

Like the Sea, Like the Sky

Exploring Modern Techeilis with a Few Enthusiasts

By Baruch Lytle
Jewish Press Staff Writer

This week is the reading of Parsha Shelach, where the mitzvah to wear techeiles and tzitzit are first mentioned. While its modern-day application has drawn skepticism for many years, particularly in the chasidish community, the practice of wearing blue techeiles and its acceptance by rabbanim has grown throughout the Jewish world, and “for-or-against” lectures are becoming increasingly common. The Jewish Press met up with several enthusiasts to understand what compelled them to pursue this unconventional mitzvah.

“I’m from Chabad circles, where *techeiles* are nearly nonexistent,” Rabbi Gershom Baraza told *The Jewish Press*. Baraza is currently studying *dayanut* and other advanced rabbinical studies and for a long time has been based in Hong Kong, China, where he works for different kosher agencies.

Rabbi Baraza explained his argument for wearing *techeiles*. “The Lubavitcher Rebbe never saw nor was presented with any *techeiles* coming from the *Murex trunculus*,” he said – referring to the sea snail that is almost universally the only species used nowadays to create *techeiles* (as opposed to others that had been used at various times in the last couple centuries). He suggested the current Chabad position is mostly borne out of an unawareness of the new developments on *techeiles* and cites an early short letter from the Rebbe about the Radziner which may not be applicable to current *techeiles*.

“The Rebbe Rashab says the commandment of *techeiles* ‘is a perpetual one, and whenever we are capable of fulfilling it, it is clear that we must do so.’ So these statements potentially would apply to the *Murex trunculus techeiles*, which has been identified by several rabbanim as the source of the true *techeiles*.”

“There are very few people who are close to Chabad who wear it. I remember the first time I wore it, I was concerned about who would see it, so I only wore it on my *tallit katan*. I didn’t intentionally hide it but I also made it not so obvious. Eventually I said, what am I doing? I realized I had to make the step to wear it on my *tallit gadol* during the *Shema* prayer as [that *tefillah* mentions] looking at the *techeiles* – and the first reaction was eyebrows.”

Baraza recalled a time when he was called to the Torah while he was wearing *techeiles* and he saw the look on the *baal koreh*’s face. “That started a series of discussions.” He presented his case to a *shliach* for wearing it, who wasn’t sure how to respond. “We are not sure this is the right thing to do,” the rabbi replied.

“After a series of good conversations they told me if I could get a



Rabbi Baraza with a fellow member of Ohel Leah synagogue. (Courtesy)

Chabad *beis din* to say it was okay according to Chabad *minhag* to wear it, many Lubavitchers including themselves would wear it with pleasure. We left the conversation respectfully.”

Baraza was not able to get a definitive answer from a *beis din*, but said that since then, many in the Hong Kong community have been supportive, including at the 120-year-old Ohel Leah synagogue, the main shul in Hong Kong, and some have even begun to wear it as well. “There’s something to this mitzvah that really catches your heart.”

Today Baraza shutters at the thought of not wearing blue *techeiles*. “Once the evidence is in front of you, I will feel very bad not to wear it.”

Baraza recently gave a *shiur* on wearing *techeiles* in Caulfield South, Melbourne, together with the Lubavitcher assistant rabbi at the local Modern Orthodox shul. “A few people have already expressed that they are going to start wearing it.”

At a shul in West Rogers Park, Chicago, Rabbi Dovid Aronin lays out an impressive collection of snail shells, including a container holding water and a large living snail. “There are three snails in the Mediterranean that make a dye,” Aronin explains. “Of the three snails, this is the one, the *Murex trunculus*, that gives off the blue dye. The others give off a reddish, purplish color.”

Aronin’s knowledge of the nail is fascinating. “One of the things the Gemara says about the *chilazon* is that once the snail dies, the dye isn’t good anymore.” Aronin exhibited a snail shell with a small hole in its shell. “They found evidence that the snails were eating each other. So here is



Rabbi Aronin with his living *Murex trunculus*. (Courtesy)

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a case where one snail ate another by boring a hole through the shell and consuming the snail inside. This indicates that the snails were being held alive for later use.”

Contrary to popular belief that snails are slow, Aronin’s specimen was remarkably fast, and would almost successfully escape its containers and slither away if it wasn’t being watched. Aronin is one of only a few people in the United States who has the Murex trunculus snail, and he believes he may be the only one with a specimen that is still alive. And how do they catch these fast little guys? “They are attracted to meat,” said Aronin, “so they put meat in a basket and lower it down into the ocean and the snails come to it.”

“My father considered Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski his rebbi,” Rabbi Dovid Aronim told *The Jewish Press*. “He attended (Twerski’s) Hebrew school in the 1950s when he moved to Milwaukee. Rabbi Twerski was the one who instructed my father to wear blue *techeiles*.

“I had a seven-year period when I stopped wearing *techeiles*. That’s part of the struggle, I did actually stop based on the pushback.” Aronin said once he started to learn about *gedolim* who were comfortable wearing it, he began wearing it again. At that point he was willing to engage in debates with people of the street. “Those would get very heated.”

Aronin said just recently he got into a debate at shul. “The person said Rav Chaim Kanievsky didn’t wear it, so how dare you say that you could do something that Rav Chaim Kanievsky wouldn’t do?”

“I took that to heart and I do struggle with that



A Murex trunculus snail in a tank. (Courtesy)

concept,” he said. “So when you talk to people, that’s a sticking point that some people have.”

Rabbi Yakov Grunwald is a chasidic rabbi in

Chicago. “What inspired me to wear blue *techeiles* is a few things,” Grunwald told *The Jewish Press*. “Whenever I saw Yidden wearing it I felt I was missing out, and I wanted to experience it. So I started learning about the subject and asking expert rabbis about it. Also, there were rabbis in Boro Park that encouraged me to wear it, such as Rabbi Zalman Sofer, the Erlau Rav.”

Grunwald said that although Rav Sofer’s father wore *techeiles*, the rav himself began only after Grunwald pressed him about it. Grunwald said he noticed immediately a difference in the way he felt when he put on *techeiles*: “It made my thoughts more holy.” Grunwald said his son started wearing *techeiles* when he turned three “just like Avraham Avinu did when he was a child.”

Rabbi Rafi Hecht is a web developer and the founder of bluefringes.com. At first glance, the website is visually appealing and clearly user friendly. “The website was built to introduce *techeiles* to a specific audience,” Hecht told *The Jewish Press*.

Hecht said the halachic standards on the permitted blue *techeiles* are complex, but first and foremost, it needs to come from a “fish” that comes from the sea and must naturally produce the blue dye. Hecht pointed out that halachically all sea creatures are referred to as “fish,” and that the Murex trunculus shellfish is the only one that produces the blue dye. “There are many *Rishonim* that spell out that the *chilazon* is a snail, based on the actions required for dye extraction,” Hecht said.

Another validation for the Murex trunculus can be found in Gemara (*Shabbos* 26a) where it talks about *techeiles* being found in land belong-

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ing to *Shevet Zevulun*. Big deposits of Murex shells have been found along that coastline. Besides Halachic evidence, Hecht's website provides resources that prove the Murex trunculus snail is scientifically and archaeologically the correct source. Hecht acknowledged there can be resistance by some rabbonim to discuss the topic, and said, "Resistance to change is not necessarily a bad thing, as resistance to change has preserved our religion."

Rabbi Baraza's voice fills with excitement whenever he gets a chance to share more about his passion for the mitzvah. "I believe our attitude towards any mitzvah in general and this mitzvah of *techeiles*, in particular, is well captivated in *Likutei Tefilot* 1:49 of Reb Nosson of Breslov," he said, "where it says, 'For it is revealed and known before You that our will is to do Your will, and

we eagerly yearn to fulfill the commandment of *techeiles* in the *tzitzit*. If we were privileged to find *techeiles* for the *tzitzit*, we would spare no expense to fulfill this commandment completely.'"



Rabbi Grunwald davening with his tallis with *techeilis*. (Photo by Baruch Lytle)

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