

In the list of gifts for the mishkan, one item is a mystery: עור תחש - **or tahash**. Because of its similarity to the Arabic *tahas*, a word that denotes aquatic animal, translators render the **tahash** as *porpoise, dolphin, seal, or badger*. Others identify it as a *dugong* or *sea cow* (see below), a large aquatic animal related somehow to the elephant.



Still others admit that *it is a word of uncertain etymology and meaning* (Ernest Klein). The rabbis, unsurprisingly, get us off our *tahas*, and offer several different interpretations. Two of them debated it here:

R. Yehuda and R. Nehemia lived in the latter half of the 2nd Century CE. They were students of Rabbi Akiva, part of the 4th generation of Tannaim. On closer examination, their debate is about something more than just the **tahash**. Like Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk, they are debating a deep, fundamental question about reality: Is there a divine logic, a set of rules and order, to reality, or is reality essentially a mystery of unexplainable divine miracles?

THE DEBATE RE-IMAGINED:

R. Yehudah: Nehemia, my good friend, what a pleasure it is to be with you! We have just read Parashat Terumah and we have come across this strange item used in the making of the mishkan: the **or tahash**. Our students have asked us: what is that? My answer is simple: it is a large, pure (ie. kosher) animal, multicolored, with a single horn in its forehead. **Large**, because a large amount of skin was necessary for the mishkan. **Pure**, because the mishkan required pure animals.

Multicolored, because that would give the mishkan an extra splendor. And **single-horned**, because every single culture around us, as well as ours, has a record of a very large single-horned creature that would certainly have existed in the time of our ancestors. It was a desert animal, very likely, a large type of oryx, which would have been fairly easy for our ancestors in the desert to capture and kill, and then use its massive hide for the mishkan. That is the logical choice. I agree that we have never seen this animal but that is not a problem. In the ordered world which God created, some animals survive, and some die out especially when their purpose has been fulfilled. The cultural record says it existed. Ergo, it was a **tahash**.



tion is: it's a miracle! A miracle invites the imagination and it puts us in contact with the mysteries of the universe. The **tahash** was not your extinct desert unicorn mammoth but a miraculous mammal that God invented for the miraculous mishkan. Once its purpose was fulfilled, it was gone.

R. Yehuda: My dear Nehemia. I too am a believer in miracles! But there's logic here, and God created logic too! Things happen for reasons; and God created a world bound by rules and order. Not everything has to be a mystery. I'll give you an example. A friend of mine took ill, so ill that people were afraid that he was going to die. We looked far and wide for a physician to treat him, and several villages away, we learned of one who had cured someone from the very same illness. We summoned him to our village, and he came with his potions. When he

looked at my friend, he understood immediately what the ailment was, and provided the correct elixir. Within days, my friend recovered. Of course, you and I would agree that God is the ultimate Healer. But it's hard to discount the role of the medicine here. It's

<p>וערת תחשים. רבי יהודה ורבי נחמיה. רבי יהודה אומר: היה טהור גדולה היתה במדבר וקרן אחת היה לה במצחה, ובעורה ששה גונים, ונטלו אותה ועשו ממנה ריעות. ורבי נחמיה אומר: מעשה נסים היתה, ולשעה שנבראת, בה בשעה נגנזה. מדרש תנחומא תרומה ו</p>	<p>And skins of tahashim (Exod. 25:3). (A debate between) R. Judah and R. Nehemiah. R. Judah said: It was a large pure animal in the desert, with a single horn in its forehead and a skin of six different colors. They took it and made the coverings. R. Nehemiah said: It was a miraculously made creature and at the precise moment it was created (its skin was used) and it was instantly hidden. Midrash Tanhuma Terumah 6.</p>
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R. Nehemia: Yehuda, my dear friend. As elegant as your reasoning is, the absence of an actual specimen defeats your entire argument. Why wouldn't God have wanted this animal to continue to exist? I am looking beyond your logic and order to mystery. The only explanation here, the only **realistic** explanation, is that it was a miracle. Yes, a miracle like the gold and silver of the mishkan! A miracle like all the precious stones in the breastplate! A miracle like the pillar of fire and smoke, and even the splitting of the sea! Yehuda, just accept the fact that some things cannot be explained. Some questions elude answers. Sometimes, the most compelling explana-

part of the order and structure that God made in the world.

R. Nehemiah: But Yehuda. The fact that a physician wants to help another person in the first place is itself a miracle! The miracle of human kindness! Without that miracle, there would be no physicians who desire to heal others. In my opinion, everything that has to do with healing is a mystery. Therefore, healing itself is a miracle. We cannot explain why one person suddenly falls ill and another suddenly gets better. Your physician has probably treated patients who died. Sometimes life doesn't work along the lines of logical causes and effects. To me, it is a mystery why your friend

recovered. Thus, his recovery was a miracle. And Yehuda, in truth, all of life is one big miracle.

R. Yehuda: Of course it is. But it also follows God's rules and order. Let me give you another example: war. In war there is chaos. Soldiers try to defeat each other in battle. Soldiers have weapons. They practice and drill. They use effective tactics. A few well-trained and carefully deployed soldiers can defeat a large army. It can all be explained with logic.

R. Nehemia: Absolutely. But soldiers have a sense of mission and are driven by courage. We can't only explain victory might or power. Even you would agree with the verse from Zecharia (4:6), *Not by might and not by power, but by My spirit...* There are things beyond our imagination that guide us and sustain us. You say the **tahash** was a creature that no longer exists. You find God in that logic. I say that it was a miracle, and I find God in that miracle. It kindles my imagination and elicits from me a profound sense of wonder and gratitude.

R. Yehuda: Indeed, I too have wonder - for a world created with order and boundaries. And gratitude - to God for making that world.

R. Nehemia: And I, thank God for a world of miracles.

R. Yehuda: Always a pleasure to learn with you. Thank you for your friendship.

R. Nehemia: Our friendship proves my point: it's a big mystery!

A Modern Interpretation of **Tahash** based on Philology and Archeology

"Hebrew **tahash** is cognate with Hurrian/Akkadian/Sumerian **duhsu**,"

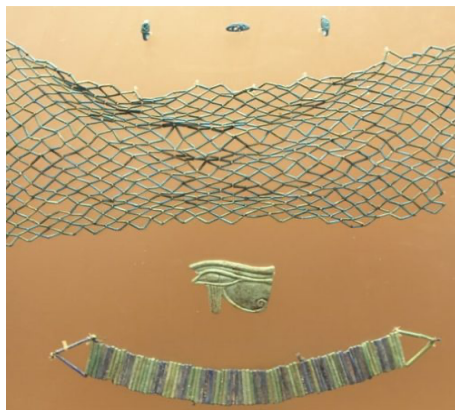


writes Dr. Stephanie Dalley of Oxford University.¹ **Duhsu** "denotes beading

¹Stephanie Dalley, *Hebrew Tahas, Akkadian Duhsu, Faience and Beadwork*. Journal of Semitic Studies, January 2000.

²Faience refers to a non-clay-based ceramic used by the Egyptians to create colored glazed objects. One specific purpose of faience was

and attaching pendants, and inlaying in stone, metal, faience² and glass, and is usually made on leather but sometimes also wool or linen..."



Ancient Egyptian Faience. Vatican Museum, Rome.

"The professional who manufactured them was not involved in dyeing leather, but was a refiner of frit,³ faience and glass, who shaped beads and inlays, and designed the iconography of ceremonial armor and harness, awnings for royal boats, ceremonial necklaces and headdresses, luxury sandals and royal headrests." In other words, **tahash** is a luxurious form of ornamentation for a leather or fabric, similar to sequins or spangles. The person who made this had a status, "far higher than that of a mere dyer of leather." There was great skill involved. In the Greek translation of the Bible, **tahash** is translated as *huakinthinis* a word which conveys "both the color and the surface effect of beading." Finally, Dalley writes:



"The covering for the tabernacle in the Pentateuch with its underlay of red, madder-dyed leather has its precise

counterpart in craft materials from Isin and Mari around 2000-1800 BCE." The mishkan coverings are luxury products of their time.

IT IS DAY 134. MAY GOD SHIELD THE HOSTAGES AND MAY THEY BE FREE!

creating beads to substitute for gem materials like lapis lazuli, carnelian, malachite and turquoise.

www.langantiques.com/university/faience-2/

The only other occurrence of the word **tahash** in the Bible, is in Ezekiel 16:10: **וְאַלְבִּישׁךְ רִקְמָה וְאַנְעֹלְךָ תַּחַשׁ וְאַחֲבִשׁךְ בַּשָּׁשׁ וְאַחֲכַסְךָ מְיֻשִׁי - I clothed you with embroidered garments, and gave you sandals of **tachash** to wear, and wound fine linen about your head, and dressed you in silks.**



Beaded **tahash** slippers found in Tutankhamun's tomb Bottom line: according to archeology and philology, **or tahash** does not refer to the skin of a large aquatic or extinct desert animal. Rather, it is a kind of leather or fabric that was ornamented with exquisite ceramic beadwork, the kind found in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Associated with royalty, it would have been fitting for the desert, and protected the mishkan from the harsh elements of wind and dust.⁴

Does this persuasive explanation displace the midrash? Not at all. The traditional midrash and the modern analysis complement each other. While archeology and philology satisfy our curiosity, the rabbis engage us theologically. Their questions about the mishkan will always be relevant. Especially in challenging times - when we are looking for both the logic to guide us in a chaotic world and miracles to help us cope with it! **Shabbat Shalom! Shabbat Shalom!**

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Paula and Aaron Kondioti remembering their son, Adam Marc Kondioti z'l, on the 21st anniversary of his Bar Mitzvah.
עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל חַי! שַׁבַּת שְׁלוֹמִים!
Shabbat Shalom! Am Yisrael Hay!

³ Frit is the mixture of silica and fluxes which is fused at high temperature to make glass. Glaziers fret over frit.

⁴See, thetorah.com Rabbi N. Solomon, *What was the Tahash Covering in the Tabernacle?*