

RASHI'S "YAROK" AND THE COLOR OF TECHEILES: WHY IT STILL MEANS BLUE

By: Rafi Hecht

For centuries, Techeiles - the blue wool string tied onto tzitzis - was nowhere to be found. Only recently has it reemerged, sparking renewed excitement. But with that excitement comes a fair share of questions. One in particular keeps coming up: Why did Rashi, of all commentators, describe Techeiles as yarok? In today's Hebrew, yarok means green—plain and simple. So naturally, people wonder: Did Rashi actually think the Torah's "blue" thread was green? It sounds odd, but the answer isn't so simple.

In Ancient Hebrew, Yarok Didn't Just Mean Green

One of the first things to understand is that color categories back then weren't cut and dry the way they are now. Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew used fewer color terms than we do today. Think broad strokes instead of paint chips.

Yarok didn't mean just one color. It was a category—one that included various cool shades, including green, yellow, olive, and yes, even blue. This isn't speculative linguistics; we have sources.

Both the Maharam of Rothenburg and the Maharam of Prague, when discussing blood colors in the laws of Niddah, group together blue, green, and yellow under the umbrella of yarok. And the Mordechai in Yoreh De'ah 188 writes it outright:

"What is called 'blue' is included in the category of yarok."

So when Rashi used yarok, he wasn't being careless. He was using the vocabulary of his time.

Rashi's Language Was Accurate for His Era

Let's give Rashi some credit. He didn't have Pantone color charts. The term yarok kararti—which roughly means a cool or subdued shade of yarok—was probably the best available expression for what we'd now simply call blue.

In fact, later commentators seem to confirm this. The Pri Megadim translated Rashi's yarok as bla, the Old French word for blue. That tells us that by the 18th century, scholars already understood Rashi's intent.

It's also worth noting that yarok appears in multiple flavors throughout Rabbinic literature, including:

- **Yarok haKarti** – the green of a leek, mentioned in various halachic contexts.
- **Yarok kararti** – the version Rashi uses; interpreted by some later authorities as dark or bluish.
- **Yarok me'or haRakia** – a phrase linked to the color of the sky in Shemos 24:10.
- **Yarok Dam Niddah** – a pale greenish-yellow tone resembling saffron.

- **Yerakrak** – a dull, sickly yellow-green tone, particularly in discussions of tzaraas.
- **Yarok shel Zahav** – a shimmering yellow-green, described in poetic passages.
- **Yarok with red tint** – debated in some halachic discussions.

So no, yarok didn't always mean green in the way we use the word now. It was a spectrum. Blue had a place on it.

The Sea-to-Sky Analogy in Chazal

There's a well-known connection in the Yerushalmi (Berachos 1:2 - Daf 7B) that goes as follows:

"Techeiles is like the sea, the sea is like grass, grass is like the sky, and the sky is like the Kisei HaKavod (Heavenly Throne)."

At first glance, throwing grass in there might suggest a greenish hue. But the Bavli—which generally takes halachic precedence—simplifies it: sea, sky, Kisei HaKavod. No mention of grass.

So what was the grass doing in the Yerushalmi? Probably not describing color directly. It's more of a metaphoric ladder—from earth to Heaven, natural to divine. You're not supposed to color-match it like a design palette from a Home Depot paint aisle.

Techeiles Doesn't Bleed into Purple or Red

If you really want to understand what Techeiles is, it helps to understand what it isn't.

According to Pesikta Rabbati (Chapter 20), Hashem showed Moshe Rabbeinu a visual guide to the Mishkan's four sacred colors. When it came to Techeiles, He presented garments that looked like the sea. But for Argaman, the garments were distinctly red. Tola'as Shani, meanwhile, was described as "not red and not yarok." That's telling. It implies that yarok, as Chazal used it, steered clear of reddish hues—and Techeiles, by extension, had to be in that non-red range.

Rabbeinu Bachya also chimes in with a fascinating note: He warns that red or greenish colors in this context symbolize arrogance. Techeiles, on the other hand, is about humility. It needs to stay cool, spiritually and visually.

What the Torah Itself Says

In Shemos 24:10, we're told:

"And under His feet was something like sapphire, like the essence of the sky in clarity."

This isn't poetic fluff. It's a visual cue.

The Chizkuni says it's referring to a light sapphire, in that it's clear and sky-like. Rashi calls it pure. The Ramban and Ibn Ezra compare it to the look of ice. So what we're talking about here is a bluish, reflective clarity. Not green. Not purple. Not some mystical in-between.



The Word Travels Across Languages, and It's Still Blue

Techeiles has never been isolated to just Hebrew. In Arabic, Rav Saadia Gaon calls it asmangon, a word that refers to the midday sky. The Rambam, in multiple places, mentions it as a dye made from Isatis tinctoria, called Nil in Arabic, which produces a deep blue.

Even the Greeks got in on it. The word hyakinthos, meaning a deep blue or violet, turns up in Midrashic texts as yakintinon or tayinon, and is used interchangeably with Techeiles.

You don't need to be a linguist to see the pattern: blue, blue, and more blue.

Bottom Line: Rashi Wasn't Off the Mark

It's easy to look at an old term through modern lenses and cry foul. But that's not fair to the texts—or to Rashi.

Back then, yarok was the word you used for a wide range of light, cool colors. And blue, the very shade of sea and sky that Techeiles is meant to recall, fit squarely within that category.

So instead of second-guessing Rashi, we should learn where he was coming from. He was describing a color that reflected a world beyond our own.

Special Thanks

I owe a debt of gratitude to Rabbi Gershom Baraza for pointing me to many of the sources used here. Rabbi Baraza, originally from Spain, has one of the more remarkable backgrounds I've encountered: a former Christian missionary who converted to Judaism and went on to become a serious Torah learner. He currently serves with BCK (British Columbia Kosher) and has shared his insights on a range of halachic and textual topics - including Techeiles - through shiurim, writings, and interviews on platforms like Jews on the Edge.

It was a late-night message from him, pointing out an obscure Mordechai, that kicked off the rabbit hole which ultimately became this piece.

Rafi Hecht holds degrees from Lander College for Men and Stevens Institute of Technology. He has written extensively on Techeiles, runs BlueFringes.com, and has contributed to Ptil Tekhelet's digital efforts. In 2021, he led the Porphyrology.com project restoring Rabbi Herzog's doctorate, earning a letter of thanks from President Isaac Herzog. He can be reached at bluefringes613@gmail.com.

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