

# WHAT DOES PSALM MEAN IN HEBREW?

## Part II - Psalms and the blue color.

MONY ALMALECH

(New Bulgarian University)

EFSS 2011



## The **blue color** and another letter, *Haf כ*, for the non short [h]

The biblical term for the color *blue* is  
תְּכֵלֶת [tehèlet] and it is phonetically close  
to *psalms* תְּהִלִּים [tehilìm].

The letter *Kaf כ* is used in cases where the  
non short [h] changes in derivative words to  
[k], e.g. *king* מֶלֶךְ [mèleh], *kingdom* מַלְכוּת  
[malkùt].

**That is why we call the letter *Kaf/Haf*.**

**If the letter *Kaf/Haf* כ/כ is the last letter in the word, then it is called *Kaf Sofit* and is written in another way –**

**ך/ך. This does not change of the letter's referent. Theoretically, there is a difference between the *Het* ח and *Haf* כ but practically the referent of the letters is non short [h].**

## **The blue color and the commandment from Numbers 15:38-40**

**The color *blue* תְּכֵלֶת [tehèlet] is a part of the sacred four color unit, which is an obligatory part of the interiors of the tabernacle and the first temple. *Blue* has a special role in the 613 commandments:**

38 Speak to the sons of Israel, and tell them that they shall make for themselves tassels on the corners of their garments throughout their generations, and that they shall put on the tassel of each corner a **cord of blue**. 39 **It shall be a tassel for you to look at and remember all the commandments of the LORD, so as to do them and not follow after your own heart and your own eyes, after which you played the harlot, 40 so that you may remember to do all My commandments and be holy to your God.**  
(NAU Numbers 15:38-40)

**Ben Zion Bokser gives an example of the importance of this commandment in the post Talmudic era:**

Through the commandment of the fringes, declared Rabbi Ahai Gaon, the children of Israel are given the means of seeing God "at every hour," thereby freeing them from the limitation pronounced in Exod. 33.20, that "man cannot see Me and live."

(Bokser 1963, p. 30)

**The hue should be produced by marine animals but never from plants.**

## Psalms and the blue color 6

Another element of special interest in the color blue was the delicacy of the operation by which the blue dye was prepared. It was extracted from a species of shellfish, called in the Talmud *halazon*, and found on the coast of the Mediterranean. The *halazon* was apparently the *murex*. Tyre was the center of the dye industry and coins minted in Tyre carry frequently the decoration of a murex shell. (Bokser 1963, p. 2)

In Rome purple was the favorite dye, and it was also made from the *murex*. The continued decline of the Mediterranean world which followed the Islamic conquests in the seventh century destroyed the mollusc based dye industry and the thread of blue finally fell into obsolescence. The disappearance of the thread of blue did not put an end to speculations on the subject. (Bokser 1963, 29-30)

## The root of biblical blue תְּכֵלֶת [tehèlet]

There is no agreement on the root of the word.

One hypothesis is that the root comes from שֵׁלֶת [shèlet] which means *oniha* – marine

mollusk (murex, shell fish), which is an ingredient of incense, made only for the Lord.

Another hypothesis connects תְּכֵלֶת [tehèlet] to

the root *Kaf-Lamed-He* פִּלָּה because of the words תְּחִלָּת [tahlit] (*perfection, completion*)

and תּוֹכֵלֶת [tohèlet] (*hope, expectation*).



## Psalms and the blue color 8

If the monotheists observe the commandment from Numbers 15:38-40, it gives hope and purposes of the the Jews' life – “remember all the commandments of the LORD, so as to do them”. This is a kind of self limitation – limits to “follow after your own heart and your own eyes after which you played the harlot”. The commandment from Numbers 15:38-40 happens in the Temple, in times of worshiping.

## **The color blue, the sapphire of Chariot of God and their interpretation**

Scholars agree that Jewish tradition (Josephus, Rabbi Meir in Talmud, the Zohar) permanently associates תְּכֵלֶת [tehèlet] at Numbers 15:38-40 to the divine level and to the mystical and magic powers of the sapphire of the Chariot of God (Exodus 24:10; Ezekiel 1:22-26).

- **and they saw the God of Israel; and under His feet there appeared to be a pavement of **sapphire**, as clear as the sky itself. (NAU Exodus 24:10)**
- **And above the firmament over their heads there was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like **sapphire**; and seated above the likeness of a throne was a likeness as it were of a human form. (RSV Ezekiel 1:26)**
- **Then I looked, and behold, in the expanse that was over the heads of the cherubim something like a **sapphire stone**, in appearance resembling a throne, appeared above them. (NAU Ezekiel 10:1)**

**Bokser connects the meanings of the color blue with the prototypes of blue long before the theory of prototypes (Eleonor Rosch, 1976 et al) appeared.**

Apart from its intrinsic aesthetic appeal as a color, blue carries an added interest; it resembles the color of the sea and the sky. In all cultures of antiquity the sky is conceived as the special abode of the deity, and this led to a closer association of the color blue with the deity. The thread of blue was, in other words, a link with the deity, and, gazing on the blue, one was really, by a chain of associations, gazing on the divine. (Bokser 1963, p. 1)

**The same is in Talmudic speculations:** Rabbi Meir's statement is: "Why was the color blue singled out from all other colors? Because blue resembles the sea and the sea resembles the sky and the sky resembles the throne of divine glory."

(Bokser 1963, p. 3)

**Bokser's analyses leads to important conclusions which support my hypothesis:**

The thread of blue was, in other words, a link with the deity, and, gazing on the blue, one was really, by a chain of associations, gazing on the divine. ... The law of the fringe has now gone through a radical transformation. Its essence is not in the fringe itself but in the thread of blue which, by a series of associations, is said to offer man the very greatest prize of the religious life, admission to God's presence. There are four elements in the chain of associations through which the color blue becomes a reminder of the "throne of divine glory," the blue thread, the sea, the sky, and the divine throne. The link between the thread, the sky, and the divine throne is understandably important. ... The resemblance between sea and sky was a demonstration of the link between the earthly and the heavenly and the blue fringe was a precious carrier of this mystery. (Bokser 1963, p. 4-5)

## Conclusions

Genuine **achievement of the light through psalms** is a very difficult action, but the **psalm** still remains one of the easiest ways of access to the **macro light blue (sapphire)** of the Throne of the Lord. **Vise versa –**

**Numbers 15:38-40** commandment to meditate on the **blue color תְּכֵלֶת [tehèlet]** of tassels (during the worshiping in the Temple) helps to obey the commandments and to accomplish the state of emission of spiritual light when singing psalms **תְּהִלִּים [tehilim]**.

The **blue color** תְּכֵלֶת [tehèlet] helps  
to avoid **deseccrating God** (חָלַל  
[halàl]) and to achieve the state of  
**radiating spiritual light** (הִלָּל  
[halàl]) in singing psalms תְּהִלִּים  
[tehilìm].

## **General Conclusions**

**The Hebrew language and alphabet possess a complex system of concepts that promote logical thinking. This system has cognitive aspects such as the Hebre wordview, different spelling of similar phonemes, the notion and vision of color.**

**A remarkable feature of this system is the hermeneutic aspect held by language and spelling which works at the level of linguistic consciousness and subconsciousness.**



**The name of the book of Psalms תְּהִלִּים [tehilim], the basic color term for blue תְּכֵלֶת [tehèlet], the relations between הָלַל [halàl] and חָלַל [halàl] are just an example of the sophisticated mental systems existing in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament which are untranslatable into Indo-European and Finno-Ugric languages.**

Mony Almalech

**THANK YOU**

**MONY ALMALECH EFSS 2011**