas the associations with *malkhut* are

9 This association is similarly found in the following sixteenth-century anonymous manuscript: New York Jewish Theological Seminary Manuscript 8558 [Signature at the National Library of Israel, microfilm F53277], fol. 1a.

more oriented towards the claim that it is a unification or purpose of all colors (Nachmanides on Numbers 15.38). At the same time, it seems that the association of *tekhelet* and *hokhma* tends to link *tekhelet* with a blackish hue, whereas the association with *malkhut* corresponds to a bluish hue. In any event, when discussing *tekhelet*, one should distinguish, as much as possible, between the earthly *tekhelet*, which is the color itself, and the divine *tekhelet*, which is the gradation that is symbolized and embodied by the earthly *tekhelet*.

In the Zohar (The Book of Splendor, the major text of medieval Spanish Kabbalah), too, it seems that the emphasis is on associating *tekhelet* with *malkhut* rather than *hokhma*. It also seems that the Zohar tends to identify the hue of *tekhelet* as a bluish one. I will now introduce four zoharic symbols of *malkhut* that also have a bluish color: the tassel, the sapphire gemstone, fire, and water/sea. These symbols inherit the powers of *malkhut*, thereby acquiring talismanic capabilities. I argue that by having a bluish color, these symbols also equip the color *tekhelet* with powers attributed to *malkhut*, thereby imbuing this color with a magical potential.

The tzitzit, the tassel, is a ritual object that is a symbol of *malkhut* because it should have a *tekhelet* thread and the color *tekhelet* in general is a symbol of that gradation. Accordingly, the tassel receives powers of *malkhut*, thereby becoming an object that protects its wearer. It should be mentioned in advance that the origin of the protective powers of the tzitzit was not *tekhelet* alone. The Babylonian Talmud (Menahot 43b) listed the tzitzit together with other ritual objects — the tefillin (phylacteries) and the mezuzah (a case containing parts of the Torah affixed on a doorpost) — as objects that protect from sin anyone using them.

The sapphire gemstone is also a symbol of *malkhut*, both because of its being a stone and its bluish color. Stones in general are symbols of *malkhut*. In particular, the sapphire is described as receiving all colors, symbolizing *malkhut* absorbing the radiation of gradations above it.¹⁰ The color *tekhelet* was associated with sapphire in the talmudic dictum quoted above,¹¹ an association emphasized by medieval writers.¹²

One zoharic teaching that compares the *tekhelet* of the tassel to the sapphire through their *tekhelet* color exemplifies the construction of the magical

10 See, for example, Gikatilla 1994: 21.

11 See especially *b. Hullin* 89a stating that the sky resembles the sapphire gemstone.

12 For example, the thirteenth-century kabbalist and Bible commentator R. Bahye ben Asher rejected Saadia Gaon associating sapphire with white and agreed with Abraham Ibn Ezra's view that sapphire resembles *tekhelet*. See their commentaries on Exodus 24.10.

potential of these symbols (Zohar 3.226b–227a [RM]).¹³ This teaching endows *tekhelet* with the impregnability or hardness of the sapphire. Therefore, whoever wears a tassel with *tekhelet* is shielded like the sapphire from harmful forces and even from hell itself. The association between a tassel of *tekhelet* and sapphire, sharing the same color, both being symbols of *malkhut*, enables the zoharic text to furnish the tassel of *tekhelet* with the magical qualities of the sapphire.

Fire is a symbol for the entire system of the *sefirot*, with the *tekhelet* flame, whether blue or black, symbolizing *malkhut*. *Tekhelet* appears in several zoharic teachings as a color of fire that is the destructive force of *malkhut* (Zohar 1.50b–51b; 3.29b; 3.33a [RM]; 3.257a [RM]). This destructive quality is rooted in the aforementioned similarities between the word *tekhelet* and words denoting termination, both in the sense of completion and in the sense of annihilation. Additionally, the Zohar mentions the similarity between *tekhelet*/תכלת and the Hebrew root *ʾkl/אכל* which denotes devouring; as such, it concludes that *tekhelet* is a devouring fire (Zohar 2.135a; 3.226b–227a [RM]). This motif of *tekhelet* as a threatening fire is further developed in a zoharic text that is oft-quoted by later sources. This text brings together several symbols of *tekhelet* to conclude that *tekhelet* is the holy throne which is a night court of capital cases (Zohar 2.138b–139a).

While the association of *tekhelet* with blue fire shaped its image as an expression of divine judgment, *tekhelet* can also be associated with water attenuating this fire. *Tekhelet* is usually identified as the color of the sea. The sea is a well-known symbol of *malkhut* because it is a basin that receives water from rivers, just as *malkhut* receives the influx from the gradations above it. Concurrently, the sea is associated with water, which is a symbol of mercy, and mercy is also discernible in *malkhut*. Hence, using the sea as a symbol of *malkhut*, *tekhelet* can be associated with a mild judgment in which an element of mercy mitigates the severe judgment.

Of these four symbols, water is of special importance with regard to *tekhelet* because it is also the habitat of the *tekhelet* snail, the origin of the *tekhelet* dye. Thus, the sea as a symbol of *malkhut* is enriched by the material characteristic of *tekhelet*. Of the zoharic teachings discussing *tekhelet* as originating from a snail, one will be frequently quoted by later kabbalists (Zohar 2.149b). This teaching opens with a statement that the *tekhelet* required for the tabernacle should be taken from a marine snail. On the basis of the water motif, the discussion then moves to the second day of creation, which was a manifestation

13 RM stands for *Ra'aya Meheimna*, a part of the Zohar which is distinguished from other sections on the same page by its title.

of divine judgment. However, when the color red, representing the harsh judgment of the second day, entered the sea of *tekhelet*, this judgment was mitigated. This text can also be interpreted as claiming that the *tekhelet* water extinguished the red fire of the second day.

The discussion in this section demonstrated how zoharic symbolism provided various blue objects — the tassel, the sapphire gemstone, fire, and water — with the power to attack or to protect. However, the most striking example for a powerful blue object is a blue cloth. The power of cloth, formulated as an influential myth, will be discussed in the next section.

The Myth of Blue Cloths

A kabbalistic myth of a blue cloth covering the feminine aspect of the godhead became the theological foundation for various practices of using the color blue against the evil eye. Kabbalistic symbolism has important mythical aspects manifested in the personification of the divine gradations. In particular, *malkhut*, the last gradation, is portrayed as the feminine aspect of the godhead. As such, she is often characterized as vulnerable and as being in danger. The danger is that the evil and demonic forces will attempt to penetrate her, a penetration often portrayed in sexual terms. This act is their way to penetrate the godhead and disseminate their evil upon the world.¹⁴

The point of departure for the zoharic text introducing that myth of the blue cloth is that according to the Bible, a *tekhelet* cloth covered the ark when it was transferred from place to place (Numbers 4). The Zohar refers to this *tekhelet* cloth thus:

This holy moon is beautifully white, with all colors sparkling within Her, embroidered. She has exactly the same fine whiteness as the sun. In that sea of Hers, within seventy years, a certain fish emerges, from which is extracted *tekhelet*. She takes this dye, prepares it, and covers Herself outwardly with this color. Not that this color is Her garment — for after all, “Her garment is linen and purple” (Proverbs 31.22) — but the outer covering is this color. Similarly with the Dwelling [the tabernacle], all of which was beautifully embroidered within, and afterward “they shall spread over it a garment of pure *tekhelet*” (Numbers 4.6). Why? Because beneath this sea are depths of the sea, totality of male and female, and they have

14 On the vulnerability of the feminine element in Kabbalah, see Scholem 1991: 189–190. On the evil forces in Kabbalah, see Scholem 1991: 56–87.

an evil eye, gazing. When they gaze, the color *tekhelel* [*sic*], confronts their eyes, and their eyes cannot prevail. Within, She is arrayed in all colors, fittingly embroidered, ranging to the four corners of the world.

ZOHAR 3.163b¹⁵

This text connects three symbols of *malkhut*, the last gradation: the moon, the ark of the tabernacle, and the sea. The moon symbolizes the internal (and implicitly upper) aspect of *malkhut* because of its white color, which is a reflection of the light of the sun (the sixth gradation) and in which all colors (other upper gradations) sparkle. The ark of the tabernacle also symbolizes *malkhut*, so the “garment of pure *tekhelet*” that covered the biblical ark protected *malkhut* from the evil eye of the demonic forces. But this covering is not limited to the biblical narrative; it is a general rule. The demonic forces always aim to look at her with an evil eye, but a divine *tekhelet* garment always prevents them from causing harm. All of this structure is connected to the sea, which is described as the habitat of both the *tekhelet* snail and evil forces. The protective operation of *tekhelet* seems to relate to homeopathic magic: the sea, which is the origin of harmful forces, is also the origin of *tekhelet*, the remedy against these forces.

In the text that follows the quote, the Zohar connects the *tekhelet* cloth of *malkhut* with the *tekhelet* of the tassel: when one covers himself by a tassel with *tekhelet*, he cloaks himself in a *tekhelet* cloth like *malkhut*. They are both protected: she is protected within the upper worlds; he is protected within the lower worlds. Like the text about the tassel and sapphire mentioned in the previous section, here, too, the tassel performs a double role: it is a symbol representing divine processes but it also has magical capabilities of protecting the wearer of that tassel, and concurrently protecting its divine counterpart. As Scholem observed (1965: 122–135), kabbalistic ritual strengthens existing myths while those myths nourish and nurture kabbalistic ritual.

This zoharic text about the *tekhelet* cloth covering the ark can be understood as yet another attempt to control, prohibit, and prevent gazing at the sacred (Wolfson 1994: 336–345). But this specific text seems to relate more to the motif of the garment,¹⁶ particularly with regard to practices of cloaking both human and divine entities against the evil eye, as we shall see in the next section.

This zoharic text greatly influenced later kabbalists, who referred to it time and again. Of the numerous references, I would like to focus on the

15 Translation according to Matt 2016: 71–72, with slight modifications.

16 On the garment as a key motif to understanding the Zohar, see Cohen-Alloro 1987: 7.

interpretations of those who are considered the pillars of sixteenth-century Kabbalah: Moses Cordovero (1522–1570) and Isaac Luria (1534–1572). Each developed a concept of *tekhelet* in a particular direction.

Cordovero discussed *tekhelet* both in his systematic treatise on colors, *Gate of Colors*,¹⁷ and in his commentary on the Zohar, *Or Yakar*. In both works, he emphasized *tekhelet* as representing the threatening force of the godhead, directed towards both human beings and evil forces.¹⁸ Cordovero attributed special importance to the zoharic teaching about the *tekhelet* garment of *mal-khut*; he referred to it on several occasions. In his discussion of *tekhelet* in *Gate of Colors*, this teaching was one of only two that were quoted and analyzed at length; the other was the teaching describing *tekhelet* as a threatening divine court for capital cases. Brought together, these quotations give the impression that, for Cordovero, the protective power of *tekhelet* is rooted in its threatening force.

In contrast, Luria emphasized the above-mentioned text about the sea of *tekhelet* mitigating the divine judgment, thereby emphasizing *tekhelet*'s milder aspects rather than its harsher ones, which were highlighted by Cordovero. In the interpretation that came to light through the editing of Luria's disciple, Haim Vital, Luria concluded that *tekhelet* attenuated not only the element of judgment but also the element of mercy (Vital 1988: 117–123).¹⁹ This overall weakening of the godly principles of action is meant to allow the evil forces to emerge so that they can later be overcome. Thus, the appearance of the color *tekhelet* results in arousing and attracting the evil forces. Drawing that kind of conclusion seems to contradict the zoharic teaching about the *tekhelet* garment of *malkhut* that banishes evil forces. Luria explicitly noted this incongruity and resolved this problem by offering a new interpretation of this teaching:

The male and female shells [In Hebrew, *kelipot* — a kabbalistic term for the evil forces] look for a place of hold in the holy domain, and she [*malkhut*] covers herself with a *tekhelet* garment. This garment is close to the

17 *Gate of Colors* is the tenth "gate" of *Pardes Rimonim* and will be referred to in this article using Cordovero 1591.

18 For example, when Cordovero interpreted the teaching about the *tekhelet* cloth of *malkhut*, he went beyond the Zohar in emphasizing the power of the evil forces surrounding *tekhelet* (1962–1995, 14:93–94). Even when he discussed the teaching about the sea of *tekhelet* as an aspect of mercy that mitigates the red fire, he emphasized its threatening motifs (1962–1995, 10: 3–6).

19 This text belongs to the Lurianic commentary on the cryptic zoharic text of *Sifra detsni'uta*, considered one of the few that Luria wrote himself and at an early stage of development of his Kabbalah.

shells, so they look at it, feed their eyes from it, held by it, not entering into the place of supreme holiness.

VITAL 1988: 119

Luria posits here that *tekhelet* has a dual action of both attracting the evil forces and warding them off. Notably, *tekhelet* acts like a dazzling light.

In the text that follows this quote, Luria makes use of images associated with *tekhelet* in a fashion that highlights their mythical and magical character. For example, Luria draws on kabbalistic sexual associations of fish (Scholem 1965: 143; Hallamish 2000: 505): the fish/snail (Luria uses here the terms “snail” and “fish” interchangeably) that produces *tekhelet* is presented as a manifestation of the ninth gradation, *yesod*, which is a masculine gradation. As such, this fish/snail mates with a feminine element, an intercourse that produces *tekhelet* (Vital 1988: 120). In another narrative, which will be introduced in a subsequent section (“Blue against Non-Jews”), Luria claims that the covering of *malkhut* with *tekhelet* was also meant to shield her from the sexual desire of the evil forces. These narratives of covering the divine promulgate a mythical tendency according to which *malkhut* mates inside holiness, rather than with the evil forces.

While the motif of the fish is used to construct the sexual myth, it is the salt motif that enables Luria to amplify the apotropaic potential of *tekhelet* in his mythical formulation. In many cultures, including Judaism, salt is associated with magical capabilities (Latham 1987; Jones 1951: 20). In Luria’s discussion of *tekhelet*, the fact that the sea in which the snail lives is identified (probably after Moses Maimonides) as “the sea of salt” enables him to conclude that the salty character of *tekhelet* staves off the evil forces.

The differences between the Zohar, Cordovero, and Luria are striking in the distinct ways each one describes the *tekhelet* garment that covers *malkhut*. The Zohar describes the *tekhelet* garment as a passive cover hiding *malkhut*, which merely prevents the evil forces from seeing her. Cordovero imbued it with a more ominous and aggressive role as the executor of the divine Judgment and as banishing the evil forces. Luria carves out a different path; he presents the *tekhelet* garment as catching and nurturing the sight of the evil forces, thereby obstructing their vision inside the holiness. Thus, according to Luria, *tekhelet* is an attractive color rather than one that separates (like the Zohar) or distances (like Cordovero). Via this presentation of the *tekhelet* cloth, Luria employs the principle of giving the devil his due, which the Zohar presented in other places but not in this teaching about the *tekhelet* cloth.

Although the motif of the *tekhelet* garment of *malkhut* is well-rooted in Jewish sources, one can also suggest two possible non-Jewish contexts. In an

original-yet-controversial study, Arthur Green (2002) suggested that the Marian cult of twelfth-century France might explain the emergence of a feminine aspect of the godhead, which is *malkhut*, in early Kabbalah.²⁰ One of the contending arguments against Green was a study by Yehuda Liebes (2006) claiming that a more probable influence on the image of *malkhut* was a Hellenistic myth about the royal purple garment (*porphira demalka*) of god, which kabbalistic sources associate with *malkhut*. Within this context, the color of *malkhut* is described as the color of blood, which is akin to the royal purple often associated with *tekhelet*. According to this myth, the images of Jewish martyrs are inscribed on this garment, and when god wears this garment he takes revenge upon the enemies of Israel. Without any pretension to resolve this debate, I would like to point out that the motif of the *tekhelet* garment of *malkhut* is commensurate with both arguments. If the textual image of the Virgin Mary played a role in shaping the feminine aspect of the godhead in Kabbalah, then it is even more probable that common visual images of Mary cloaked in blue (Pastoureau 2001: 50–55), which were more accessible than texts, played a role in shaping the imagination of kabbalists. Concurrently, the idea of a powerful colored garment of god, which threatens the enemies of Israel and which was sometimes even identified with *tekhelet*, resonated with the function of *tekhelet* against the evil eye of the gentiles.

The Color Blue against the Evil Eye

Similar to other Semitic and Indo-European cultures, belief in the evil eye is common among Jews (Trachtenberg 1939: 54–56; Cohen-Alloro 1989: 197–201; Ulmer 1994).²¹ In particular, there were individuals who were perceived to be especially vulnerable, such as women right after giving birth and young children, and there were specific antidotes that were perceived to be particularly effective. In the context of colors, in addition to blue, the color red was also considered effective against the evil eye (Murgoci 1923: 359–360; Jones 1951: 12; Greenfield 2005: 2). While the magical potential of the color blue was alluded to as early as in the Zohar, it was the aforementioned Cordovero, followed by other sixteenth- and seventeenth-century kabbalists who introduced an explicit magical approach with regard to the color blue. That approach included a theory of colors as well as formulations of specific practices.

20 For evaluations of this and similar theses (such as Peter Schäfer's), see Abrams 2010.

21 For a comprehensive orthodox book on the evil eye in Judaism, see Peha 1990.

A theory of colors can be found in Cordovero's *Gate of Colors* mentioned above, which may be the most famous kabbalistic treatise on colors.²² In its first chapter, Cordovero argued that different colors have different operations; by virtue of using a specific color, such as wearing a costume of that color, one can activate the *sefirot* in a specific requested direction (Cordovero 1591: 71a–b). *Tekhelet* was the color afforded the most elaborate discussion in *Gate of Colors*. Among his observations, Cordovero was more specific than the Zohar in his designation of the hue of *tekhelet*. In the Zohar, the hue of *tekhelet* is indefinite whereas Cordovero explicitly determined the hue of *tekhelet* as blue. He did so by identifying the hue of *tekhelet* with two non-Hebrew color terms: *haniad* (which probably refers to indigo, whose origin was India) and *azul* (blue in Portuguese).

As Idel has already noted (1989: 91–92), the magical character of Cordovero's color theory is an expression of the rise of elitist magic among kabbalists from the fifteenth century onward. Accordingly, the accuracy in the color designation of *tekhelet* might be related to Cordovero's approach to magic, which required specific color designation for the sake of using colors for practical purposes.

It should also be noted that Safed in the time of Cordovero was a center of textile manufacture, which included dyeing in various colors, particularly in blue (Avitzur 1962: 58–61). Additionally, there is evidence that bluish colors were customary among Jews of the Ottoman Empire, in part due to sumptuary laws (Rubens 1967: 40–58). Hence, Cordovero's focus on the magic of dyes is no surprise, and the example of switching between colored costumes was not theoretical.

The determination of the hue of *tekhelet*, backed up by the general observation about the magical potential of colors and the relative availability of the color blue in Safed, allowed Cordovero and other kabbalists to introduce more specific rituals of using the color blue to ward off the evil eye. It facilitated the linking of the zoharic *tekhelet* symbolism and myth introduced in the previous sections to what appear to be existing magical practices of using the color blue.

A striking example is Cordovero's interpretation of a zoharic teaching that does not mention the term *tekhelet* but rather uses the verb *khl*/כחל, denoting painting with antimony. According to this zoharic text, when the stones of the Israelite temple will return to their place, they will be characterized by

22 It is noteworthy that *Gate of Colors* is rather neglected in the scholarship. For example, three prominent scholars of Cordovero — Yosef Ben-Shlomo, Bracha Sack, and Zohar Raviv — did not address this treatise.

sapphire light, and “no other eye will be empowered to see them except when a person paints his eyes with that antimony [*pukh*], filling his eye with it” (Zohar 2.240b).²³ Both sapphire and antimony have a bluish hue. Hence, only a person who would adjust the color of his eyes to the color of the temple, something akin to tuning into the frequency, would be able to see the temple stones. Other people, particularly non-Jews, would not be able to see them. Interpreting the zoharic teaching about the future Israelite temple, Cordovero is less interested in the object of vision facilitated by antimony. Rather, he is more interested in the magical function of the technique:

It is known that the hue of *tekhelet* is used against the evil eye, and this is the interpretation to the verse “they shall spread over it a garment of pure *tekhelet*” (Numbers 4.6). This is the hue that comes before the eyes of this [evil] eye so that it would not be able to control the sacred . . . And for this reason antimony, which is lapis lazuli [*even kahli*], the hue of *tekhelet*, is used to blue the eye to thwart the evil eye, and prevent it [the evil force] from gaining control there. This is the meaning of [the zoharic saying] “except when a person paints his eyes with that antimony.” The Zohar meant that the stones of the temple will be elevated to a high place where the external [evil] forces cannot gain control. “A garment of pure *tekhelet*” separates between the spiritual aspects and the external [evil] forces. Both of them [the holy and the evil entities] look at it. It covers the holy, and the evil forces cannot grasp the holy . . . There is also a remedy for subtle unperceivable [spiritual] entities — to prepare a blue liquid with which a material [human] eye could see the subtle spiritual. Something of this can be also learned from the Babylonian Talmud, first chapter of Tractate *Berakhot* (*b. Berakhot* 6a), about how to see demons.

CORDOVERO 1962–1995, 11:227

The Zohar introduced antimony as a recipe for a mystical-messianic vision. *Tekhelet* was not mentioned. Neither was the evil eye. Cordovero explicitly identifies the hue of antimony with the hue of *tekhelet*, and both of them with the color blue. That identification, similar to Cordovero’s aforementioned identification of *tekhelet* and *azul*, enabled him to use motifs relating to *tekhelet*, particularly the myth of the *tekhelet* cloth of *malkhut*. Basing his postulation on the protective power of *tekhelet*, Cordovero concludes that applying blue makeup on the eyes is a magical recipe against the evil eye. This practical advice was not introduced by the Zohar but, rather, by Cordovero himself.

23 Translation according to Matt 2011: 392.

At the end of the aforementioned quote, Cordovero presents another magical recipe, this time not for protection but instead to enhance vision: Cordovero refers to a Talmudic recipe for viewing demons by filling one's eyes with the powder of the ground afterbirth of a special she-cat. Similarly, writes Cordovero, by preparing a blue liquid and probably applying it to the eyes, one can see hidden spiritual entities.

Cordovero's assertion that the *tekhelet* is effective against the evil eye circulated in manuscripts until the twentieth century. Perhaps more influential was a comment by Rabbi Haim Yosef David Azulai (1724–1806; henceforth, the Hida), a famous rabbinic scholar who made significant contributions to the fields of Kabbalah, historiography, and bibliography. In many Zohar editions from the nineteenth century onward, there is a comment attributed to the Hida, printed in the side margins of the text about the *tekhelet* garment of *malkhut*: "it implies [from the Zohar] that *tekhelet* is good against the evil eye."²⁴ This comment explicitly states that the Zohar is the source for the effectiveness of *tekhelet* against the evil eye. The comment was influential because it was printed many times in the Zohar, a tremendously popular book, and in an eye-catching place that made it easier to notice even without reading the zoharic text. Its influence can be gathered from recommendations on the color blue as warding off the evil eye; those recommendations are based on the zoharic text as well as on the comment by the Hida. I would like now to introduce two nineteenth-century examples of this sort.

The first example is a discussion dedicated to the evil eye by the Syrian rabbi Abraham ben Isaiah Dayan (d., 1876) in which he described instances of the evil eye and introduced recommendations as to how one ought to cope with it (1850: 48b–50b). The Zohar mentioned a custom of parents placing a cloth over their babies' heads to ward off the evil eye that is actively trying to work its power when the babies are taken to the market (Zohar 3.211b). Dayan went further, proposing that one ought to dress children in blue garments. He used the Arab color term for blue — *azraq* — and likened it to *tekhelet*. The reason he provided for this practice was the Hida's advice that referred to the zoharic teaching about the *tekhelet* cloth. It is unclear whether he was introducing a new practice or merely justifying an existing one.

The second example involves the prominent nineteenth-century rabbi Yoseph Haim of Baghdad (1834–1909), whose nickname was *Ben Ish Hai*, the title of his famous book. His book of responsa includes a question about a popular custom of using the color blue against the evil eye:

24 The earliest edition I found with this comment is the Livorno edition from 1815 (second pagination).

Question: Here in our town Baghdad, they have a custom. After a woman gives birth they bring an iron skewer, putting on it two legs of a rooster, seven onions, and a piece of cloth colored with Isatis-water called in Arabic *nil* [indigo], and they put this skewer above the woman's bed. And one inquirer came to me and asked whether this custom belongs to the field of mantic and the way of the Emorites [forbidden magic]. And this is an old custom, performed by all.

HAIM 1901: 58b

It seems that the person who asked this question, probably another rabbi from Baghdad, was not disturbed by this custom, yet could not ignore the question posed by the inquirer. In his response, Yoseph Haim gave his permission for the performance of this custom by proving, inter alia, that every element of it is a well-known legitimate practice against the evil eye. He wrote thus about the colored liquid:

And the piece of cloth colored with Isatis-water that they put on the skewer — this is also to frighten the demons, because this color is like *tekhelet* and the Zohar 3.163b teaching is already known . . . and our master Luria interpreted . . . in *Sha'ar ma'amarei rashbi* for the portion *Teruma* page 11 [commentary to *Sifra detsni'uta*] . . . and that is why they put the cloth colored in a hue similar to *tekhelet*, to distance the looking of the evil forces at the woman and her new baby, and it is like putting a *tekhelet* garment on the tabernacle.

HAIM 1901: 59a

This response proves again the power and usefulness of this zoharic teaching in providing rabbinic legitimization to a popular local magical practice upon which a rabbinic figure had cast doubt. But one should note that Yoseph Haim did not consider these popular beliefs to be mere superstitions. In his commentary on the Talmud, he discussed the rabbinic description of the town of Luz as a center of *tekhelet* production, a place that the enemies of the Israelites could not conquer, and a place in which people did not die (*b. Sotah* 46b). Basing his position again on Luria's interpretation, Yoseph Haim connected the Talmudic descriptions of Luz and suggested that the town's immortality was related to an atmosphere saturated with *tekhelet* that prevented evil forces from causing any harm (1902: 38b).

Popular anthologies of practical advice compiled during the twentieth century quoted the formulations of Dayan and Yoseph Haim in their advice regarding the evil eye (Peha 1990: 213–214). Hence, these nineteenth-century

rabbis were intermediary links in a chain of legitimization of the color blue against the evil eye. Relying on the Zohar, they were simultaneously authoritative sources for twentieth-century popular anthologies of practical advice.

So far, the discussion has been about the power attributed to the color blue to protect vulnerable individuals such as women who just gave birth and young children. But this color was also presented as a means for protecting the Jewish people in general, as we shall see in the next section.

Blue against Non-Jews

One of the major themes in kabbalistic symbolism is that the last gradation, *malkhut*, is a mythical personification of the people of Israel and that her biography symbolizes their history. *Malkhut* not only represents but also protects the Israelites from possible harm on the part of surrounding non-Jews (Scholem 1991: 140–196). Accordingly, the myth of the *tekhelet* cloth of *malkhut* against the evil gaze of the evil forces was also applied on a national level. That is, the covering of Jews, particularly by blue objects, serves as protection from what is believed to be a danger from the nations of non-Jews, who are sometimes considered in kabbalistic texts as earthly manifestations of the evil forces. This covering resembles the metaphor of being under the wings of *shekhinah*, the divine presence.²⁵

This nationalistic interpretation was made via another zoharic narrative of covering *malkhut* against the evil eye. According to that narrative, the biblical Joseph, who is traditionally described as immune to the evil eye (*b. Berakhot* 55b), covered his mother Rachel with his arms so that Esau would not be able to look at her with his lustful evil eye (Zohar 1.175a, 3.202b). Later on, god rewarded Joseph when Rachel covered the tribes of her two sons, Joseph and Benjamin, to ward off the evil eye of Balaam (Zohar 3.202b). According to kabbalistic symbolism, in the upper worlds Joseph and Rachel are symbols of divine gradations (Rachel is a symbol of *malkhut*), whereas Esau and Balaam are symbols of the evil forces. At the earthly historical level, Joseph and Rachel represent the Israelites, whereas Esau and Balaam represent the gentiles, specifically Christianity. Hence, the relationships between Joseph, Rachel, Esau, and Balaam represent and mirror both the relations in the upper worlds and the relations between Israel and the gentiles.

25 See, for example, Zohar 1.150b (in English, see Matt 2004: 337).

In the aforementioned discussion attributed to Luria, he drew a connection between that myth of Joseph covering Rachel and the myth of the blue cloth. Basing his position on the aforementioned likening of Joseph to the *tekhelet* snail, he then analogized the covering of Rachel by Joseph to the covering of *malkhut* by *tekhelet* (Vital 1988: 119).

In the commentary of the Zohar by the Jerusalemite kabbalist Yehuda Hacoen (d. 1850), he cited on several occasions Luria's interpretation of the blue cloth myth (Hacoen 1852).²⁶ But he went even further, imbuing it with a nationalistic character: Hacoen (1852: 283b–284a) emphasized Luria's reference to Joseph's covering of Rachel with a cloth against the sight of Esau (a symbol of Christianity), asserting that *tekhelet* is a shield for Israel against the evil eye of the nations, as was the case with Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar.

The nationalistic understanding of the myth of the blue cloth was not only an interpretation of a text but also an explanation of a custom. In one of his books, the Syrian-born Jerusalemite kabbalist Itzhak Alfia (1878–1955) presented some practices to cope with the evil eye, such as equipping children with blue stones. To support his suggestion, Alfia (1923: 32), too, referred to the zoharic teaching about the *tekhelet* cloth, as well as the Hida's comment on the margin of the page of the Zohar, that *tekhelet* is good against the evil eye. Yet Alfia went even further. He expounded on *tekhelet* in a later work (1943: 28a–31b), an elaboration that should be viewed as part of his more general interest in colors.²⁷ He quoted several Zohar teachings about *tekhelet* and referred to Luria's interpretation discussed above. Here I would like to draw attention to Alfia's brief discussion on the blue miter of some of the distinguished rabbis of the Ottoman Empire in his time, especially the chief rabbi, the *Rishon Letsion*. Alfia suggested that this miter functioned in a manner similar to the *tekhelet* garment that covered the ark of the tabernacle (1943: 31a). Both were barriers against the evil eye of the evil forces. He identifies these evil forces as those who try to harm the Jewish people, both in the upper worlds and among the gentiles. Of interest here is the application of the color blue against the evil eye on a national level. The chief rabbi was a public figure representing the Jewish people. From Alfia's discussion it is clear that the miter protects not only the chief rabbi himself but also the Jewish people as a whole. Although the color blue was already the color of the Zionist flag when Alfia discussed the blue miter, his discussion does not seem to be influenced by Zionist symbols.

26 See, for example, 1852: 121a–b, 188a, 206a, 256a, 261a, 273a, 283b–284a, 326a–b, 364a–b, 383b, 384b–385b, 391b–392a, 393b, 404a.

27 In this work, Alfia also discussed the color black (1943: 25a–27a).

Summary

In this article I offered a partial history of the color blue in Judaism. The various characteristics of the color term *tekhelet* as well as the material culture of the *tekhelet* dye in antiquity resulted in embedding *tekhelet* in the symbolic and mythical system of medieval Kabbalah. I proposed that the disappearance of the ritualistic *tekhelet* from Jewish material culture paved the way for equipping this color with diverse meanings and functions. Independent of whether the zoharic depiction of the blue cloth of *malkhut*, the feminine aspect of the godhead, was influenced by the medieval Marian cult, one cannot deny the affinities between the two images: the feminine personification of the holy is clad in a blue garment that symbolizes the divine and provides a cover for fragile creatures.

But the more relevant and explicit context is the Middle Eastern one, where the color blue was a preferable color for Jews for their clothing, and this color was used to ward off the evil eye by Jews and non-Jews alike. Particularly, in many Islamic societies, the color blue is considered both inauspicious and helpful: on the one hand, it inflicts injury; on the other hand, it is considered powerful in warding off evil forces (Bloom and Blair 2011: 15–16). The Islamic context is most significant because most of the examples brought above were of writers who lived in the Muslim world. However, in addition to the common knowledge that Jews simply adopted existing surrounding practices, I showed how Jews theologized, mythologized, and perhaps even enriched these practices.

Beyond any possible cross-cultural influence of either the Marian cult or Middle Eastern popular cultures, the discussion in this article rejects ahistorical generalizations with regard to the role of specific colors. To quote Michel Pastoureau (2001: 7), “[c]olor is first and foremost a social phenomenon,” and, as such, the meanings and roles given to them change over the course of history. In the case of *tekhelet*, I would add that the color itself changed over time. Only the color term, the word *tekhelet*/תכלית, remained stable from the time of antiquity; the views regarding its appearance or material composition changed significantly. Whereas in medieval times there was a range of opinion about the hue of *tekhelet*, it was the sixteenth-century kabbalist Cordovero’s identification of *tekhelet* with the color of lapis lazuli that imbued *tekhelet* with magical powers. The rise of magic in relation to Kabbalah at that period (as was suggested by Idel 1989), the prosperity of the dyeing industry in sixteenth-century Safed, and the contemporaneous increase of availability of indigo are factors that contributed to this development.

The encounter between the elitist kabbalistic myth and popular practices to ward off the evil eye undermines the sharp distinctions drawn between

“elitist” and “popular” culture. The usage of blue against the evil eye was neither merely an adoption of local customs nor merely an application of elitist esoteric knowledge. It was a combination of both. *Tekhelet* was shaped by Cordovero in such a way that it fit popular knowledge about the evil eye, and popular evil eye rituals were legitimized by kabbalistic sources.

Still to be answered is the question of the source of the power of *tekhelet*. Contemporary texts written about the color blue often emphasized an inherent physical and spiritual specialty of its hue, leading it to qualify as the most paradoxical color (Mavor 2013; Fallon 2014; Ophir 2006). However, that sort of essentialist interpretation of color does not cohere with the Jewish sources, for the paradoxical character of *tekhelet* was based on the color term, the word *tekhelet*/תכלת, rather than on its hue. Moreover, paradoxical features and magical functions were attributed to other colors; the color red is the most striking example.

Instead of this essentialist explanation, I would like to propose a few hermeneutic-semiotic observations. First, the paradoxical character of *tekhelet* can be concluded from the fact that the color blue is associated with both fire and water, which symbolize opposites in Kabbalah. As such, *tekhelet*, the Jewish blue, symbolized both judgment and mercy, the demonic and the divine.

Second, when a human being is covered by any blue cloth (either a real covering or a symbolic covering like the tassel), he can easily and immediately become an embodiment of *malkhut*, the divine gradation, and as such he may feel protected and empowered by the power of *malkhut* and all other relevant protecting objects: sapphire, fire, and water. Moreover, being protected from the evil eye by a blue cover might also remind one of the talmudic tradition that fish are protected from the evil eye because they are covered and hidden under the sea (*b. Bava Batra* 118b).

Third, the power of *tekhelet* might also be related to its marine context more than to its hue. In a comprehensive essay authored by Alan Dundes, “Wet and Dry, The Evil Eye,” Dundes surveyed earlier writing and theories on the subject, followed by his own theory of the evil eye (1981: 257–312). One of his theoretical premises is that “liquid means life while loss of liquid means death” (1981: 266). Accordingly, practices that involve liquid or extend the amount of liquid have a positive effect. That sort of assumption goes in tandem with the color blue, which is often associated with water and the sea. Moreover, Dundes’ theory seems plausible, specifically with regard to *tekhelet*, in which the water motif is even deeper since the ritual *tekhelet* dye should be produced from a marine mollusk.

Finally, and above all, *tekhelet* seems to be a semiotic junction, an intersection of the various motifs of antidotes against the evil eye: water, salt, fish/

snail, and garment. No less than the hue of *tekhelet*, it was the material context of its production and usage, as witnessed by various texts, that contributed to the construction of *tekhelet* as an antidote against the evil eye.

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