

## Nature in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha Siegelbaum

### *Parashat Teruma* – The Multicolored Unicorn

#### Tachash: Dolphin, Goat or Seal?

From childhood fairy tales, unicorns have long enchanted us with their mystical grace, finesse, and unconquerable nature. Perhaps the legends of the primeval unicorn were inspired from our Torah, specifically from the tachash, mentioned in opening of this week's *parasha*. The tachash skin appears in the center of the list of materials needed for the Mishkan (Tabernacle). "Red ram skins, skins of tachashim, and acacia wood" (*Shemot* 25:5). What kind of creature exactly was the tachash (plural tachashim) and what can we learn from it? Translating the word tachash is a challenge and unattainable task, since this kind of creature no longer exists. I have come across such far out and inconstant translations from different English Bibles, such as seal, goat, porpoise and dolphin. See below for a list of 11 completely different translations of the word tachash that I downloaded from the internet. I'm glad that at least the Jerusalem Bible and Silberman Chumash left the word alone and just transliterated it from the Hebrew. So what does a tachash have to do with a unicorn, which is not even one of the many and varied translations? Rashi explains that tachash was a kind of wild beast, which existed only at the time of the Mishkan. It was multicolored, and therefore the Targum Onkelos translates it כסגונוא/*sasgona*, a contraction of words שש/*sas* – rejoicing גונוא/*gona* – colors, meaning, "It rejoices and prides itself in its colors." Rashi's explanation, of the multicolored beast, still does not bring us closer to the unicorn. Rabbi Meir in the Talmud, however, tells us that the tachash had one horn in its forehead, and the Sages debated whether it was a wild beast (*chaya*) or domesticated animal (*behema*) (*Babylonian Talmud Shabbat* 28b). The legendary unicorn is often depicted as a white horse-like or goat-like animal with a long horn and cloven hooves. The cloven hooves is an indication of a (pure) kosher animal, this fits in with the tachash as Rabbi Yosef holds, only kosher animal skins were used for the holy Mishkan (*Ibid.* 28a). When I glanced through various images of unicorns, I noticed that many were depicted on the backdrop of a rainbow, linking us back to the multicolored tachash.

#### The Colors of the tachash: Vessels for Higher Lights

I'm quite intrigued with the mysterious tachash, created specifically for the Mishkan. Rabbeinu Bachaya explains that the tachash came into being for the sake of the Mishkan in honor of G-d, as its skin was filled with the most beautiful and amazing patterns. The outer covering of the Mishkan and many of its vessel were covered with these gorgeous hides. After having fulfilled their divine purpose, the tachashim disappeared from the face of the earth, as if these creatures were too stunning for the lower physical world. This reminds me of אור הַגִּנוּז /'ohr haganuz' – the hidden light which was too great for the wicked in this world. Hashem, therefore, hid it away for the righteous in the world to come (Rashi, *Bereishit* 1:4). Actually, there may be a connection between this hidden light and the colors of the tachash skin. Our purpose in this world is to repair the seven days of creation each corresponding to a different color and Divine emanation (*sefirah*). The Zohar teaches that there are

colors emanating different kinds of light. By means of these colors, it is possible to perceive the brighter lights. The statement of our sages that the tachash was only created for the Mishkan can also be understood to mean that the tachash was created for the sake of the Jewish people. When all of the children of Israel become elevated as one unified being, then the Mishkan becomes our cosmic body. Its outer covering – the tachash skin – with its colors representing the seven building blocks of the world, likewise embody the entire Jewish people. Each of us is connected to a different hue in the color spectrum, channeling a different kind of divine light. The multicolored tachash, thus, represents the unified Jewish people complementing one another by the different shades of colors we represent (*Sefer Ohr HaMeir, Parashat Teruma*).

### Fancy Exterior for the Sake of Heaven

Why did the tachashim pride themselves in their beautiful colors? Shouldn't we be humble rather than proud? *Yeitev Lev* in his commentary on *Parashat Ha'azinu*, explains that the tachash came to teach us not do things for external reasons, such as in order to receive wealth and honor. Since the tachash took pride in its external beauty, it only lived temporarily. In order to gain eternity our intentions need to be for the sake of heaven rather than self-aggrandizement. Are there no redeeming qualities in priding ourselves for our exterior beauty and splendor? You may notice that holy Chassidic masters take great pride in an immaculate appearance crowned by luxurious fur *streimels*. Perhaps, a simpler inexpensive dress code would be more conducive to engender the desirable character trait of humility? Actually, great *tzaddikim* (righteous people) and benefactors of the Jewish people who are not bugged down by their ego, have the ability to take pride in their appearance, while remaining humble within. This character trait made the tachash suitable for the covering of the Mishkan (*Siach Sarfei Kodesh, Parashat Teruma*). I can identify with the multicolored tachash delighting in its bright colors. Wearing darker more humble shades such as black, navy and brown feels heavy and depressing to me. I remember in Denmark the Copenhagen Synagogue taking pride in its plain unassuming exterior façade hiding a most elegant sanctuary with a woman's balcony and glorious crystal lamps. The tachash teaches us that an attractive exterior can go hand in hand with holiness, as the holy Mishkan was vibrant and colorful even on the outside. The challenge is to be fancy for the sake of Hashem while remaining humble within.

### List of Bible Mistranslations of the word תַּחַשׁ/tachash – Multicolored Unicorn

[New International Version](#) ram skins dyed red and another type of durable leather; acacia wood;

[New Living Translation](#) tanned ram skins and fine goatskin leather; acacia wood;

[New American Standard Bible](#) rams' skins dyed red, porpoise skins, acacia wood,

[King James Bible](#) And rams' skins dyed red, and badgers' skins, and shittim wood,

[Holman Christian Standard Bible](#) ram skins dyed red and manatee skins; acacia wood;

[International Standard Version](#) ram skins dyed red, dolphin skins, and acacia wood;

[NET Bible](#) ram skins dyed red, fine leather, acacia wood,

[GOD'S WORD® Translation](#) rams' skins dyed red, fine leather, acacia wood,

[American Standard Version](#) and rams'skins dyed red, and sealskins, and acacia wood,

[Douay-Rheims Bible](#) And rams' skins dyed red, and violet skins, and setim wood:

[World English Bible](#) rams' skins dyed red, sea cow hides, acacia wood