

While some people dream of the future, others are still trying to understand the past. When archaeologist Shimon Gibson invited me to discuss his most recent discovery, he certainly roused my curiosity. He was leading an important excavation on Mount Zion, the westernmost section of Jerusalem in the Second Temple period, and wanted my opinion regarding something he had found. The address he gave me was a modest building in a quiet Jerusalem neighborhood. As soon as I opened the front door, however, I realized that this was no ordinary apartment.

On every wall, from floor to ceiling, shelves bulged under the weight of countless bags of potsherds and other fragments. This storeroom held the finds from the Mount Zion dig, where researchers meticulously catalogued and stored the collected material, no matter how big or small, with the expectation that scholars one day will study the items and glean important historical lessons from some broken piece or weathered artifact.

Gibson took down one bag from the unending array and emptied its contents onto the kitchen table. What spilled out were not broken bits of pottery but rather shells—which I immediately recognized as *Murex trunculus*. Gibson explained that the dig had unearthed a few dozen of them, scattered around the Mount Zion site, and they dated to the first century, when the Temple of Herod still stood. The area, Gibson told me, situated close to the Temple, had served as a housing complex for priests and their families. In

## THE RAREST BLUE



*Murex shell (first century) found on Mount Zion* PHOTO BY E. WEISBERG

support of his assertion that this site once housed priests, Gibson had uncovered a ritual bath in the area as well as a beautiful stone cup with a cryptic ten-line inscription carved into it, presumably part of a purification ceremony.

But what possible purpose, the archaeologist asked, could these shells have played here, and how did they make their way up the mountains to Jerusalem, a hundred miles from their habitat in the Mediterranean? The Temple enterprise required enormous amounts of murex dye to produce *tekhelet* for the clothes of all the priests and for the wall coverings and other decorative fabrics used in the building. Could the priests have brought the snails up from the coast to carry out the dyeing in Jerusalem? Gibson asked. It seemed unlikely.

## ONLY GOD CAN TELL

Such an undertaking would have required transporting vast quantities of snails and keeping them alive for the duration of the journey because the dye can be extracted only from live animals. Further, the shell specimens he showed me from the dig remained whole. If they had been used for dyeing, they would have exhibited telltale breakages testifying to the extraction of the dye glands. Lastly, the smell that resulted from dyeing proved almost unbearable, so the process usually took place far from the center of a city. No, the dyeing would have been carried out close to the sea, where the snails could be stored alive until needed; where necessary ingredients, such as salt, occurred in abundance; and where no one but dyers would have to abide the stench.

Gibson offered another thought. Perhaps the shells served a more mundane purpose: advertising. Since the Temple would have been a primary consumer of the blue dye, a priest or priests would have bought or arranged to buy the colored wool. They would travel to the coast and bring back the valuable material to be processed and spun in Jerusalem or nearby before being fashioned into the fabrics needed in the Temple. As merchants dealing in *tekhelet* for Temple purposes, they no doubt would have provided the blue strings of the tzitzit worn by the general public for religious purposes. Perhaps, as a striped barbershop pole advertises haircutting services, a snail shell outside a door declared to the public, “*tekhelet* sold here.”

Priests probably did provide *tekhelet* strings for the tzitzit of the population at large, but I suggested that the shells’ function would

have been one not of marketing but rather of authorization. The correct analogy was not a sign announcing a service but rather a certificate of authenticity, conveying to the customer that he was getting the genuine article. Ancient buyers indeed had reason to beware, and they would have demanded proof that the *tekhelet* being sold came, as it properly should, from a murex snail. Then, as now, there was a trade in fraudulent religious objects—in this case counterfeit dye that unscrupulous merchants tried to pass off as authentic *tekhelet*. Cautious customers wanted to know that they weren't paying premium prices for fake blue strings known as *kala ilan*.

“The Holy One, blessed be He, will exact vengeance from him who attaches to his garment threads dyed with *kala ilan* and maintains that they are genuine *tekhelet*.”<sup>50</sup> The Talmud uses this ominous threat to intimidate the unprincipled dealers who sold the counterfeit blue dye. Rabbis frowned upon dishonest behavior, of course, but this particular fraud could lead to overt violations of two biblical laws.

The first, from the book of Numbers, we know: that all the children of Israel affix the thread of blue to the corners of their garments; the second: “You shall not wear cloth combining wool and linen.”<sup>51</sup> The one exception applies to the *tekhelet* strings of tzitzit. These blue woolen strings could be attached to a linen garment, and that was the common practice. The law is clear on both counts; only *tekhelet* obtained from the *hillazon* marine creature qualifies for ritual use in the tzitzit, and the only wool that can be worn with linen is the *tekhelet* strings of the tzitzit.