

## Rashi's *Hillazon*

Mois A. Navon, 5759

The Gemara tells of the following legend: “He went up to the mountain and saw that today there was only one *hillazon*; the next day it rained and [the area] was filled with *hillazonot*” (Sanhedrin 91a). Rashi explains the word “*hillazon*” as “a *tola’at* (worm) that comes up from the sea once in seventy years, and with its blood they dye *tekhelet*” (Rashi on *ibid.*).<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand Rashi’s intention, it is essential to investigate<sup>2</sup> his translation of other related creatures:

- (1) Rashi (Vayikra 11:30) translates the word “*homot*” into Old French as the “*limatza*” (limace).
- (2) Rashi (Moed Katan 6b) explains the verse in Tehillim (58:9): “like a snail that melts away” (*shablul temes yehaloch*). On the word “*shablul*” he states that it is called “*limatzon*” (limacon). And on the words “*temes yehaloch*” he writes “that it melts away when it comes out of its shell”. Clearly Rashi holds that a *shablul* which is also referred to as a *limatzon* has a shell.
- (3) When Rashi provides the meaning of the word “*shablul*” in his commentary to Tehillim (58:9) he translates it *limatza* (limace). Furthermore, Rashi elsewhere (Shabbat 77b) translates “*shablul*” as *limatza* (limace). Thus Rashi uses the French terms *limatza* and *limatzon* interchangeably to refer to a shelled creature.
- (4) From the above sources which equate the shelled creature “*shablul*” with *limatzon* and *limatza*, it is readily inferred that the *homot* called a *limatza* is a shelled creature.
- (5) On the verse in Devarim (8:4): “Your clothing did not wear out”, Rashi employs the Midrash: “...as the people grew so their clothing grew with them, like the clothing of the *homot* which grows with it” (Pesikta d’Rav Kehana, Beshalah).<sup>3</sup> Here again, as inferred above, the *homot* is a shelled creature; this time the feature is understood from its metaphoric use in the Midrash that this creature has some kind of “clothing” or external cover which grows as its body grows. However, of greater interest here is Rashi’s use of the word “*homot*”, for the original Midrash does not use the term *homot*, but rather “*hillazon*”! By this replacement, clearly Rashi equates the *hillazon* with the *homot*, at least in their both being shelled creatures.<sup>4</sup>

From the above analysis, it is evident that Rashi views the *hillazon* as a creature with a shell. His use of the term “*tola’at*” can be explained as being a reference to the essential creature (i.e., the living body found inside the shell).<sup>5</sup> And certainly Rashi does not hold that the *hillazon* was a worm in the simplest sense of the term; for he himself refers to the *hillazon shel tekhelet* as “a type of small fish” (on Shabbat 74b). Given the Gemara’s broad use of the term “fish”,<sup>6</sup> Rashi too intended simply “a sea creature”. Combining all of these references provides a clear picture of Rashi’s *hillazon*: a small, shelled, sea creature with a worm like body. The *Murex trunculus* answers quite nicely to this description.

<sup>1</sup> As an aside, R. Borshtein states that the *hillazon* of this legend may not necessarily be the *hillazon shel tekhelet* (HaTekhelet, p.28, esp. n. 16).

<sup>2</sup> This investigation is based on the manuscript by Yechezkel Russ: “Gilui HaTamun BeGalut Edom – Tekhelet BeZmaneinu”, Ch.1, Sec. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Shir HaShirim R. 4:11; Midrash Tehillim, Mizmor 23; also Devarim Rabba 7:11.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps Rashi chose to use the term *homot* as it was a more obvious example of a shelled creature than was the *hillazon*.

<sup>5</sup> “A snail is basically a worm that lives in a shell” (R. M. A. Katz, “Kium Mitzvat Tekhelet BeTzitzit BeYameinu”, Kovetz Or Yisrael, Gilayon 10, p.12). “Worm-like refers to the lack of feet or discernible organs” (R. Resnick, “Hidden Blue”, Jewish Action, Vol. 52, no.1). The worm-like body of the *hillazon* seems to be the object of Rashi’s comment to the word “*tablul*” which is a hair like defect in the eye. He writes on Vayikra (21:20), “*Tablul* means *hiliz* from *hillazon* which is similar to a worm ...” – i.e., the string like defect is similar in shape to the worm like body of the *hillazon*.

<sup>6</sup> R. I. Herzog (“Hebrew Porphyrology”, The Royal Purple and the Biblical Blue, p.68) explains that “from the sporadic allusion to the nature and characteristics of fishes” in the Gemara no precise taxonomy can be inferred.