

The secret of the lo

The blue thread that runs through Jewish history



Murex trunculus straight out of the ocean. (Photos: Stephen Epstein)



Tzitzit with techelet and the hilazon.

• By MIRIAM KRESH

Long ago, there was blue. A blue dye, obtained from a certain marine creature – a snail that lived off the Mediterranean coast. The dye was extracted from it by a specific process that was well known at the time. It was labor-intensive work. Fishermen would harvest the snails from the seabed, which was hard work because they were camouflaged with sand and slime. They would take their harvest to the dye houses located near the beach, where workers extracted the creatures' digestive glands immediately, then crushed, salted, and steeped them in boiling water.

This yielded a green-yellow color, “like the color of leeks.” Only after the infused water was exposed to sunlight did the royal crimsons, purples and blues appear, according to scheduled timing.

The Talmud says that the blue color was as pure and beautiful as the sapphire Tablets of the Law. The Hebrew term for this royal blue is *techelet*. The name of the only snail good for making it is *hilazon*.

In the ancient world, fabrics dyed with these colors were literally worth their weight in gold. The nobility of ancient Egypt, Rome and Greece wore them not only for their beauty but to flaunt their prestige. In Judaism, the robe of the high priest was dyed techelet blue. It's said that Mordecai of the Purim story dressed in blue-and-white robes after he became chief vizier to Ahasuerus. Yet the common man also bought fabric dyed blue with techelet, usually only a few woolen threads. These blue threads, knotted together with

those of common white wool, were drawn through the corners of the tzitzit garment, making the ritual fringes worn every day, as commanded by God to Moses.

The blue thread among the white was a reminder: “You shall look upon it and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them; and that you go not about after your own heart and your own eyes, which you use to go astray; that you may remember and do all My commandments, and be holy unto your God.” The sage Rabbi Meir (second century) would say that wearing the thread of techelet is considered as great as if a man greeted the Divine Presence, “For techelet resembles the sea, and the sea resembles the sky, and the sky resembles God's holy throne.”

When the Romans conquered Israel, they passed sumptuary laws restricting clothing of those luxurious colors to the nobility. Jews were forbidden to wear blue or make the dye. But so precious was the mitzva of wearing techelet that some Jews risked the severity of Roman law to manufacture the dye in secret and smuggle blue threads to other communities around the land. With the Arab conquest of Israel in 639 CE, the techniques of identifying the snails and extracting the dye were lost. Jews never abandoned the tzitzit garment, but all its fringes were white.

Yet the blue thread continued to run through Judaism, in holy books and debates in the houses of study. The source for the blue dye was known to come from the hilazon snail, but no one knew how to identify the creature for sure, nor even how to harvest it. How to extract the sky-blue color from the snail remained a secret. For over 1,400 years, techelet remained a mys-

terious echo from the past – one of many sacred things lost in the exile from the Land of Israel and the dispersion of Jews throughout the world.

In addition, some rabbis considered that after so many centuries without techelet, it wouldn't be permissible to try making it again, supposing the hilazon was rediscovered. Wouldn't it be better, they argued, to wait until Messianic times to revive the custom? For then the hilazon would be identified without question. The techelet issue continued to serve as a subject for study and discussion, but no one expected to see the real thing in their lifetimes.

But there are always second and third opinions in Judaism. Maintaining that the techelet could and should be used again, one rabbi eventually undertook to rediscover it. In Poland, in 1889, a hassidic sage became convinced that the cuttlefish's ink was the source of techelet. This was Rabbi Gershon Henoch Leiner, the Radziner rebbe. He traveled to Italy to continue his research, working with a local chemist. The chemist used iron filings and chemicals to produce Prussian blue; the cuttlefish, although present in the mix, did nothing to produce the desired color. Still, the Radziner rebbe was convinced that the mystery was solved. He had thousands of tzitzit sets made with the blue thread, and his hassidim began to wearing them.

This gave rise to a new debate. Most Jews rejected the “new techelet,” today considered a fraud of the Italian chemist. But the Radziner system of making blue dye survives until today, and thousands of Radziner Hassidim wear a blue thread from it in their tzitziot.

Blue color can be extracted from plants, specifical-