

# *Identifying the Chilazon*

by

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## **The Disappearance of Techelet**

*Techelet*, an integral part of the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, was lost to us many centuries ago. The exact time and circumstances of this loss is subject to historical speculation, but it is known that it was available during the time of the *Amoraim* (which closed toward the end of the fifth century of the common era) and was no longer available at the middle of the Gaonic period (the eighth century)<sup>1</sup>. The

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*The majority of the research for this article comes from works of: Dr. I. Zeiderman, from an article published in "Tchumim" volume number 9, Dr. Boruch Sterman from his as yet unpublished article "Tekhelet," and Dr. Ari Greenspan from a yet unpublished article. Dr. Sterman and Rabbi Greenspan, in turn, derived much of their knowledge of techelet from Rabbi Eliahu Tevgar, a pioneer in this field. Rav Tevgar, is the author of the sefer "KI'il Techelet", and co-founder of Amutat P'til Techelet. My gratitude to all the above persons is deep, for they have studied this subject "al m'nat la'asot," in a manner rarely seen in practice.*

*For further research the reader is advised to avail himself of "The Royal Purple and the Biblical Blue", a collection of scholarly works on the subject edited by Ehud Spanier, including the most masterly work "Hebrew Porphyrology", the doctoral dissertation of Rabbi Yitzchok Isaac Halevy Herzog.*

*My thanks, as well, to Rabbi Dr. Jerold Isenberg Chancellor of Hebrew Theological College, for devoting substantial time and effort to reviewing and preparing this article for publication. His numerous suggestions have enhanced this article considerably.*

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<sup>1</sup> The *gemorra* Menachot 42b-43a discusses the usage of *techelet* and the way that it is dyed, "this *techelet*, how do you dye it?" The *gemorra* 43a recounts that Mar from Moshke brought *techelet* in the years of R. Achai, and that the *techelet* was tested. Rav Achai was of the last of the *Amoraim* and the earliest of the Rabanan Savrai, living during the years of Mar b. Rav Ashi and after (circa 500). If so, this is a piece added by the Rabanan Savrai. Had the *techelet* become unavailable at the close of the period of the

best estimate is that the loss of the technology of the *techelet* dyeing process and/or the identity of the *chilazon* (the specific species needed to make *techelet*) is that it was a consequence of the Arab conquest of 639 CE<sup>2</sup>, or perhaps the result of the Christian massacres of 628 CE<sup>3</sup>. The

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Rabanan Savrai (c. 570), there would have been a mention of this following the episode of Rav Achai. (Even if the Rav Achai mentioned here refers to some Amora that lived earlier [highly doubtful], yet, there is no mention of *techelet* being unavailable during the years of Ravina and R. Ashi, c. 470 at the close of the Talmud). We may therefore conclude that *techelet* was available until the end of the Talmudic era. On the other hand, the *Midrash Tanchuma Parshat Shelach* laments the loss of *techelet*. The estimated date of the final redaction of *Midrash Tanchuma* is about 750 CE.

<sup>2</sup> Suggested by Rav Leiner in his introduction to his *sefer*, *Ptil Techelet*, and by Rav Yitzchok Halevi Herzog, *The Royal Purple and Biblical Blue*, Ehud Spanier, Keter Publishing, Jerusalem (1987). "The Arab conquests of Palestine about 639 entailed the total destruction of the purple dyehouses administered by the imperial official. Was this the real cause of the extinction of *techelet*?" (page 112).

*Techelet* is the subject of Rav Herzog's doctoral thesis first submitted in 1913 and first published in *The Royal Purple* (1987) from a microfilm of a manuscript.

<sup>3</sup> My own theory. The massacre of 628 which was led by Heraclius and inspired by the monks and the Patriarch Modestus is recorded by Graetz and other historians of the period. Graetz records "he [Heraclius] instituted a persecution of the Jews throughout Palestine and massacred all that failed to conceal themselves in the mountains or escape to Egypt." *History of the Jews* Vol III Page 23. It would seem to me that the closure of the dye factories by the Byzantine government would not have, by itself, brought an end to *techelet* manufacture, but the loss of Jewish artisans would have broken the chain of tradition in the knowledge needed for *techelet* manufacture. However, the subsequent closure of the dye

*chilazon* was never available in Bavel, the center of Jewish population during this era, and until that time *techelet* was imported from *Eretz Yisroel*<sup>4</sup>. Thus, with the destruction of the *yishuv* in *Eretz Yisroel*, came the ultimate disappearance of *techelet*.

### **Rav Leiner's Attempt of Rediscovery**

In 1887 HaGaon HaRav Gershon Henoah Leiner (the Radziner Rebbe) undertook the monumental task of rediscovering the lost *chilazon*.<sup>5</sup> After proving from the Talmudic texts that there is no reason to assume that the *chilazon*

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manufacture would have been a factor in preventing its renewal in a subsequent generation.

<sup>4</sup> This can possibly be inferred from Menachot 42b. Abaya asked R. Shmuel b. Yehudah, "How do you dye *techelet*?" It is known that R. Shmuel b. Yehudah spent time in *Eretz Yisroel*, and brought back some of his acquired knowledge to Bavel (See Hyman, *Toldot Tanaim v'Amoraim* p. 1037 "He [R. Shmuel b. Yehudah] was appointed along with his colleagues Ravin and Rav Dimi to travel to *Eretz Yisroel* and bring back teachings from the Masters"). Abaya, therefore, asked him to describe the process, since R. Shmuel b. Yehudah had been there and seen exactly how the *techelet* is dyed. Had the dyeing been prevalent in Bavel, Abaya could have gone to see how it is done himself.

In addition, since the *chilazon* were indigenous to the Mediterranean Sea, it would have been unavailable in Bavel.

<sup>5</sup> Rav Leiner (1839-1891) wrote three *sefarim* on this subject, 1) *S'funei T'munei Chol* (1887), 2) *P'til Techelet* (1888), and 3) *Eyn Ha'techelet* published posthumously (1891). The first sefer introduced his arguments regarding the feasibility of discovering the *chilazon*, and was published before his discovery. The second sefer was a defense of his identification of the *chilazon* as *Sepia officinalis*. The third was written as a response to his critics.

became either extinct or irretrievably lost<sup>6</sup>, he postulated that the *chilazon* is very likely extant in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, where it was known to exist at one time. With this theory in hand, he undertook a journey to Italy to visit an aquarium where he might study the various species of fish in order to determine, based on the descriptions culled from Talmudic literature, the identity of the *chilazon*.

Despite his great efforts, his formidable erudition, and three treatises that he wrote to support his contention, the Radziner Rebbe's conclusion, that the *chilazon* is the species *Sepia officinalis* (cuttlefish), was met with a great deal of skepticism in his time and years later was conclusively refuted by Rav Yitzchok Isaac Halevi Herzog.<sup>7</sup> However, his efforts were not at all in vain, for in addition to writing the most authoritative work on *techelet* with regard to many facets of this mitzvah, he laid the groundwork for a future generation to seek the *chilazon*.

### **Recent Attempts at Rediscovery**

In recent years, a group of religious scientists who have since formed an association called Amutat Ptil Techelet, took up the task of finding the elusive *chilazon*. They claim that this time the efforts have been met with success.

At the outset, any such claim should be greeted with a healthy dose of skepticism, since even the esteemed Rav

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<sup>6</sup> The subject of his first work, *S'funei Tmunei Chol*.

<sup>7</sup> There can be no doubt that it was Rav Leiner's work that inspired Rav Herzog to devote his doctoral thesis to the subject of *techelet*. No doubt, it was his intention to substantiate his findings, and he was chagrined to discover that the identification of Rav Leiner was erroneous.

Leiner was in error in this very matter and the skepticism that greeted his claim was proven to be quite justified. If so, we must suspect that lesser qualified persons would be at least as likely to come to erroneous conclusions.

However, this should not mean that the claim of the modern discovery should be ignored. Rather, it needs to be examined carefully, and if, after carefully weighing the evidence, it turns out that the claim lacks foundation, it should be rejected. On the other hand, if the evidence in favor of positive identification is overwhelming, then the return of *techelet* should be accepted by the majority of *shomrei mitzvos*, for this will afford *chovivei mitzvos* an opportunity that has not been available for nearly 1400 years. It should thus be regarded with great excitement and enthusiasm, as a precious and dear element of the mitzvah of *tzitzit* may well have been retrieved.

### **The Claim**

The Ptil Tekhelet Institute claims that a species of snail called by its official Latin name, *Murex trunculus*<sup>8</sup>, is the *chilazon*. The evidence of this come from a variety of disciplines including history, chemistry, and archeology, intermixed with textual proofs from the Talmud and *Midrash*. An outline of the evidence follows:

- 1) The Talmud,<sup>9</sup> regarding *tzayadei chilazon* states the following:

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<sup>8</sup> *Murex brandaris*, a sister species to *Murex trunculus*, will also fill all the specifications laid out in this monograph. The contention is that the *chilazon* is identified with both of the two murex species since each of these has brominated indigo as natural chemical in its mucus, from which the murex- derived indigo can be extracted.

<sup>9</sup> Shabbat 26a

..these are the fishers of  
*chilazon* from Haifa to Sidon

From this statement we can derive that the natural habitat of *chilazon* was off the shores of what is today northern Israel and southern Lebanon, and what was, in ancient times, Phoenicia.

- 2) It is documented that the center of the dye industry in the ancient world was Phoenicia.<sup>10</sup> The most famous of the dyes was Tyrian Purple, an extremely expensive dye that was in great demand by the nobility and the extremely wealthy, as it was unique in its beauty and color-fastness.
- 3) If one opens a *Murex trunculus* snail and squeezes the hypobranchial gland one will obtain a clear mucus.<sup>11</sup> This mucus, if taken out of the shell and exposed to the air, will change from its clear color to yellow, then to green, then to blue and finally to purple.<sup>12</sup>
- 4) In the late 19th and early 20th century, there were archeological findings of enormous numbers of broken *Murex* shells discovered near the cities of

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<sup>10</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Book IX, pages 40-45 is one of the earliest recorded sources. Aristotle in *De Animalibus Historia* also gives a detailed description of the Phoenician dyeing processes. Also in Strabo, *Geography*; Jones, H.L. Ed.; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, 1930 XVI 2,23.

<sup>11</sup> *Shabbat* 75a states that the dyer does not want the *chilazon* to die in the process of extracting the 'blood' because he wants the dye to remain clear. This indicates rather strongly that the 'blood' or mucus extracted is clear and that it would not remain clear long after the death of the *chilazon*. See also *Tosafot ad. loc.* regarding the 'blood' of the *chilazon*, stating that it does not mean the lifeblood but a secretion.

<sup>12</sup> Jackson, op. cit.

Sidon and Tyre.<sup>13</sup> These were buried in large pits and each broken opposite the hypobranchial gland—a manner consistent with the method needed to extract the dye material found naturally in these snails (and inconsistent with the method employed for its use as a food). The pit near Tyre contained broken shells of *Murex brandaris* and *Thais haemastoma* (a third type of *Murex* which yields a reddish dye) shells while the pit near Sidon had *Murex trunculus* shells exclusively. Off the coast of Lebanon and Northern Israel these same species can be found even today.

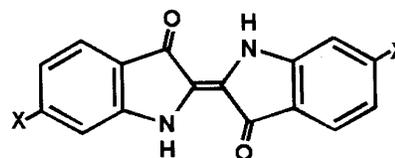
Now, from these facts alone, we have no identification whatsoever regarding the *chilazon*. It stands to reason, of course, that these snails must have been used in the dye industry of ancient Phoenicia, since such vast amounts of snail shells broken in a peculiar manner buried in pits can only mean that these snails were used in the dye industry. But the color that results from these snails is purple, not blue. Purple is the color of *argaman*, an important dye in *halacha* as this was needed for the *bigdei k'hunah* and other sacred objects. *Techelet* is assumed by tradition and verified through a host of other sources, to be a blue dye, and not purple.

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<sup>13</sup> J. Wilfrid Jackson, F.G.S in an article entitled *The Geographical Distribution of the Shell-Purple Industry*, taken from Volume 60, Part II of *Memoriae et Acta Societatis Regiae Societatis Literariae et Philosophicae Societatis*, Session 1915-1916, writes that archeologist L. Lortet reported (*La Syrie d'aujourd'hui*, Paris 1883 pg. 102) finding in the vicinity of Sidon great banks, a hundred yards long and several yards thick composed entirely of broken shells of *Murex trunculus* and in Tyre, H. B. Tristram (*The Land of Israel*, 1882, pg. 48) reports that large quantities of crushed *Murex brandaris* shells were discovered.

The last piece of the puzzle came to light about 15 years ago when it was discovered that if the dye obtained from *Murex trunculus* is exposed to direct sunlight during the dyeing process, the resultant dye changes from purple to blue.<sup>14</sup>

Chemically, after exposure to oxygen the dye of the *Murex trunculus* is dibromoindigo, with a certain amount of indigo intermixed. In the process of making the dye substance water soluble, the dye must be reduced (deoxidized). If, in the reduced state, it is exposed to sunlight, the sun's ultraviolet rays have the power to unbind the bromide atoms from the indigo molecule, leaving the remaining chemical dye, indigo. This indigo is chemically identical to plant-derived indigo, and the dye is therefore the identical color. Plant-derived indigo has the Hebrew name *k'la ilan*.<sup>15</sup> *K'la ilan* is the false *techelet* mentioned several times in the Talmud, and which is obviously identical in color to *techelet*.



X = Br, Dibromoindigo  
X = H, Indigo

With this, we now have sufficient grounds

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<sup>14</sup> The discovery was made in the early 1980's by Otto Elsner and Ehud Spanier while doing research in ancient dyeing techniques. (*Tekhelet* by Baruch Sterman).

<sup>15</sup> The positive identification of *k'la ilan* as indigo comes from the Aruch who states this identification explicitly on the entry *k'la ilan*. Cf. *Radvaaz Responsa* 2: 685.

to identify *Murex trunculus* as a very likely candidate for *chilazon*. 1) It is known that this species was found near Sidon. 2) The remains of a dye factory near Sidon had thousands of *Murex trunculus* shells. 3) This shell produces a dye that can be converted to a blue indigo dye without much difficulty; and 4) This dye is chemically the same as *k'la ilan*, which the Talmud states is the same color as *techelet*.<sup>16</sup>

We need also realize that before the 19th century, when Henry Perkins opened the field of synthetic coal-tar dyes, there were very few natural dyes available.<sup>17</sup>

That *chilazon* was a shell fish (mollusk) is shown by inferences in the Talmud and Midrash. For one, the Midrash says that the *shell (nartik)* of the *chilazon* grows with it.<sup>18</sup> Second, the Talmud<sup>19</sup> says that one who cracks open (*ha'potzeiah*) a *chilazon* violates the Shabbat. The word *potzeiah* from the word *petza*, means to strike with force. When applied to opening a *chilazon* this would implies cracking something open, as in *p'tzias egozim* (cracking open nuts). If an animal is cracked open, it must have a hard shell to crack, otherwise the term to 'cut' (*lachtech*) or merely to 'open' (*liftoach*) would be employed.

The Talmud also says that "the treasures buried in the sand" (Deuteronomy 33:19) is a reference to *chilazon*.<sup>20</sup> Snails

<sup>16</sup> Bava Metzia 61b, Menachot 42b-43a.

<sup>17</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, entry "Dyestuffs and Pigments," mentions 10 to 12 materials that were in use prior to the 19th century. Indigo and the *Murex* dyes were among these.

<sup>18</sup> *Psiktah d' Rav Kahana 11:21*.

<sup>19</sup> Shabbat 85a

<sup>20</sup> Megillah 6a

do burrow into the sands of the shallow waters

Further support that *chilazon* is a snail (or conch) is that some Middle Eastern languages, (Farsi and Assyrian<sup>21</sup>), the word for snail or conch is *chilazon*.<sup>22</sup> Middle Eastern languages, as Latin languages, often share nouns in common.

A further linguistic proof comes from a statement by the Raaviya<sup>23</sup>, who quotes a Yerushalmi identifying *techelet* with the Greek word *propherin*. *Propherin* is the Greek word for *Murex*.

*Chilazon* is known to be an uncommon species. This is true of *Murex trunculus* and *Murex brandaris*, for these are found only in some areas off the Mediterranean coast<sup>24</sup> and are difficult to obtain in the large quantities needed for dyeing<sup>25</sup>.

Further, the Talmud tells us that the dye needs to be extracted while the snail is yet alive, or soon after.<sup>26</sup> This is in total agreement with the nature of the mucus of the *Murex trunculus* and *Murex brandaris*, since in order for the color changing

<sup>21</sup> A language evolved from Aramaic

<sup>22</sup> From discussion with an Iranian Jew and an Assirian.

<sup>23</sup> Berakot §25.

<sup>24</sup> In fact, the government of Israel prohibits the catching of *Murex trunculus* off the coast of Israel as it is considered an endangered species.

<sup>25</sup> So much so that in ancient times the value of wool dyed by the *murex* extract were worth many times its weight in gold. McGovern and Michel, Acc. Chem Res. 23, *Royal Purple Dye; The Reconstruction of the Ancient Mediterranean Industry* 152-157 (1990).

<sup>26</sup> Shabbat 75a

processes to develop, a specific enzyme, purporase, must be present. This enzyme deteriorates soon after the death of the *Murex* and if the exposure to the air does not occur within a few hours, the mucus will not develop into dibromindigo.<sup>27</sup>

Putting this all together, when looking for *chilazon*, we are seeking a mollusk or more specifically a snail that was found off the coast of ancient Phoenicia, that was used in the dye industry, that is difficult to obtain, and that can produce a blue dye that is identical in color to indigo and which must be squeezed from the snail while yet alive or immediately after the death of the snail. All these match *Murex* and no other known mollusks.

But, one may argue, even granting all this, we still do not have positive identification for *chilazon*. One might suggest that the true *chilazon* is a yet undiscovered mollusk and that *Murex*, although it can produce a blue indigo dye, is *possul* for *techelet* nonetheless, since this is the wrong mollusk. After all, it is possible (even if highly improbable) that two different mollusks have the same chemical in the mucus and share all the other characteristics stated above.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> *Tekhelet*, Dr. Boruch Serman. In correspondence to me he stated that he asked eminent biochemists and they confirmed that if left in the body of the *Murex*, the enzyme could not survive for more than a few hours. Actual experimentation to determine the rapidity of deterioration has not been done to the time of the writing of this article. It is hoped that this shall be done in the not distant future.

<sup>28</sup> Rav Tevgar in his *sefer, K'kil Tekhelet*, argues quite forcefully that this suggestion is untenable, since all mollusks in the Mediterranean have been discovered. This is known because marine biologists have continually searched and

Rav Herzog, in his thesis, argues quite forcefully that this is a fallacious argument, for the following reason.<sup>29</sup> Surely, the *chachmei ha'mishna* were well aware of the dyes produced just north of them in Phoenicia. Now, if the dye produced by the *Murex* is indeed *not* valid, then, just as the *Mishna* admonished against the use of *k'la ilan*, the *Mishna* would have admonished to avoid the use of the "possul" mollusk and would have described the differences between the two species<sup>30</sup> (as the Talmud took the trouble to identify the differences between the *arava*

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continue to search the Mediterranean Sea for new species of all types, and no new species of mollusks have been discovered for many decades (other than on rare occasion have migrated from the Atlantic due to storms or other rare events. The only new discoveries in recent decades have been micro-organisms scarcely visible to the human eye. The likelihood that there is a yet undiscovered mollusk indigenous to the Mediterranean that is the true *chilazon* must be dismissed is more than remote.

Rav Tevgar argues further that the word *chilazon* implies merely that *techelet* must be produced from a snail, not any specific snail, and if in fact there are two different snails that can produce *techelet*, then either would be valid for *techelet*!

<sup>29</sup> *The Royal Purple*, page 74.

<sup>30</sup> Understandably, the concern for the use of *k'la ilan* as a substitute for *techelet* would be a far greater a concern, since plant indigo is inexpensive and *murex* is presumably as expensive as our hypothetical *chilazon*, there would therefore be no profit motive to substitute the real *chilazon* with *murex*. Nonetheless, it stands to reason that if there were two different species both capable of producing an indigo dye and both sharing so many similarities, that the Talmud would have been concerned that an error would be made by those involved in producing the dye in thinking that there is no halachic difference between them and would have warned about this possible error.

and the *zafzafa*<sup>31</sup>). Needless to say, there is no such *Mishna* or *Braissa* that does so. The absence of such a dictum is a strong indication that there was indeed only one known mollusk that was used for the blue dye and if so, this was *Murex*.

### **Rejection of *Sepia* as *Chilazon***

As mentioned earlier, the Radziner Rebbe, Rav Gershon Henoch Leiner, identified the *chilazon* as the common cuttlefish, *Sepia officinalis*. He amassed impressive evidence to prove this, and in fact, many were convinced by the weight of his evidence and the strength of his conviction.<sup>32</sup>

Rav Yitzchok Herzog, who studied Rav Leiner's *sefer* with great interest, subjected his argument to rigorous analysis. He obtained some samples of the Radziner *techelet* and sent them to three different laboratories in three different countries, for chemical analysis. The results astonished him. It turned out that all three laboratories came to the same conclusion — the dye claimed to be *techelet* was in fact a well known synthetic dye known to the world as “Prussian Blue”, first synthesized in 1704.<sup>33</sup> He then sent a letter to the Radziner's son (Rav Gershon Henoch had passed away in 1891) asking for the exact process by which the *techelet* was made. He received a reply from one of the manufacturers as to the exact method. Rav Herzog's further investigation into the

process led him to understand that the *sepia* ink had little to do with the final product, and that it was the chemicals added to the mixture that was, in fact, the basis for the resultant dye. The *sepia* ink is not a necessary ingredient for the dye produced by this process. Any organic compound will do, and in fact the original Prussian Blue was manufactured using ox blood as one of the ingredients.

Rav Herzog, recognizing the greatness and integrity of the Radziner Rebbe, suggested that Rav Leiner must have enlisted the help of a chemist in order to find the method to change the black ink to blue. The chemist did his best by introducing the chemicals needed to synthesize Prussian Blue<sup>34</sup>. Rav Leiner, assumed that since the added chemicals had no intrinsic color (they were either clear or white) that the blue color is inherent in the black ink. The chemicals added only removed the impurities from the *sepia* ink and what was left behind was a pigment extracted from the *sepia* itself. He was therefore convinced that the Prussian Blue dye that emerged from the squid ink is the *techelet* that he sought for so long.

It is obvious, however, that the secretion of the *chilazon* that makes *techelet* must be the basic dye itself, not an inconsequential ingredient that can be supplied by any organic source.

Although this in itself is more than enough to discredit the Radziner Rebbe's theory, there are quite a number of other

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<sup>31</sup> Sukkah 34a

<sup>32</sup> The Marsham, (the Bezhana Rav, HoRav Sholom Mordechai Schwadron) and Rav Itzel Ponevizer, both universally recognized *gadolei ha'dor*, wore these *Sepia*-dyed *techelet*. Heard from Rav Dovid Kohn.

<sup>33</sup> The chemical formula for Prussian Blue is  $\text{Fe}_4[\text{Fe}(\text{CN})_6]_3 + 12\text{K}^+$ .

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<sup>34</sup> The chemicals added to the mixture are iron, potash, ammonium chloride, muriatic acid, sulfuric acid, and tartaric acid. The only element to which the organic compound (be it *sepia* ink or any other organic substance) contributes is nitrogen.

discrepancies that make this identification highly questionable.

For one, cuttlefish are quite common and were, in fact, a source of common ink at one time.<sup>35</sup> The Talmud indicates that *techelet* was very expensive, so much so that even the few threads for *tzitzit* amounted to an expense.<sup>36</sup> This does not square with cuttlefish ink.

Second, the Talmud says that “the treasures buried in the sands” refers to the *chilazon*.<sup>37</sup> Cuttlefish cannot exist in sand.

Third, the cuttlefish does not have an external shell<sup>38</sup>, and it is appears from the Talmud that the *chilazon* has a hard shell, which needs to be cracked in order to obtain the dye.

Last, the *techelet* is known to be a very permanent dye, while the Prussian Blue will wash out with soap. (The Radziner Rebbe addresses these issues, of course, but gives answers that are quite forced.)

### **Rav Herzog’s Thesis**

As we noted earlier, Rav Herzog’s doctoral thesis was on the subject of *techelet*. After refuting the claim of the Radziner Rebbe, he investigated other possibilities and set forth as a final point, his own hypothesis. In his thesis he came close to suggesting that *Murex trunculus*

was indeed the *chilazon*. However, due to four difficulties in this identification, he was forced to reject *Murex trunculus*. The greatest of the objections is that the dye of *trunculus* is purple, not blue. The second objection is that the dye is not especially permanent. The third objection is based on a statement of the Talmud that “the body of the *chilazon* is like the sea.”<sup>39</sup> Rav Herzog understood this to mean that the color of the *chilazon* is like the color of the sea (blue). *Murex trunculus* shells are not blue but rather a light brown color. The final objection is that it does not appear “once in seventy years” as the Talmud says is the nature of *chilazon*.<sup>40</sup>

The first two objections have, with new knowledge, been adequately answered. As noted earlier, the *trunculus* dye is indeed purple, but if the dye is subjected to sunlight it will turn blue in the dyeing process. The second objection, that it is not especially fast, is simply not so. Rav Herzog was ill informed as to the fastness of the dye by someone who did not study the dye sufficiently.<sup>41</sup> In fact, if properly prepared with the correct reduction agents, (chemicals used to treat wool to absorb the dye) the dye is extraordinarily fast. In a recent test, a thread of *techelet* was bathed for three days in strong bleach solution without the slightest effect.<sup>42</sup> The third objection has been answered by viewing the snail in habitat. The snail in the water will take on a blue-green color due to the sea

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<sup>35</sup> Encyclopedia Brittanica on entry “Cuttlefish.”

<sup>36</sup> Menachot 43b. This is further adduced by the concern for counterfeit *techelet* of indigo, mentioned earlier.

<sup>37</sup> Megillah 6a.

<sup>38</sup> Though it does have an internal shell, called the cuttlebone, one does not need to break this bone in order to get the ink out of the ink sac.

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<sup>39</sup> Menachot 44a

<sup>40</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>41</sup> It is very likely that the dye was tested in cotton, which does not absorb the indigo very well.

<sup>42</sup> Verified by personal experimentation. The dyed wool was soaked in a strong bleach solution. Pure bleach will dissolve the wool itself.

fouling organisms. The snail that Rav Herzog had in hand was evidently cleaned of its fouling and therefore did not have the appearance of the sea.

The last of the objections remains, for we do not know of any comet-like appearance of *Murex trunculus* or *Murex brandaris*. However, several suggestions have been made to explain what the Talmud might have meant by this. In any case, the Rambam, in identifying *techelet* did not mention this as one of the identifying features of the *chilazon*, and the Radziner Rebbe, in identifying *sepia* gave an interpretation that would fit the *Murex* equally well.

It is clear that one did not need to wait seventy years to get the *chilazon*, for an industry existed upon its basis and it is obvious that no industry can exist where the supplies become available only once in seventy years. Rather, it seems that the Talmud is saying that only rarely *chilazon* come up ashore and become available in abundance.

Among some speculative answers as to what this may be; perhaps this could be due to reproductive patterns that we are not yet aware of, or perhaps the Talmud was referring to a rare storm or other such rare occurrence that would cause the *chilazon* to come ashore in large numbers.

Rav Herzog concluded his thesis without an identification of the *chilazon*, but left open a suggestion that it might be a snail called *janthina*, which has a violet colored shell. He suggested that perhaps the mucus of this snail might have the properties needed to create a blue dye. In addition to the blue color of the shell, one other feature is striking with regard to the *janthina*. This species often live in large groups that are attached to one another. In rare occasions, they are known to wash

ashore by the millions. This could easily be what the *gemorra* means by the description of “once in seventy years”, meaning, as we would say, “once in a lifetime”. Rav Herzog noted that the Talmud does not state, when giving the reason for the enormous expense of *techelet*, that the amount of snails needed is immense<sup>43</sup>, but that the occurrence of the species is rare.

Nonetheless, Dr. Sterman writes that modern research has shown that *janthina* could not have been the *chilazon*, for, among other reasons, although it does secrete a blue liquid, it does not produce a dye that can be used to color cloth, for this fluid turns brown after a few minutes and, in addition, is water soluble. Chemists have not found a way to use the secretion as a viable fabric dye.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, this species lives by floating on the water, and will drown underwater. It cannot, therefore, live in the sand and the scriptural description of *sefunei t'munei chol* cannot describe the *janthina*.

### **The Color of Techelet**

While the color of *techelet* is thought to be blue by virtually all, one of the modern scholars who has done pioneering work in this field, Dr. I. Ziederman, (in an article published in *Tchumim* volume 9) has suggested that it is not so. In that same article, he marshals much evidence to prove that *Murex trunculus* is indeed the *chilazon*, but argues

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<sup>43</sup> It does take about 30 *murex trunculus* to extract enough dye for the four threads needed to make one pair of *tzitzis*.

<sup>44</sup> H.K Mienis and E. Spanier, “A Review of the Family Janthinidae in Connection with the Tekhelet Dye,” *The Royal Purple*, p. 197. Confirmed with correspondence between Dr. Sterman and the late Dr. Otto Elsner.

that that the color of *techelet* is not blue but rather a purple with a bluish shade (*segol hanota l'kchol*).

To this, he presents the following argument.

The Talmud asks how one can distinguish between *k'la ilan* and *techelet*.<sup>45</sup> The *gemorra* then gives a method of chemical testing. The threads are soaked in a series of chemicals. If the color does not fade, then it is *techelet*. If it does, then it should be subjected to another series of chemicals. If the color becomes bright again, it is *techelet*. If it remains faded, it is *k'la ilan*.

Now, if the dye obtained from *trunculus* is indeed indigo, then it would seem that it would be impossible for there to be any difference at all between the two. Any chemical that will fade one will fade the other, and similarly. Equally, any chemical that will not fade one will not fade the other.

However, if the color of *techelet* is purple, then we can understand that the artificial *techelet* is made from a combination of the indigo dye with a red dye. It is the red dye that will be affected by the chemicals stated in the *gemorra*, and that is why the pure *techelet* will stay fast while the ersatz *techelet* will fade.

R' Yehudah Rok of Yeshivat Har Etzion, in disagreement with Dr. Zeiderman, brings much evidence that the color of *techelet* is indeed a pure blue. Among his proofs is the fact that Rambam states that the color of *techelet* is the color of the sky, and that the *gemorra* that says the color is like that of the sea. Neither the sky nor the sea are purple or any shade of

purple.<sup>46</sup> Further proof may be adduced from the fact that it has been translated as "blue wool" by tradition, a point raised by Rabbi Leiner in his work against those who have claimed in his time that *techelet* was green or black. The Greek translations, made yet when *techelet* was extant, also translate *techelet* as "*iakinthos*", which, when transliterated into modern language is "hyacinth" which is known to be a blue colored flower.<sup>47</sup>

R' Yehuda Rok, acknowledging that Dr. Zeiderman does have a point, contends, correctly, I believe, that the direct evidence in favor of blue *techelet* far outweighs the indirect evidence he advances to identify *techelet* as purple.

Possible answers to solve the riddle of the chemical testing cited by the *gemorra* may lay in variant methods used

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<sup>46</sup> Zeiderman suggests that immediately after sundown the sky is indeed a shade of purple due to the mixture of the red rays of the sun and the blue sky. Even if so, this does not explain the match with the color of the sea, and with regard to the sky's color seems to be quite forced. The Rambam states clearly the color of the sky while the sun shines. (L'ein ha'shemesh).

<sup>47</sup> Hyacinths come in a variety of colors, however this is a relatively recent phenomena as botanists have cultivated and created many new types of hyacinths. However, even today, most of the hyacinths are blue. Encyclopedia Britannica states, (entry Hyacinth), "Most species have...fragrant flowers that usually are blue but may be pink, white, or other colours in cultivated varieties." We may be sure that if someone wanted to describe a color by the familiar flower, the hyacinth, in ancient times, it was blue that was meant, even if there was, even at that time, variants in the color of the flower. By analogy, if one were to describe a particular color as "the color of the rose" everyone would understand that a deep red color was meant, despite the fact that there are pink, white and yellow roses available in the flower shops.

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<sup>45</sup> Menachot 42b-43a

for dyeing with indigo rather than in the dye itself.<sup>48</sup> It is also possible that although the dye chemical of both the *Murex trunculus* extract and the indigo plant are identical, nonetheless, the impurities that are inherent in both the animal and vegetable materials may have some effect upon the take of the dye into the fabric.

### Other Objections

One of the major points raised by Rav Leiner in support of his theory is that the Rambam states<sup>49</sup> that the color of the secretion of the *chilazon* is black like ink<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> In correspondence to me Dr. Sterman wrote the following: "Though we are not one hundred percent certain, it would appear that snail *tekhelet* and indigo were reduced in different ways. *Tekhelet*, since it comes from a snail, may have been reduced chemically using lead and tin pots with the sulfuric reducing agent found in the glands of the snails. (This seems to be what Pliny describes) Indigo, on the other hand, comes from a plant and has no protiens or sulfur compounds. Up till a few tens of years ago in America, and still in some African countries, indigo is reduced by fermentation, using bran, madder and sugars to cultivate the bacteria necessary to reduce the dye. These differences may have had something to do either with the way that the dye adhered to the wool, or perhaps to some extraneous chemicals found in the dyed wool (maybe in the snail *tekhelet*, or just as possibly in the plant indigo.)

<sup>49</sup> Hilchot Tzitzit 2:1

<sup>50</sup> It should be noted that we do not know the source for the Rambam, a point that led Rav Leiner to speculate that the Rambam had himself discovered the *sepia* and obtained *techelet* from it-for otherwise how would he have known that the 'blood' of the *chilazon* is black. There is no known *midrash* or any other source that indicates that the color of the 'blood' of the *chilazon* is black. One can only speculate that the Rambam took this information from a secular source, (as he did in a few other cases with regard to factual matters as he states himself at the end of *Hilchot Kidush Hachodesh* which was taken from

This identifies quite well with *sepia* and not at all with *Murex trunculus*. On the other hand, however, *Rashi* and *Tosafot*<sup>51</sup> both seem to state that the color of the *chilazon* extract was blue, not black,<sup>52</sup> a point

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Ptolemaean astronomy), and that this source was, perhaps, itself either corrupted or faulty. In fact, Aristotle does say that "in the northern part they give a black dye and in the southern parts red". Vitruvius, a Aristotilian scholar, says that Aristotle was referring to the color of the dye, not the shell of the mollusk. (Aristotle, *Di Animalibus Historia* p. 175). Rav Herzog makes the same speculation page 77.

<sup>51</sup> Menachot 42b. See also *Eyn Hatechelet* section 22 for a discussion concerning the Rashi and *Tosafot*.

<sup>52</sup> Where the *Breita* tells us, "One brings the 'blood' of the *chilazon* and chemicals," Rashi states that it is the manner of dyers to soak the wool in *tzarif* to enable the wool to absorb the dye. Now, if *Rashi* would agree to the Rambam that the 'blood' of the *chilazon* is black, there would be no need to explain the need of the chemicals brought with the 'blood' of the *chilazon* to be for the sake of the wool, as it is needed for the dye color itself! *Tosafot, ad. loc.*, ask how the use of chemicals is allowed in the *chilazon* blood. Wouldn't the chemicals be an additive to a pure substance, and therefore render the dye *possul*? *Tosafot* answer, "perhaps the *techelet* is by its definition a mixture of these chemicals." Now, if the 'blood' of the *chilazon* is black, then the question of *Tosafot* doesn't begin. Of course chemicals are needed, for without the chemicals the *chilazon* 'blood' produces the wrong color!

In fact, in order to dye with the *murex*, as with any vat dyeing process, chemicals do need to be added to the dye itself. Dyes are, by nature, insoluble in water, for a colorant that is soluble in water would not be much good as a dye, as it would wash out of the cloth when soaked in water. This leads to a problem. How do you get the dye into the fabric? In order to soak or cook the dye into the fabric, you do need to dissolve the dye in water. A dye cannot be both water soluble and insoluble at the same time! The solution to this problem is to alter the chemical make-up of the dye temporarily by reducing the dye (that is, to introduce a base

conceded by Rav Leiner in his *sefer, Eyn Techelet*<sup>53</sup>.

Another objection can be deduced from a notable statement of Rabbenu Bachya with regard to why silk was not used in the construction of the *mishkan*.<sup>54</sup> He answers that silk, since it is derived from a worm, which an impure species, would not be fitting for the *mishkan*. He then asks that if so, why is *tola'as shani* used to make the red wool? He answers that the color does not come from the worm itself, but from a shell in which the worm is contained. Evidently, Rabbenu Bachya would have to assume that the *chilazon* is also a type of a kosher species, for otherwise how could it be valid for the use of dyeing the *bigdei k'huna* and the *mishkan* itself?<sup>55</sup> However, Rashi says explicitly that the *chilazon* is a type of

*tola'as* (worm).<sup>56</sup> It does not seem possible to reconcile Rashi's opinion with that of Rabbenu Bachya. In matters of fact, such as whether or not *chilazon* is a kosher species, both cannot be correct.

Another objection that can be raised is that the Talmud states that "the body of the *chilazon* is like the sea and its creation is like a fish."<sup>57</sup> How does this statement square with *Murex trunculus*?

The first half of that statement has been discussed earlier, that the color of the shell, in the water, is indeed like the color of the sea. The second part of the statement was taken by Rav Leiner to mean that the nature of the species is similar to that of a fish, a fact that can easily be regarded as consistent with *Sepia officinalis*, but in which way could this be true with regard to *Murex trunculus*? Perhaps the "creation" means its coming into being, i.e. its method of birth. *Murex trunculus*, like fish, are spawned from eggs.

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chemical that will remove the oxygen from the chemical compound that is the dye, and change it into a different chemical temporarily). This new chemical will be water soluble. The fabric is soaked in the reduced solution (which, in this case, will have a green color) until the fabric has well absorbed the dye. When the fabric is then removed from the water, the oxygen from the air will combine with the reduced dye and it will revert back to its original chemical makeup, turning back to the blue indigo. The transformation is immediate and complete.

<sup>53</sup> He says that we can ignore both Rashi and *Tosafot*. Since both did not have the *chilazon* they were unable to do anything but guess at the color of the dye, and blue would be a logical assumption. The Rambam, who says that it is black, must have had a better source for his information.

<sup>54</sup> *Rabbenu Bachya al HaTorah -Parshat Trumah*.

<sup>55</sup> The same objection can be made with regard to *sepia*. Rav Leiner treats this objection at length in *Eyn Ha'techelet*.sections 9-20.

### **Other Halachic Considerations**

When the Radziner Rebbe took his findings to the *gedolei Yisroel* of his time, he met with some measure of resistance. Among the most significant responses were those of the Kutna Rav (Rav Yisroel Yehoshua Trunk, known as Reb Yehoshua Kutna, author of *Yeshuos Malko*) and the Brisker Rav, Rav Yosef Ber Soloveichik (author of *Bet Halevi*).

The Kutna Rav's rejection was based on the fact that the dye was made with added chemicals, and he quoted Rashi and *Tosafot* as inferring that the color of

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<sup>56</sup> Sanhedrin 91a

<sup>57</sup> Menachot 44b

the extract of the *chilazon* itself was the dye color.

As we have seen, the Kutna Rav's argument was exactly on target. His suspicion, that the chemicals added were the main coloring agent and that the *sepia* was therefore not the *chilazon* was the very same objection that Rabbi Herzog raised and substantiated. However, this objection cannot be said with regard to the *Murex trunculus*, as it is indeed blue before any chemicals are added, and the chemicals that are added to enable the dyeing process do not affect the outcome of the dye itself.

The *Bet Haleivi's* objection is a more complicated one. In fact, exactly what he said is also a matter of disagreement, and quite unverifiable, since there is no written record. His letter to the Radziner was not printed verbatim in the Radziner's third *sefer*, but was paraphrased. Rav Yosef Ber Soloveichick had a somewhat different version regarding the objection of his great-grandfather.<sup>58</sup>

According to the Radziner Rebbe, the objection of the Brisker Rav was as follows. In order to accept that *Sepia officinalis* is the *chilazon*, we will have to explain why it was not available during the 13 centuries that it was not used. For if it was available, then the very fact that it was not used during this entire time is ample proof that *Sepia* is in fact not the *chilazon*.

The Radziner countered that he did indeed explain that the science of making a blue dye out of the black ink was indeed lost, and that it was only after much effort

that he rediscovered the process. In addition, the identification of the fish itself would have been lost over the period of time, since the loss of one element (the process) would have eventually resulted in the loss of the second (the identification of the species).

It would appear that the Brisker Rav was not satisfied with this answer, for the *sepia* is a common sea animal and was available in many places in the world where Jews lived. Evidently, it did not seem reasonable to him that the *sepia* would be so unavailable that the science of making the dye would have ever been lost.

This objection does not apply to *Murex trunculus*, which is an uncommon species. Had a generation elapsed without Jews in northern Israel, as did happen in the sixth century of the common era, then the identification of this species would have been forgotten to all the sages who lived in Bavel and other countries of the Diaspora.

According to Rav Yosef Ber Soloveichick, the objection was much more basic. The reason he did not accept *sepia* was simply because we no longer have a *mesorah* with regard to the identity of *chilazon* and without a *mesorah*, we cannot know that we have identified the *chilazon*.

The Radziner did not counter this objection because it wasn't presented to him. However, one might argue on his behalf that one does not need absolute certainty in *halacha* with regard to the establishment of a factual matter, but rather all that is ever needed is a reasonable basis. Indeed, the principle of *rov* (that we follow the majority) or *chazaka* (that we follow the *status quo*), the two most used instruments of *halacha* in matters of *issur* and *heter*, are prime examples of where the *halacha* instructs us to follow reasonable

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<sup>58</sup> See *Nefesh Harav* by HaRav Hershel Shechter. It is quite possible, of course, that he had two objections, and only the stronger objection was communicated in writing to Rav Leiner, while the second was communicated orally to his son and remained a family tradition.

assumptions even though there is no certainty of fact.

The halachic basis for identifying *chilazon* is simple — the evidence has created an *umdana d'muchach*, a relative certainty that exceeds the power of *rov*. *Rov* is not sufficient a basis, for example, to decide a monetary issue against a defendant (*muchzak*) yet an *umdana d'muchach* can be sufficient evidence according to some opinions.<sup>59</sup> If so, in matters of *mitzvot* or even matters of *issur*, where *rov* is sufficient to determine a matter of fact, all the more so may one rely upon an *umdanah d'muchach*.

Moreover, although it must be acknowledged that *mesorah* is a very strong force in *halacha*, by no means does a *mesorah* create a certainty of fact. For example, what could be a greater matter of *mesorah* than the method of making *t'fillin*? Only *soferim* are involved and each *sofer* was trained by a older *sofer*. Yet, although the order of the *parshiot* in a set of *t'fillin* must be correct for the *t'fillin* to be valid, there is a lack of absolute certainty as to what is the correct order, with no fewer than four differing opinions.<sup>60</sup> If the

*halacha* would demand absolute certainty in the essential elements of a mitzvah, then we would not wear *t'fillin* today because there is an area of disagreement as to the correct order of the *parshiot*. But we do wear *t'fillin*. Evidently, the framework of *halacha* allows for the possibility of error, and instructs us to follow the most reasonable likelihood, be it based *on rov*, *chazaka*, *umdana*, or any method of determination of fact accepted within the halachic framework.

### Conclusion

The argument for identifying *chilazon* as *Murex trunculus* has much merit. However, it cannot be said this identification can be 100% absolute, both with regard to the species or even with regard to the color. Nonetheless, the element of certainty would seem to surpass the threshold needed for identification *l'halacha*. Moreover, there is no *issur* in wearing a blue colored thread in the *tzitzit*, even if it turns out that this is not *techelet*, a point made poignantly by the Radziner Rebbe, in his *sefer*, *Ptil Techelet*.<sup>61</sup>

As with anything that is not definite, this matter is likely to be controversial for a long time to come. It is likely that in future years there will be some *rabbonim* who will say that one is required to wear *techelet* made of *Murex trunculus*, others who will say that it is a *mitzvah*, but not an obligation, others who will say that it is a *chumrah*, or a *mitzva min hamuvchar*. Many, undoubtedly will say that there is no

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<sup>59</sup> See statement of Shmuel Bava Batra 93a. It should be noted that a reverse *s'vara* is stated there according to Rav, however in matters of jurisprudence, the halacha follows Shmuel.

<sup>60</sup> There is the dispute between the Rabbenu Tam and Rashi whether the order is *Kadesh, V'haya ki Yeviacha, Shma, V'haya im Shamo*, or *Kadesh, V'haya ki Yeviacha, V'haya im Shamo, Shma*. In addition, there is the opinion of the *Shimusha Rabba* that the order is right to left from the standpoint of the one who wears the *t'fillin* rather than (as assumed in practice and based on our text of the Talmud) from the standpoint of the reader (facing the one who wears the *t'fillin*.) This makes, therefore two possibilities for each of the two orders.

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<sup>61</sup> As Rav Leiner states in his *Sefer, Ayn HaTechelet*, and in *Ptil Techles*, the curse meted out for those who use *k'la ilan* in their *tzitzis* and claim that they are wearing *techelet*, is meant for those who are intent upon deception, not those who are making a sincere attempt of fulfilling the *mitzvah*.

*mitzvah* whatsoever, and that it is a waste of money and effort and still others who will find some *issur* to wear *Murex trunculus techelet*. Undoubtedly, Radziner chassidim will continue to maintain that *sepia* is the *chilazon* and *techelet* made of any other species is *possul*.<sup>62</sup>

If I may offer my own humble opinion it would seem that this identification ought to be accepted by many, if not the majority of *poskim*. But it will likely take much time for this to happen, for halacha is by its very nature conservative, and in general, a consensus is reached only after much debate and deliberation. For the meantime, until a consensus is reached, each *rav* should do according to the dictates of his own reasoning. If after careful study of all the material he is skeptical, there is no reason for him to wear *techelet* made from *Murex trunculus* or instruct others to do so. If, on the other hand, one is reasonably convinced that *Murex trunculus* is indeed the *chilazon*, he should wear them, and rule so for those who ask and rely upon his rulings.

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<sup>62</sup> Chassidim are known for their *emunas chachamim* and it would be highly unlikely that they would question the conclusion of their *rebbe*. It should be noted, however, that Rav Leiner himself stated that he would accept any reasonable argument that would prove his identification wrong and another identification right. It is more than likely that were the Radziner *rebbe* to be alive today he would have abandoned his own thesis and adopted the present one.