

# THE QUEST FOR THE HOLY SNAIL



By Baruch Sterman

The story of the rediscovery of the source for the dye *tekhelet* - Biblical blue - is one of intrigue, deception, deduction and luck. It weaves together clues from archaeology, chemistry and Biblical scholarship.

The Bible bids the children of Israel to "make themselves fringes on the corners of their garments... And they shall place upon the corner fringes a thread of *tekhelet*".

To the Jewish people, the blue thread on their *tsitsit* signified their relationship to God and His laws. The Talmud says: "Whoever observes the commandment of *tsitsit*, is considered as if he greeted the Divine Presence, for

*tekhelet* resembles the sea, and the sea resembles the sky, and the sky resembles God's holy throne".

In ancient times, coloured dyes were rare and valuable, but the most prized of all were the purples and blues derived from mollusks, literally worth their weight in gold. These precious dyes were reserved for royalty; they coloured the robes of kings and princes of Median, Babylon, Egypt and



Greece, and to wear them was to identify with nobility.

The Mediterranean coast was the centre of the dyeing industry in the ancient world. The Talmud records that the *hilazon* - the mollusk source of the blue dye - was to be found along the northern shores of Palestine. The Phoenicians made their wealth trading in the dyestuff, and dye houses were ubiquitous in the region. Because of its lucrative nature, dyeing slowly came under imperial control. The Romans issued edicts that only royalty could wear purple and blue garments and only imperial dye houses were permitted to manufacture the material. This oppression drove the Jewish *tekhelet* making industry underground. With the Arab conquest of Pales-

tine (683 CE) the secret of *tekhelet* was essentially lost.

Jews continued to wear fringes on their garments (as they still do today), but as the Midrash (circa 750 CE) laments: "*and now we have only white, for the tekhelet has been hidden*". The description of the *hilazon* was recorded by the Talmud in various, sometimes esoteric passages. Its distinguishing features were that it had a shell, that it could be found along the northern coast of Palestine, and that its body was "*similar to the sea*".

The main characteristics of the *tekhelet* were its colour, which was similar to the sky and sea, the steadfast nature of the dye, and that it was indistinguishable from the fraudulent dye of vegetable origin, *kala ilan* - indigo.

The rediscovery of Biblical blue was due to a chance encounter in 1858. The French zoologist Henri de Lacaze-Duthiers was on a scientific expedition when one of the fishermen on his boat took a snail, broke it open and smeared it on his shirt. He boasted that the yellow stain would soon turn blue in the sunlight. Lacaze-Duthiers immediately realised that the snail was the long lost source of the ancient dyes. Subsequent investigation led to the identification of the species *Murex Trunculus* as the source of the ancient *tekhelet*.

In 1887, unaware of Lacaze-Duthiers' findings, Gershon Henokh Leiner, a Hasidic Rebbe from the Russian-Polish town of Radzyn, wrote a small pamphlet announcing that he was to begin searching for the lost *hilazon*, in an

