

# Letters to the Editor

CONTINUED

## Rabbi Herzog and blue-dye process

In commenting on my researches, as described in Thea Valman's article (June 19) on the blue *techelet* cords for tsitsit tassels, Rabbi David H. Lincoln (July 10) claims that "Rabbi Herzog was strongly opposed to attempts to bring back the *techelet*."

In Rabbi Isaac Halevy Herzog's address of 1919, referred to in Rabbi Lincoln's letter, we read: "If, for the present, all hope is to be abandoned of rediscovering the *techelet* species among the members of the *genera murex* and *purpura*, it might not be amiss to look for the same within the confines of the *genus janthina*..."

"Pending further research, which, let us hope, will one day be undertaken along the Palestinian and Syrian coasts by specialists from the future Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the suggested identification is deserving of serious examination."

In 1953, Rabbi Herzog issued the following endorsement (my translation, from Leiner's "Techelet Betsitsit Beyameynu," 1954):

"I hereby certify that on Monday, Kislev 6, 5713, Chasidim of Radzin presented before me in my home the fish called *sepia officinalis* that the illustrious sage, Rabbi Gershon Hanoch Leiner, of blessed memory — the Admor of Radzin — had identified as the shellfish with whose blood the *techelet* was dyed."

"They removed from it its black secretion and placed some completely colourless chemicals in a pot of water upon a fire; and finally, they put the above secretion in that water and placed in that mixture white threads that came out blue after a minute."

Although the "Radzin" blue itself proved to be a synthetic artefact unknown in antiquity, Rabbi Herzog's encouragement of attempts to renew *techelet* have served as a seminal inspiration and validation for my current solution of the *techelet* quandary.

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Thea Valman's informative article prompts me to comment on the origin of the Hebrew names of both the country that produced the dye — Canaan — and the mollusc — the *chilazon* — from which it was extracted.

The Canaanites were a seafaring people whose most lucrative industry was the extraction of purple dye from molluscs native to its shores, between present-day Haifa and Tyre.

Because the mollusc's name in Canaanite comprised the root letters *kaf*, *nun*, *ayin*, meaning "to crawl" (the same letters having a similar meaning in Hebrew), it is thought that the mollusc, so vital to the country's economy, gave Canaan its name.

In the ancient world, strong dyes for textiles were expensive, and the Canaanites sold their product to wealthy patrician families in countries on the Mediterranean coast. Those who could afford robes of this colour were "raised to the purple."

The Greeks likened the colour to the blood of their legendary bird, the Phoenix — meaning "purple" — and called the Canaanite mariners Phoenicians, and their country Phoenicia.

As for the mollusc, its Hebrew name, *chilazon*, may have a similar origin.

Using a linguistic approach known as metathesis — the rearrangement of letters in a word without changing its meaning, such as *keves* and *kesev*, both meaning "sheep" — the root letters of *chilazon* (*chet*, *lamed*, *zayin*) may have been transposed from *zayin*, *chet*, *lamed* (*zachel*) which in Hebrew also means "to crawl."

This not only provides support to *techelet* being extracted from the same mollusc as the purple dye of the "Phoenicians," but, by including it in the tsitsit, substance was given to the concept of the Israelites being "of the purple" — the Chosen People.

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# Religion is not the only way

One of the marvels of this modern age is the modem, the gadget which allows me to set out what passes for my thoughts on my computer screen each week, press a button and know that, seconds later, those thoughts have appeared on the editor's own screen.

Convenient, yes; sociable, no. The modem means I've never been into the Farnival Street offices of Britain's favourite Jewish weekly. I've no idea whether the place is run by short, pale men in dusty gaberdine suits who peer through thick spectacles at the pages they painstakingly set out, or by sharp young types who run around the place shouting: "Quick — hold page three! I gotta rewrite on the Gants Hill counterfeit lokshen gang!"

But I do know that, somewhere in Farnival Street, there will be an office door, musty old oak or modern laminate I know not, bearing the label: "Circulation Manager." And here will labour the man or woman who knows how many of us lie about the JC. Indeed, he or she may be the only person who does know the full extent of our lying.

Because we do lie, you know. Just as there are thousands of Sun readers who will only ever admit to having seen a mate's copy or Sport on Sunday readers who swear they found their copy on the back seat of the bus, so you'd be amazed by the number of letters I get from people who say: "I read in your column last week (my grandmother gets the JC)..." or "Leafing through a copy of the JC at my dentist's the other day, I noticed..."

I don't know why it should be that some people take such great pains to point out that they don't actually pay for the paper. But it was ever thus. I can remember, over 25 years ago, telling a friend about a piece in the JC colour supplement about Jewish pop stars (in which the full-page picture of Cat Stevens was dispensed with in the single, memorable line: "Many think that Cat Stevens's real name is Steven Katz. It isn't.") and making sure that he knew that it wasn't my copy.

The paper is a different paper now, of course, and not just because Ask the Rabbi has been converted into an afternoon chat show and retitled "Vanessa." But, like the JC buyers who pretend they aren't, there are some things which never change about the paper.

For as long as I can remember, there has been a regular piece in the news section based on the latest estimate of the number of Jews in Britain. Or, rather, not a piece: a series of pieces. The first will quote the Board of Deputies to the effect that, since the last time they counted, 3,270 British Jews have disappeared.

A spokesman will say that he was sure they were there last time he looked, but he popped out for



JOHN DIAMOND

five minutes to get a sandwich (OK, 10 minutes maximum) and, when he came back, they'd gone.

The next week there will be a piece from an outfit called The Children of Abraham saying the Jews didn't disappear at all. They just stopped calling themselves Jews. And why did they stop? Because they were embarrassed to call themselves Jewish. And why are they embarrassed? Because we don't do enough to maintain the pride in our faith that we used to have.

The next week, it will be the turn of the rabinate who will say it has nothing to do with pride and everything to do with practice. We are losing Jews, they will argue, because young Jews are not being inculcated with the proper religious values.

The week after that it will be the turn of the letter writers. There will be a series of letters from Rabbi Stern "Stern" Sternbaum, the leader of the Cheerless Synagogue of North London (Motto: "If we were goyim, we'd be Jesuits"), and his supporters, explaining that we can only stop the communi-

ty from losing stray Jews by chaining them to the wall as talmudic commentaries are read to them, in Aramaic, over loudspeakers.

There will be a letter from Rabbi Jason Cool ("Hey — just call me Jase, OK?") of the Incredibly Liberal Synagogue of Notting Hill Gate, in which he will explain that, if you insist, as he does, that the congregation turns up in Bermuda shorts and listens to sermons taken from Cosmo and Loaded, then the youngsters will flock back.

I am, God knows, no theologian, but it occurred to me 25 years ago, as it occurs to me now: they're all wrong. I offer myself as an example; 15 or 20 years ago I wouldn't have been able to write this column. I never denied that I was Jewish but it wasn't an adjective I thought had much to do with me.

That I now find that, most weeks, I have something to say, however peripherally, about Judaism, isn't a question of my having found, in middle age, my missing faith. That I want my children to have some idea of their Jewish heritage isn't the clichéd act of a penitent, crawling back to God as his own mortality becomes apparent.

It is because I have found a way of being the cultural Jew I am which I'm comfortable with. A way, indeed, which is something like the Jewish equivalent of Anglicanism. In so many of the debates I hear about the need to use religion to claw back the recalcitrant Jews, the assumption is made that, because we live in a Christian country, we live in a society where the Christian religion is practised. It isn't.

Something like 15 per cent of the population are active churchgoers although 65 per cent express themselves as members of a Christian church. The trick that Anglicanism has worked, and the one which has let it remain the established religion for so long, is that it has allowed those brought up in its culture to happily describe themselves as C of E without it being assumed that they are therefore active evangelists ready to rush forward with the tambourine at a moment's notice.

Judaism in Britain hasn't been able to work the same trick. It insists on operating as if those who disappear from the synagogues on Saturday pitch up again in the churches on Sunday. They don't. They become people for whom Judaism means religion and for whom religion has no relevance. Tell people that, in order to be Jewish, they have to believe that which they simply don't believe and they'll stop being Jewish.

Only when we find a way of allowing people to be as Jewish as most Anglicans are Christian will we start finding those lost Jews.

## 39 poles, 7 opponents and 501 genes

This month, Mark Rowe reported in the Independent on Sunday that, after eight years, Barnet's devout have successfully bid for the right "to form an inner sanctuary... to enable them to observe the Sabbath and be less constrained in their activities on their holiest of days."

In short, the eruv story. Again. One can't help wondering what gentiles (the majority of readers, after all) make of a territorial imperative which, at the wearing of a hat, transforms secular suburbia into sanctified ground.

They may feel that, if it keeps Barnet's "estimated 10,000 Orthodox Jews" happy, then why not. It isn't as though they're demanding to engage in a triumphalist Etrog Order march through Hampstead Garden Suburb.

But what particularly struck me about Rowe's report is how many different interested parties were peeved by Barnet's eruv.

For the most part, Rowe explained, the eruv follows "natural boundaries" — houses, fences, the M1 and the tube — but there are 39 gaps, mainly at road junctions, where the boundary of the eruv will be marked by posts up to 20 feet high, linked with fishing line.

Through these gaps swarmed its opponents. I counted seven groups:

(1) Local residents who think the construction of wire and poles presents transport and environmental dangers.

(2) Local aesthetes who fear that the linked poles will be an eyesore.

(3) Those who question whether it is right for anybody to mark out

an area which is socially, religiously and racially mixed so as to ameliorate the effects of their own strict rules of Sabbath observance.

(4) Jewish dissenters, such as one unnamed member of "the Reform Jewish movement", which does not strictly observe the Sabbath (who) said the eruv would make the Jewish community highly visible. It could lead to the Jewish community being ghettoised and invite vandalism."

(5) Adath rabbis, of whom close sources said that "some members felt the eruv diluted the meaning of the Sabbath."

(6) Nor must we forget the Corporation of London, whose concern is that the poles may damage trees bordering Hampstead Heath.

(7) And finally, the Rationalist Press Association, an organisation dedicated to the use of reason to resolve religious problems, which thought the eruv might impinge unfairly on other sections of the community, and raises "issues of freedom and the right to express one's belief but make it visible in the environment," said its spokesman, Jim Herrick.

### MEDIA MONTH



TONY MALLERMAN

Seven quarrels against the eruv, but not, it seems, a whisper of anti-Semitism. By contrast, Jo Glanville, in the New Statesman, discovered a cacophony of prejudice among journalists, with Peter Mandelson its target.

Scavenging the past for images of the Jew, Glanville found strong examples in the present. She wrote that "the imagery which is now routinely used to describe (Peter Mandelson) echoes prejudices that have resonated in our language since

the Middle Ages.

"The Jew is the very devil incarnate," said Shylock's servant, and it is rare to find a profile of Mandelson which does not refer to him as an 'evil genius' or as the 'Prince of Darkness,' skilled in the 'black arts.'"

She observed that Mandelson publicly makes little of his Jewish origins. "Indeed, he has said on more than one occasion, albeit in a very Judaic turn of phrase, that the Labour Party is his tribe, his blood and his religion." So that's what a Judaic turn of phrase sounds like.

Even so, Glanville discerned a rash of what she called "uncon-

scious, anti-Semitic metaphors in his press coverage." Somewhat ingenuously, she wrote that "it is unlikely that journalists are aware of the source of the archetypal imagery on which they are drawing, but it is unmistakable and occasionally blatant — as when they refer to 'Mandelstein,' for example."

She also saw that Mandelson has become a scapegoat, "another classic Jewish role," for all the disappointments which old Labour supporters have experienced since the rise of Blair. She noted that references to him as a "virus" and "Nosferatu" were the same metaphors once used by French and German anti-Semites to describe Jews.

Paradoxically, no journalist has given Mandelson a harder time than Matthew Norman, the intermittently satirical columnist on the Daily Sneeer, as I recently heard the Guardian called.

One could hardly call Norman, a Jew, anti-Semitic. Though, come to think of it, during the previous administration, an undeviating target for his barbs was Michael Howard.

Finally, to the genetic tests reported in the JC confirming that Cohanim have descended from father to son since the days of the Temple. The headline over The Times's coverage of the story, by science editor Nigel Hawkes, read: "Genes track the Jewish priesthood to Exodus." It had something to do with the Y chromosome.

I feel diminished here: I am no scientist; I am also no Cohen. But what I'd like to know is this: if the genetic roots of non-priests can't be traced, are we to take it that a Levi's genes will never be as exemplary as a Cohen's?