

The colour blue

The children of Israel were commanded to “make them fringes in the borders [RV mg., tassels in the corners] of their garments throughout their generations, and . . . put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband [RV, cord] of blue: and it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the LORD, and do them” (Num. 15:38,39). Evidently the blue of the cord was meant to remind them of the sky above, as opposed to the red earth beneath, and, by extension, of heaven, the dwelling-place of God, the giver of their Law.

Orthodox Jews today wear a rectangular garment, with a central hole for the head, under their other clothes. The corners of the garment have a fringe, made up from looped and knotted white threads. Likewise Jewish prayer shawls, known as *tallithim*, have these fringes. They are white, not blue, because Jewish tradition dictated that the blue dye to be used was to be obtained from a particular creature called a *hilazon*. At the time of the Muslim conquest of Palestine, the seventh century A.D., the identity of the *hilazon* was lost, and so the rabbis decreed that white thread should be used instead. There is, however, nothing special about the blue in Numbers 15; the Hebrew word *tekeleth* is the normal, indeed the only, word for blue in the Old Testament.

The *hilazon* used by Jewish tradition as the source of blue dye is assumed to be a mollusc, and the word serves as the Hebrew for ‘snail’ today. The idea of using molluscs to produce dye is not new; it has been known for some time that the *murex* sea snail was the source of the purple dye which was prized in ancient times, and which is referred to in both Old and New Testaments. Now, thanks to the research of a Russian-born Orthodox Jew called Eliyahu Tauger, it is believed that the *murex* sea snail is in fact the *hilazon* of Jewish tradition, being the source of both purple and blue.

Tauger compared what is said about *hilazon* in Jewish texts with what is known of the habits of the *murex* snail, and found them to be similar. With the aid of scuba divers he obtained *murex* snails and found that they can be used to produce blue dye as well as purple dye. The dye comes from the secretions of a small gland in the snail, and the purple colour produced initially by these secretions gradually changes to a bright sky-blue on further exposure to sunlight.

Tauger and others have set up a business producing sets of blue fringes for prayer shawls, and have sold hundreds worldwide. Though some rabbis have expressed doubts, many in the Orthodox Jewish community are happy to buy them in order to be able to conform for the first time with the law of Numbers 15:38, as interpreted by Jewish tradition.

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