

What the Loss of *Tefillin* Can Teach Us About *Techeiles* Today

By RAFI HECHT

There's plenty of hesitation today when it comes to wearing *techeiles*. For some, it's treated like a lost cause: a mitzvah removed from our day-to-day lives, with the assumption that only Moshiach can bring it back into practice. But that assumption overlooks a powerful precedent. *Techeiles* isn't the only mitzvah that went missing for a time. Believe it or not, even *tefillin* was also once on the brink of vanishing.

Rabbi Ephraim Kanarfogel, a leading scholar of medieval Jewish history and Rabbinic literature at Yeshiva University, laid this out clearly in his 1976 essay *Not Just Another Contemporary Jewish Problem*. Long before *techeiles* re-entered the conversation, he was sounding the alarm on how fragile *tefillin* observance had once been.

Already in the Talmudic period, *tefillin* was flagged as a mitzvah that didn't inspire *mesiras nefesh*. The Gemara in *Shabbos* (130a) says it outright:

It was taught in a *Baraita* that Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says in praise of the observance of the mitzvah of circumcision: Any mitzvah for which the Jews sacrificed their lives at the time of the decrees of the wicked empire, such as the prohibition of idolatry and the mitzvah of circumcision, is still steadfastly observed. And any mitzvah for which the Jews did not sacrifice their lives at the time of the decrees of the wicked empire, such as *tefillin*, is still casually observed, meaning that they are not as careful in its fulfillment as they should be.

The parallels to *techeiles* are striking. Legal bans, political suppression, gaps in transmission, and a lack of initial public acceptance all contributed to the fading of this mitzvah. The pushback to reintroducing it today – questions about *mesorah*, halachic uncertainty, the “vast majority of *Rabbanim* are not doing it” argument – feels all too familiar if you know the history of *tefillin*.

What's even more striking is that Rabbi Kanarfogel wrote this piece *well before techeiles* became available to the public. He wasn't trying to make a case for *techeiles*, but unintentionally, he did. The very arguments he brought forth out about why *tefillin* fell out of use, and very slowly regained acceptance, can and should inform how we think about *techeiles* today.

Political Suppression and Legal Restrictions

Tefillin: Jewish communities throughout history endured persecution that led to bans on religious practices, including *tefillin*. These prohibitions, enforced during the rule of oppressive regimes, made it dangerous for Jews to openly observe this mitzvah. As a result, many were forced to hide or abandon the practice entirely during those times.

Techeiles: The production of *techeiles*, sourced from the Murex snail, was curtailed by Roman and Byzantine laws. Emperors like Nero and Justinian imposed strict monopolies and bans on purple and blue dyes, reserving them for royalty. This made it illegal for Jews to produce or wear *techeiles*, accelerating its disappearance from use. While a few, such as certain *Amoraim* and Natroni Gaon, retained access, it became almost exclusive to non-Jewish royalty. The last known Jewish mention came from the Ramban in the 13th cen-

tury, who noted that the *Melech Goyim* – possibly James I of Aragon – still wore it in his day.

Loss of Knowledge and *Mesorah*

Tefillin: *Tefillin* are defined by halachic precision: the order of the *parshiyos*, squareness of the *batim*, specific knots, and black straps. Yet during times of upheaval, the transmission of these details faltered. The debate between Rashi and Rabbeinu Tam over the order of the *parshiyos* is well-known, but even the shape of the *shel yad* varied historically, namely due to lack of clarity in our *mesorah*. In Yemen and Amsterdam, some *tefillin* had conical tops, aligning with Tosafos in *Menachos* 35a, which suggests only the base must be square.

Pre-war European *tefillin* were often made from



dakkos, thin leather requiring annual reshaping. Today's *gassos tefillin* are thicker, sturdier, and produced with modern tools. Likewise, straps and *batim* are now dyed with industrial consistency, and *klaf* – whitish parchment from the outer layer of animal skin – has largely replaced *gvil* parchment, which is found in the inner part of the skin and is therefore much redder.

Even the ancient *tefillin* found at Qumran, while intriguing, differ in size and form from modern examples and do not resolve halachic questions on their own. Ultimately, rabbinic authorities accepted many technological improvements, not as innovations, but as halachically guided refinements to safeguard and improve observance of this mitzvah.

Techeiles: *Techeiles* once relied on a known marine source – the *chilazon* – and a dyeing process known in ancient Jewish communities. But persecution, Roman restrictions on colored dyes, and centuries of exile led to the complete loss of that tradition. Over time, communities defaulted to plain white *tzitzis*, with *techeiles* deferred indefinitely.

In recent decades, compelling evidence has identified the *Murex trunculus* snail as the probable *chilazon*. Dye tests, archaeological textiles, and even some ancient manuscripts confirm that the ancients produced blue from Murex. Still, some authorities hesitate to reintroduce *techeiles* without a continuous *mesorah*.

Concerns have also been raised about modern production methods. Today, *Ptil Techelet* uses sodium dithionite – a 20th-century chemical – to extract the blue dye. Yet research by Prof. Zvi Koren shows that ancient makers used methods to debrominate from violet-purple to blue, and due to the organic nature of the snail, each blue comes out differently. Three textile fragments confirm

that this Murex-derived blue was known and used in the ancient world.

Deception and Counterfeit Practices

Tefillin: There have been instances where imposters wore *tefillin* as an overt show of false piety, discouraging some from the practice of wearing *tefillin* all day and risking being associated with such gangsters. To quote *Yerushalmi Brachos* (2:3):

Why does one not hold on to them? Because of the impostors [Hence, wearing *tefillin* outside of times of prayer may make a person suspect of being a gangster impersonating a pious person]. It happened that a man deposited something with another, and the latter then reneged on it. He said to him: It wasn't you that I thought was trustworthy, but I trusted what you were wearing on your head.

Techeiles: The high value of *techeiles* led to the emergence of counterfeit plant-based versions, known as Kala Ilan, often using cheaper indigo dyes. These fakes were sometimes indistinguishable from the genuine article. In some instances, people would purchase Kala Ilan instead in order to appear overtly pious, though in many cases others would swap *techeiles* with Kala Ilan, whether it was to buy from someone, or to hand a *bege'd* with *techeiles* to the local laundromat where there was the added risk of the person switching *techeiles* strings with Kala Ilan strings.

With the Rambam later on being explicit that blue produced by a plant is not kosher for *techeiles*, this led to further skepticism and eventual abandonment of the practice to avoid unintentional transgression.

Being on a Lower Spiritual Level Than Before

Tefillin: On a personal level, according to Rebbi Yannai, one needed to have a clean body to wear *tefillin* all day. That meant no flatulating (Abaye) or sleeping (Rava).

Today, to address this concern, most Jews today wear *tefillin* during *Shacharis* prayer services only, making it easier to control oneself over a shorter period of time.

Anecdotally, in Jerusalem there is a *kollel* founded by R' Yitzchak Shlomo Zilberman, based on the path of the Vilna Gaon, whose members wear *tefillin* (as well as *techeiles*) all day and keep a clean body based on their understanding of the guidelines.

Techeiles: Kabbalistic teachings associate *techeiles* with profound spiritual meaning, which is then weaponized against wearing *techeiles* today. Some authorities interpret the Sifre, the Arizal, and the Ben Ish Hai to suggest that without the proper spiritual conditions, *techeiles* will not be found until Moshiach comes. Furthermore, the Zohar writes that wearing Kala Ilan instead of *techeiles* invokes the power of the *Sitra Achara* (the “Other Side”) to take over the person.

These concerns have been addressed at length but are beyond the scope of this article.

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Israel’s United Hatzalah: A Call To Help

By Baruch Lytle
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On Sunday, United Hatzalah of Israel hosted a Zoom meeting to announce its new campaign to raise \$5 million to meet the urgent need of emergency services in response to the current and on-going conflict with Iran.

“What’s going on from Iran is absolutely overwhelming, but our response is going to be overwhelming as well,” Jeremy Cole, public relations officer for UHI, told *The Jewish Press* afterward. “Right now we’re raising money for an emergency campaign to be able to purchase more life-protecting gear for our volunteers, more bulletproof helmets and vests as well as the need for medical supplies, as this could be going on for another week or so. We never want to feel like there’s a deficit. We want to be able to continue to provide the same life-saving care.”

UHI runs alongside other national security and emergency service providers, including the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) the homefront command and other ambulatory services. However, unlike its counterparts in the United States, UHI services all of the citizens of Israel. “We are like the Uber of ambulances and every volunteer has a medical bag, which is why we have a 90 second to three minute response time,” Cole said. “We have 8,000 volunteers and they are Jewish, Christian, Druze, Muslim, men, women, Arab and Israeli of all backgrounds; they are fully volunteers and our services are fully free as well.”

So far, the Iranian missile and drone attacks have been targeting the north and central regions. Around the time of the call, a ballistic missile that landed in a residential building in Bat Yam, Israel, just south of Tel Aviv, left nine people dead, including two children and one teen, and more than 200 wounded. The damage in the impact area caused complete devastation where at least one tall building took a direct hit. Windows and doors were blasted away for several blocks due to the force up the impact of the missile, and many will likely not be able to return to their homes for an indefinite time period. In the Arab-Israeli town of Tamra, four people were killed and 14 injured. Iranian missiles had also targeted an oil refinery in Haifa.



(Photo courtesy UHI)

“It’s always hard to see how Iran targets civilians and civilian centers and the devastation it causes, but there’s something beautiful about how the communities have come together,” Cole noted. “People rush into action to pull people out of the rubble and to evacuate them to hospitals or render life-saving aid on the spot.”

When asked about the morale and reactions Cole is witnessing from the civilian population, Cole admitted, “It’s a mix, everyone has reason to be afraid, but Israelis are remaining strong right now.”

Cole said alongside its search and rescue operation, UHI deployed its new mobile emergency clinic to provide immediate medical and psycho-trauma assistance. He said the efforts of UHI’s volunteers remains defiant to Iran’s goals. “We not going to just rollover and play dead; we will

retaliate and we are preparing for conflict no matter where it is – Iran, Yemen and the Lebanese border, should Hezbollah decide to act up. We are looking and planning to stock up our branches throughout the country with medical equipment, generators, backup radio units and protective gear.

UHI said its immediate needs include additional protective gear, vests and helmets. These are essential, as each missile attack may include a follow-up strike or a possible un-detonated bomb on the scene. Additionally, they can use more radios and oxygen tanks. Cole stressed, “These are not your typical rockets coming in from Gaza or a suicide bomber. These are rockets that knock down 10-story buildings.”

About 600 people joined the “United Hatzalah Emergency Zoom Briefing On Israel Under Attack From Iran” invite. On the zoom, Eli Beer, president of UHI said, “Never in my life have I felt like I feel now. All these years we knew Iran was a very powerful enemy and wanted to annihilate every single one of us. Its mission over the years was to build weapons that could completely destroy Israel; every Jew in Israel should be dead according to their belief. So I was scared, but also very proud as a Jew and Israeli and an American – seeing the Israeli flag flying above Tehran.”

“Thank you to all our heroic volunteers who go into danger to rescue those in need to save lives,” said Mark Gerson, chairman of UHI. “Hopefully we can raise 5 million in the coming hours and days so that we have the equipment it needs to do its sacred work. Each of us has the opportunity to be the indispensable and actual partner with the 8,000 volunteers on the ground.” Gerson pledged to match the first half million that comes in from existing or new donors.

Gerson pointed out that when you visit the UHI headquarters or warehouse, it’s astonishing to see how much stuff is required. “The amount of equipment for 8,000 volunteers... it’s all enabled by one thing: and that’s money.”

To donate to the UHI, visit the website israel-rescue.org.

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Yuhara (Haughtiness)

Tefillin: During the Gaonic period, this was a push-back concern voiced by some Rabbis. R’ Yosef Gaon for one wrote that “A merchant involved in business, should he put on *tefillin* during prayer (*Shemoneh Esrei*) and *Shema*, or perhaps only a great person puts them on, while one who is not such an important person doesn’t so as not to appear haughty, since the entire congregation does not put them on?”

The short answer as to why the entire congregation wasn’t able to wear *tefillin* was because in Bavel, it was relatively easy to obtain while in Israel it wasn’t due to persecutions happening there. As Jews moved around, *tefillin* became much less accessible.

Techeiles: With *techeiles* today, a number of people say that the overwhelming majority of *Gedolim* don’t wear *techeiles*, and if a regular person wears

techeiles, he may come across as appearing that he knows better than the rabbis of higher stature, as well as most of those around him.

Similar to the history of *tefillin* above, the reason why earlier *Gedolim* didn’t wear *techeiles* was simply because they couldn’t. It’s interesting to note that some *Gedolim* today do wear or have worn *techeiles*, including R’ Herschel Schachter, R’ Yisroel Belsky, R’ Moshe Mordechai Karp, R’ Zalman Nechemia Goldberg; there are reports also about R’ Moshe Sternbuch. Some *Gedolim* choose to wear *techeiles* on their *tallis kattan* only to address the *yuhara* matter, while still fulfilling the mitzvah. Others wear *techeiles* throughout, seeing the fulfillment of a mitzvah as not violating *yuhara* at all.

Conclusion

So what does this all tell us? That losing a mitzvah isn’t new, and neither is bringing one back. *Tefillin* was once on shaky ground, but

over time, we revived the mitzvah. *Techeiles* has followed a similar arc, except that the restoration of the mitzvah is happening now, in real time.

We’ve heard similar hesitations before. The doubts, the delays, the “maybe it’s not for us” line. To quote Shlomo HaMelech, there’s nothing new under the sun. But neither is the pattern: Something gets lost, it stirs debate, then slowly, people step up. And the mitzvah returns. And if we already wear the black boxes that once almost disappeared, maybe it’s time to tie *techeiles* back into *tzitzis*.

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