



BY RABBI
SHLOIME
LUDMIR



True Blue

I am writing to report a matter of some peculiarity in the Jewish district. The Hebrews of our city have begun purchasing blueberries in unusual quantities, claiming the fruit holds sacred significance. Several merchants have inquired whether this constitutes a violation of wartime rationing guidelines. I have assured them it does not, though I confess I do not fully understand the nature of the request. I await your guidance on whether further investigation is warranted."

—Letter from Mayor Thomas Crispedin of Fringetown, New York, to the Office of the Governor, September 1863

The identity of the *chilazon*, the mysterious creature whose blood was used to produce the blue dye of *techeiles*, has been debated for centuries. But only once did this famous controversy collide with orchards in upstate New York, disrupt the wartime economy of a Union city and produce what may be the only *teshuvah* to mention pie.

In the spring of 1862, the Jewish community of Fringetown, New York, had grown to over 100 souls who were seeking opportunity in the booming Great Lakes trade. Among them was Rabbi Berel Yagdes, a Galician-born *talmid chacham* known for his sharp mind and *ehrichkeit*. He had devoted decades to researching the subject of *techeiles*, corresponding with *rabbanim* across Europe and examining every pos-



Rabbi Berel Yagdes with a bowl of blueberries

sible candidate for the ancient dye source.

Then, one summer afternoon, everything changed.

Rabbi Yagdes was walking through the Fringetown Central Market when he encountered a farmer selling baskets of wild blueberries from the hills south of the city. The rabbi stopped in his tracks. The color of the crushed berries at the bottom of the basket was a deep, vivid blue—a blue that, to his eyes, perfectly matched the descriptions of *techeiles*.

Blueberries are native to North Amer-

ica, and Native Americans had harvested them for centuries, using them fresh, dried and in traditional dishes. For much of history, however, no one in Europe knew about blueberries at all; they were an entirely American plant. It was only later, after transatlantic trade and cultivation expanded, that blueberries were introduced to Europe and eventually became popular there as well.

Rabbi Yagdes demanded to know where the little blue balls came from. The farmer squinted at the bearded stranger before explaining that they mostly grew wild in the hills. Rabbi Yagdes asked whether they grew near water. As soon as the farmer replied that some did indeed grow by the creeks that fed the lake, Rabbi Yagdes purchased the entire basket. He hurried back to his home on Four Corners Avenue and immediately began experiments, crushing the berries and applying the resulting liquid to wool threads. The color was magnificent—a rich, deep blue.

That evening, he convened a meeting at Congregation Even Sapir and announced that he had found the *chilazon*. Before the room erupted in protest, Rabbi Yagdes acknowledged that the Gemara described it as being found in the sea, but he noted that blueberries grew near creeks flowing into Lake Erie, which in turn flowed to the sea. Perhaps, he suggested, over the centuries the *chilazon* had migrated upstream and adapted to the New World just as Jews had.

The *rosh hakahal* scoffed at the idea of a fish becoming a berry, but Rabbi Yagdes replied that the ways of Hashem were not



Men from Company B, US Engineer Battalion, consuming blueberries during the Siege of Petersburg, Virginia, in 1864

theirs to define, and he questioned who could say what form a creature might take in such circumstances.

Over the following weeks, Rabbi Yagdes discovered that boiling the blueberries with certain mordants produced a more lasting color, and he began producing small batches of what he called *“Techeiles Amerikai.”* A handful of community members, persuaded by his arguments, began wearing the blue-dyed threads on their *tzitzis*.

An unexpected problem soon emerged. The blueberry dye retained a faint sweetness that proved irresistible to the youngest members of the community. Within weeks of the first *Techeiles Amerikai* being worn, mothers began reporting that their children were sucking on their *tzitzis* during *davening* and coming home from *shul* with blue tongues.

Meanwhile, Jewish merchants traveling through Fringetown brought news of the “blueberry *techeiles*” to communities in Rochester, Buffalo and New York City. The reaction was mixed. Some dismissed it as obvious nonsense while others were intrigued. A few enterprising individuals began purchasing Upstate New York blueberries in bulk, hoping to get ahead of what they assumed would be a surge in demand.

The controversy reached its peak when Rabbi Yagdes sent a *sheilah* to Rav Henschel Blaufarb of Uchmanitz. Rabbi Yagdes laid out his argument for blueberry *techeiles*, including detailed descriptions of the dyeing process and color samples. Rav Blaufarb’s response was measured but skeptical:



R: The Certificate of Purpose provided to the Jews by the mayor. L: Sefer Pri Hatecheiles, discussing this important shailah.

“I have received your letter and examined the thread samples with great interest. The color is indeed beautiful. However, I must observe that the sample you sent has attracted a significant number of ants during its journey, and they appear to find it delicious. I do not recall any source indicating that the chilazon’s dye was edible to insects, or indeed to anyone. I commend your

dedication to the mitzvah but suggest that further research may be necessary.”

Rav Blaufarb’s letter, rather than settling the matter, only intensified the debate. Over the following months, a flurry of responsa crossed the Atlantic, as rabbinical authorities weighed in on what became known as *“sheilas haperi”*—the question of the fruit.

Tale End



Rav Shimshon Indigowitz received an inquiry from a former student who had immigrated to Cincinnati and encountered the blueberry *techeiles* controversy firsthand. His response was characteristically precise:

"You write to me of a rabbi who claims to have discovered the chilazon in the form of a berry. I will not dignify this with extensive analysis. The Gemara in Menachos states clearly that the chilazon has a shell, emerges from the sea, and its blood is used for dye. A berry has no shell, grows on a bush, and its juice is used for pie."

A creative response came from Rav Yosef Taliskotonsky, who tried to find a middle ground:

Perhaps the solution is as follows: The rabbi has not found the chilazon, but he has found a zeicher l'chilazon, a remembrance of the chilazon. Just as we eat maror on Pesach as a remembrance of the bitterness of slavery, though we are no longer slaves, perhaps one could wear the blueberry thread as a remembrance of techeiles, though it is not the true techeiles.

Rabbi Yagdes was undeterred by his critics. He argued that the fading was due to improper mordanting and that the ant problem could be solved by better storage. He continued producing his blueberry *techeiles*, and by the fall of 1863, approximately a dozen Jews in Fringetown were sporting the distinctive blue threads.

And that is when Mayor Thomas Crispedin became involved.

The Civil War was raging, and when reports reached the mayor's office that Jews were buying up large quantities of blueberries from the surrounding countryside, he grew concerned. Blueberries were used in



A rare tallis with Techeiles Amerikai on display in the Wild Blueberries Museum in Upstate New York

preserves sent to Union soldiers; a shortage could affect morale. Mayor Crispedin summoned Rabbi Yagdes to City Hall for an explanation. The transcript of this meeting, preserved in the City Archives, reveals the cultural misunderstanding:

Mayor Crispedin: "Rabbi Yagdes, I am told you wish to purchase a great quantity of blueberries."

Rabbi Yagdes: "Not a great quantity, Mayor. But a significant amount, yes."

Mayor Crispedin: "For what purpose? We are at war, sir. Blueberries are needed for the troops."

Rabbi Yagdes: "I assure you, Mayor, my purposes are religious. I plan to turn them into dye, to fulfill the biblical commandment of wearing a thread of blue."

Mayor Crispedin: "Rabbi, I am an Episcopalian. I have read the Bible. I do not recall any mention of blueberries."

Rabbi Yagdes: "Not blueberries specifically. The blue dye. The blueberry is merely the source."

A compromise was eventually reached.

The Jewish community would be permitted to purchase blueberries at market rates, in quantities no greater than other buyers, and would not interfere with supplies destined for the war effort. In exchange, Mayor Crispedin agreed to issue a formal letter certifying that the purchase was for legitimate religious purposes.

The blueberry *techeiles* movement, however, did not survive its founder. Rabbi Yagdes passed away in 1887, and without his passionate advocacy, the practice gradually faded. His students quietly returned to wearing plain white *tzitzis*, and the last known pair of blueberry *techeiles* was reportedly worn by Rabbi Yagdes' grandson at his bar mitzvah in 1901, after which they were placed in a drawer and eventually eaten by moths.

The controversy left one lasting legacy. For decades, the Jews of Fringetown maintained a curious custom: After the morning *seudah* on *Shabbos Parshas Shelach*, in which the *mitzvah* of *techeiles* is mentioned, they served blueberry pie. ●