

RATIONALIST JUDAISM

Exploring the legacy of the rationalist medieval Torah scholars, and various other notes

Tuesday, December 31, 2013

The Gadol and the Snail

Yesterday I attended a conference marking 100 years since a very unusual doctoral dissertation. Rav Yitzchak Herzog, Chief Rabbi of Israel, wrote his dissertation on the identity of the *chilazon*, the snail from which the *tekhelet* dye is derived. The conference, organized by [Ptil Tekhelet](#), featured a very broad range of speakers, from rabbis to archeologists.

Rav Herzog was a truly extraordinary person. He was ordained by Ridvaz, who pronounced him one of the world's outstanding Talmudists. Rabbi Herzog's elite group of disciples included Rabbi Yechezkel Abramsky, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach (whose work *Ma'adanei Aretz* bore the approbation of Rabbi Herzog), Rabbi Shmuel Vosner, and Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv.



At Rav Herzog's funeral, Rabbi Aharon Kotler of the Lakewood Yeshiva eulogized him as a "prince," and spoke of his extraordinary Torah scholarship. See [this link](#) for a fascinating account of regarding Rav Aharon Kotler and Rav Herzog's passing, and see Rav Kotler and others at Rav Herzog's funeral in the picture at right. Rabbi Shalom Gold of Har Nof, who received ordination from Rav Herzog, told me that Rav Herzog was also proficient in numerous languages, and moreover was a wonderfully kind person.



Justice Neal Hendel (himself a fascinating person - an American Orthodox Jew who studied under Rav Soloveitchik and is now a judge on the Israel Supreme Court) spoke about Rav Herzog's approach to halachah. Amongst other things, he mentioned how it is so important, and yet so difficult, for a *posek* to get the full picture on the cases that he rules upon. Rav Herzog wanted to determine the correct approach to *techeles* - and so he studied marine biology!

Rav Herzog appears on a few occasions in my books *The Challenge Of Creation* and *Sacred Monsters*. He believed that the account of creation did not need to be interpreted literally, and he wrote that Rabbeinu Avraham ben HaRambam's approach to the science of the Talmud - that it was simply the prevalent beliefs of the era and thus fallible - expresses the correct position to take. (As we discussed regarding Rav Hirsch in the previous post, these views are likewise considered heresy by many contemporary Charedi rabbinic authorities, and Rav Herzog's statements on these matters are likewise omitted by Rabbi Meiselman in his book on this topic.)

Regarding *techeles*, there's a vast amount of literature on the website of [Ptil Tekhelet](#). I haven't had time to go through more than a fraction of it, but as I once wrote in [a post regarding my own chilazon-hunting expedition](#), it's clear to me that the *Murex trunculus* is indeed the correct candidate. Those who claim otherwise inevitably turn out to be of an anti-rationalist persuasion. However, I do not myself wear *techeles*, for reasons that I will discuss on another occasion.



The presentations from the conference will soon be available for download from the [Ptil Tekhelet](#) website. And now for something completely different: There are readers of this blog who strenuously object to everything that I write, and I would like to ask them to attempt to employ this policy once again. I am very interested to know if there are any early mentions of the phrase "*l'iluy nishmas*" or the concept thereof. (I am not referring to the concept of atoning for the departed via charity, but to the concept of elevating the soul, particularly via Torah learning.) My hunch is that it does not appear in the period of the Rishonim at all. Please let me know if I am wrong!

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This website is an exploration into the rationalist approach to Judaism that was most famously presented by Maimonides. It will also explore contemporary rationalist approaches, as well as being a forum for various other notes. Well-written comments in the spirit of this enterprise will be posted; please include a name (even a pseudonym).

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5 comments:

**Moshe Laymore said...**

Rabbi Slifkin, you promised us years ago that you would reveal you reason for not wearing tcheiles and we are still waiting. How about doing it now in a comment or in your next post?

December 31, 2013 at 5:25 PM

**Joel C. Salomon said...**

One reason for doubting whether *Murex trunculus* is the *chilazon* is the added claim that *argaman* is also produced from the same source, which (I have heard argued) is not mentioned in the Gemara as might have been expected.

Do you know why this claim is made about *argaman*, or whether it is more likely from *Murex trunculus* or from *Murex brandaris* instead?

December 31, 2013 at 5:26 PM

Avi said...

Coincidentally, this issue was in the news today!

http://bostonherald.com/news_opinion/international/middle_east/2013/12/israel_researcher_elusive_biblical_blue_found

December 31, 2013 at 5:38 PM

Avi said...

Oh, I see now that the article mentions that the researcher presented her findings at the conference you attended.

December 31, 2013 at 5:41 PM

Anonymous said...

Life in Israel blog reported the following money quote which may apply to your situation: Rabbi Weinreb offered an analysis of the resistance to tekhelet. He said something very interesting, saying that just like people repress bad, they also repress the sublime.

KT

Joel Rich

December 31, 2013 at 5:48 PM

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