

Letter to the Editor

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Bio

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Having spent much spare time over the past several years studying murex trunculus *techelet*, I was most gratified to find that I had arrived at the same conclusion, and for many of the same reasons, as Dr. Mendel E. Singer; namely that murex trunculus is not the *chilazon*.

Although the space of a letter does not permit some of the other arguments against murex trunculus, nevertheless, allow me to add some points to Dr. Singer's essay.

On page 11, Dr. Singer writes about the small amount of dye produced by a single murex snail, only 4 or 5 drops. It should be pointed out that the discussion about the culpability for *disha* in *Shabbat 75a* is thus completely without basis, since the minimal volume required for culpability is that of a *grogrit*, a dried fig. And clearly, the Gemara is discussing extracting the mucus of a single *chilazon*.

On page 16, Dr. Singer assumes that the "*nartik*" or *malvush* of the *Midrashim* is a shell. Despite the fact that we lack an adequate explanation for these words, there is only the one opinion, that of Rabbi Binyomin Mosufa, that *nartik* means a shell. All the other *Rishonim* and *Acharonim* refer to the *chilazon* as a fish, ignoring the word *nartik*. No doubt this is because there is a perfectly good word for snail in the Mishnah *Shabbat 77b*, "*shavlul*". This is also used in an Aramaic form in the Gemara *Menachot 42b*, "*shavlulita*". The contention that the Sages of the Talmud held the *chilazon* in their hands, and did not use the word snail for it, but chose to call it a fish, is completely untenable.

On page 17, Dr. Singer discusses the meaning of the word "*potze'a*", and he accepts Rabbi Herzog's understanding that there is a connotation in *potze'a* of cracking a hard shell. Sad to say, Rabbi Herzog was inexplicably mistaken in this understanding. In both biblical and mishnaic usage, *potze'a* carries no connotation of a hard object. One of numerous such examples is the Mishnah *Ketubot 43b*, "*Patza'a Bifaneha*", "he wounded her face". According to the Radak's *Sefer Hasharoshim*, *Potze'a* refers to incising a smooth surface, splitting, cutting, wounding, or causing a fissure. See also Rashi, *Shemot 21:25* and *Shir Hashirim 5:7*. It is the usage of "splitting", that is found in *Shabbat 122b*, "*Lifzo'a Egozim*", to split, not to crack, nuts.

A small experiment demonstrates why the Gemara there speaks of using a *kurnos*, a blacksmith's hammer, for opening nuts. When a walnut is struck smartly with a light ¼ lb. Hammer along the seam where the halves join, the shell at the contact point is crushed. But when it is merely tapped with a heavy 1 ¼ lb. Hammer, it splits in half all the way around.

In other places *potze'a* is used for splitting the limbs from a tree or splitting a stretched string.

On page 19, Dr. Singer discussed the color of the "blood". The murex mucus is not blood, neither biologically nor in color. P'til advocates attempt to cope with this problem by writing the word thus, "blood". The implication here is that the "ancients" were imprecise in their use of language. However, there happen to be excellent words used in the Talmud for mucus: *Rir*, *Leicha*, and *Maya* are some of them.

On page 22, Dr. Singer quotes Dr. Ziderman that it is absurd to think that non-Jews would use murex dye, when indigo was available. IN this reasoning Dr. Ziderman was already preceded in the response of the Radbaz. But the most trenchant proof is from the prophet Yechezkel, who informs us in chapter 27 verse 7 that in the sixth century B.C.E., at the height of the Tyrean commercial hegemony over the Mediterranean Basin, Tyre was importing, not manufacturing *techelet*.

On page 27, Dr. Singer writes of the silence of the Gemara about the murex. The *Beit HaLevi* of Brisk, quoted in the forward to *Ein Hatechelet* page 13, rejected the Radzyner's *techelet* based on a most penetrating question. He asked, how is it possible that the *mesorah* (tradition) could have been lost, that this commonly available squid is in fact the fabulous *chilazon*? And since it is common, the *Beit HaLevi* continued, then there is a *mesorah* that the squid is not the *chilazon*!

Tyrean dye faces even more severe objections, since it was massively produced throughout the Middle East, and continued to be produced in Constantinople until May 29, 1453. Beside the omission from the Talmud, there is not one hint by Rashi, the Rambam, or any other *Rishon*, that Tyrean purple manufactured in the sunlight was actually the much sought-after *techelet*. The proposition that the sages of the Talmud and the *Rishonim* were

ignorant of facts on a subject of deep concern to them, facts that were commonly known in the world around them, is a proposition that is impossible to accept.

In note 11, Dr. Singer pronounces P'til Techelet's efforts as "inspiring". I find their efforts rather distressing. P'til is attempting to foist on an unexpert public a halachic practice through marketing methods and thereby establish the precedent of a *Minhag*. At the same time, their stand ignores the words of the *Rishonim* and exhibits a cavalier attitude towards the Gemara itself. The Gemara *Menachot* that gives the description of the *chilazon* is dismissed by P'til as "homiletic". If P'til succeeds, they will have contaminated the halachic process.