

Nature in the Parasha

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Parashat VaYakhel/Pekudei

The Crimson Creating Creature

In this week's double *parasha* the word *שָׁנִי/shani* – crimson or scarlet is mentioned 17 times – the numerical value of the word *טוֹב/tov* – good. This redder than red color was needed together with the sky-blue and purple for the garments of the Kohanim as well as for the various curtains and tapestries that adorned the Tabernacle and Holy Temple. It is a strong vibrant color that alerts your attention, and although I shy away from wearing this vivacious color I get energized by gazing at the crimson ripening pomegranates in my garden. This is the color of the string tied to the Yom Kippur goat and during Temple times it would turn white as snow at the end of the service as a sign that our sins were forgiven as the prophet proclaims: "Though your sins be like *שָׁנִי/shani* – scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be white as wool" (*Yeshu'ahu* 1:18). Rachav, the harlot from Yericho, "bound the scarlet cord in the window" (*Yehoshua* 2:21), as a sign to save her house when the Israelites came to conquer the Land. The scarlet color is also employed to produce the purifying ashes of the *parah adumah* (*Bamidbar* 19:6), and for the purification procedure from the biblical disease called *tzara'at* (*Vayikra* 14:4, 49). The *שָׁנִי/shani* exclaims its message loud and clear, "No matter how immoral and wormy we may have become, there is always a way of return becoming completely pure again.

The Crimson Dye Prepared from Plant or Worm?

From the verse, "In order that the law of Hashem should always be in your mouth" (*Shemot* 13:9), the Talmud learns that whatever is used for the work of heaven must be from kosher items that we may put into our mouth (*Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat* 28b). This could imply that we can use only kosher species for the Mishkan and the garments of the Kohanim (*Rabbeinu Bachaya, Shemot* 25:3). Accordingly, there is a view that the source of the dye is either seeds that resemble worms or seeds on which worms are attached or berries consumed by the worms rather than the worms themselves (*Rambam, Hilchot Parah Adumah* 3:2); (*Rabbeinu Bachaya, Bamidbar* 19:2). However, most authorities hold that the source of the crimson dye is obtained from eggs of insects, which attach themselves to the oak tree. The word *תּוֹלָעַת/tola'at* means 'worm' and *שָׁנִי/shani* refers to the dye produced by it. The halachic requirement for kosher species in the production of holy items actually applies specifically to items that have words of Torah or Hashem's name in them, such as *tefillin, mezuzot* or a *Sefer Torah* (*Shu"t Noda Bi'Yehudah* II, *Orach Chayim* 3). Therefore, dye from non-kosher animals may be used for various items in the Temple. In our exiting times of Redemption, where the holy items for the Temple are being rediscovered, the Temple Institute in Jerusalem has recently succeeded in producing the first authentic *שָׁנִי/shani* dye in 2000 years. After many years of intense research



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the *שָׁנִי/shani* dye was harvested from an insect in its larvae stage on the Samaritan hilltop village of Neve Tsuf. The female larvae attaches herself to the trunk and branches of the kermes oak, and as its eggs develop during the early summer it grows from the size of a pinhead to its maximum of five to seven millimeters in diameter. It is essential to harvest them at this point, before the red eggs hatch and leave the mother, taking with them their red pigment (https://www.templeinstitute.org/tola-at_shani.htm).

As a support for the source of the *שָׁנִי/shani* dye from the larvae that attaches itself specifically to the kermes oak, the word Karmil is used in *Divrei Hayamim* as a reference to the *שָׁנִי/shani* dye (Rashi, II *Divrei Hayamim* 2:6). Perhaps this reddish color was produced specifically from a live animal to teach us to raise up even our most fiery animalistic parts in the service of Hashem. From the fact that the worm gives its life to produce the dye, we may learn to offer our excited life force to serve Hashem with all our hearts.

The Warming Color of Fiery Passion

We meet the color *שָׁנִי/shani* again every Friday night when singing the praises of the *Eishet Chail* (Woman of Valor). “She does not fear of the snow for her household, for all her household is clothed with *שָׁנִי/shani* – scarlet” (*Mishlei* 31:21). Each of the four Temple colors correspond to one of the four elements (Abarbanel, *Shemot* 28:6-43). The deep red color of scarlet is the color of fire. Perhaps we can say that the *Eishet Chail* has her own and her family’s fire in control. She channels the very same fire, which usually causes people to sin, into fire and passion for Hashem’s mitzvot. This is what protects her family from the snow of *Gehinum* (hell), which is not only fire but also snow – the hell of coldness. These two kinds of hells correspond to the two kinds of *yetzer hara*. Most sins derive from fire – *ta’ava*, passion. This is the fire of *Gehinum*, yet, there is also the opposite kind of *yetzer* – coldness – a person who is indifferent and doesn’t care. He is not involved in what goes on all around him. He is cold and cynical as Amalek about whom it states, “אֲשֶׁר קָרַד בְּדֶרֶךְ”/ *asher karcha b’derech* – “that cooled you down on the way” (*Devarim* 25:18). He cooled down Israel’s desire and yearning for holiness – the fire of holiness which burned within our heart at the time of receiving the Torah. The *Eishet Chail* teaches us to be cold to sin, but hot for holiness. One of the problems at our time is when a person is able to overcome his passion for sin; he sometimes forgets to remain hot for holiness. It might be even worse to turn off the fire for holiness, which requires deed, initiative and warmth, like Torah learning, *tefilah*, yearning for the Temple and for Mashiach. For a woman it is not enough to keep her own fire for holiness going, she is praised for ensuring that this fire keeps burning within the hearts of her entire household; teaching them the correct balance between warmth and cold. Her house refers to her personal home but also to the whole house of Israel, for every woman is a mother of all Israel as well.