



***Sha'atnez* as Ostentatious Dress: Towards a Demystification of the Hoq**

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There is hardly a more frustrating experience in the course of Jewish learning than encountering a *mitzvah* that seems to bear no rhyme or reason. Why does the Torah subject us to arbitrary ceremonies, such as that associated with the red heifer,¹ or prohibit the combination of certain materials, such as that of wool and linen?² This is hardly a new question; the ancient rabbis perceived the above-mentioned laws and several more to be strange, even embarrassing, in the eyes of a sensible public. A midrashic anecdote encapsulates the rabbis' predicament, one which is strikingly resonant with our own:

במדבר רבה (וילנא) יט:ח

שאל עובד כוכבים אחד את רבן יוחנן בן זכאי: אילין עובדייא דאתון עבדין נראין כמין כשפים. אתם מביאים פרה, ושורפין אותה, וכותשין אותה, ונוטלין את אפרה, ואחד מכם מטמא למת מזין עליו ב' וג' טיפין ואתם אומרים לו טהרת! אמר לו: לא נכנסה בך רוח תזזית מימך? אמר לו: לאו. ראית אדם שנכנסה בו רוח תזזית? אמר לו: הן. א"ל: ומה אתם עושין לו? אמר לו: מביאין עיקרין ומעשנין תחתיו ומרביצים עליה מים והיא בורחת. א"ל: ישמעו אנכיך מה שאתה מוצא מפיר; כך הרוח הזו רוח טומאה דכתיב "וגם את הנביאים ואת רוח הטומאה אעביר מן הארץ" (זכריה יג:ב); מזין עליו מי נדה והוא בורח. לאחר שיצא, אמרו לו תלמידי: רבינו, לזה דחית בקנה; לנו מה אתה אומר? אמר להם: חייכם לא המת מטמא, ולא המים מטהרין, אלא אמר הקב"ה חקה חקקתי גזירה גזרתי אי אתה רשאי לעבור על גזרתי, דכתיב "זאת חוקת התורה" (במדבר יט:ב).

Bemidbar Rabbah (Vilna) 19:8

An idolater asked Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai, "These rituals you do, they seem like witchcraft! You bring a heifer, burn it, crush it up, and take its ashes. [If] one of you is impure by the dead, two or three drops are sprinkled on him, and you declare him pure?!"

¹ REFERENCE

² REFERENCE



[Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai] said to him, “Has a restless spirit ever entered you?” [The idolater] said to [Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai], “No!” “Have you ever seen a man where a restless spirit entered him?” [The idolater] said to [Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai], “Yes!” [Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai] said to [the idolater], “And what did you do for him?” [The idolater] said to [Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai], “We brought roots and made them smoke beneath him, and pour water and it flees.” [Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai] said to [the idolater], “Your ears should hear what leaves from your mouth! The same thing is true for this spirit, the spirit of impurity, as it is written, ‘Even the prophets and the spirit of impurity will I remove from the land’ (Zechariah 13:2). They sprinkle upon him purifying waters, and [the spirit of impurity] flees.” After [the idolater] left, [Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai’s] students said to him, “You pushed [the idolater] off with a reed. What will you say to us?” [Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai] said to them, “By your lives, a dead person doesn’t make things impure, and the water doesn’t make things pure. Rather, God said, ‘I have engraved a rule, I have decreed a decree (*ḥuqqah ḥaqqati, g’zeira gazarti*), and you have no permission to transgress what I decreed, as it says “This is a *ḥoq* of the Torah” (Numbers 19:2)” (Numbers Rabbah [Vilna] 19:8).

Although Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai succeeds in dislodging the criticism of the idolater, this initial answer does not allay the anxieties of his students—for they do not observe any bizarre practices to make the Torah’s strange decree seem relatively common. Instead, Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai defends the arbitrariness of the biblical decree by doubling down on its irrationality. What imbues the ritual of the red heifer with meaning is precisely its lack of reason, for as such it is a sign of our unwavering obedience to God. Rabban Yoḥanan seizes upon a word that accompanies the law of the heifer, “*ḥuqqah*,” or “*ḥoq*,” and assigns it a new meaning. As a *ḥoq*, the law of the red heifer and other laws like it comprise those decrees that God issued to emphasize God’s fiat power over human will. The rabbinic institution of the *ḥoq* redeems such strange *mitzvot* by turning their initial weakness into a prize religious virtue. The rabbis protect the integrity of the Torah by sealing off certain *mitzvot* from undergoing inquiry into their meaning. Whoever asks why, for example, the Torah prohibits us from wearing *sha’atnez* has mischaracterized the nature of such an injunction. Only an antagonistic outsider, an idolater, would raise such a question.

There is undoubtedly great importance in the rabbis’ insistence that we must respect divine authority even when the meaning of a law escapes us. For if we revere the Torah only insofar as it satisfies our needs, we risk reducing the Torah to a crude utilitarian system, and abandoning the dialogical relationship between ourselves and God that is so crucial to Jewish spiritual life. Some may even see *ḥuqim* as more sacred than other *mitzvot*, since *ḥuqim* represent the pure divine will and are unmotivated by human interest. Nevertheless, I would like to challenge this classical picture of the *ḥoq* for two reasons. First, excessive emphasis on the inaccessibility of divine law can cause the Torah to feel estranged from our everyday lives,



and cause us to distrust figures of religious authority—rabbis, teachers, and parents—for endorsing a taxing imposition that is indifferent to human affairs. And secondly: in an age of widespread literacy and schooling, when many people have access to a Jewish education, it becomes increasingly difficult to accept the conclusion that certain laws are beyond the realm of human understanding. Rather than, as in the midrashic case, being embarrassed to idolaters, we may become embarrassed in the eyes of our Jewish peers for failing to impart the meaning of our tradition. It is my concern to ensure that we trust in the relevance of Jewish tradition and those who propound it that moves me to chip away at the rabbinic seal on the meaning of these laws. It is time to demystify the *hoq*.

The Torah does not explicitly state the purpose of these *huqqim*, or of many of its ordinances altogether. This either means that the laws serve no purpose, or that their meaning is plain to someone more acquainted with their context in everyday life. As modern readers—alienated from the historical context of much of biblical law, but equipped with a comprehensive body of traditional and critical commentary—we can either forgo pursuing a rationale, or deploy the tools at our disposal to examine the meaning of a law in its biblical context, and see if any subsequent rabbinic interpretations reflect this understanding. I would like to take up this challenge and draw out the implicit purpose of one *hoq* in particular: the Torah’s prohibition of wearing *sha’atnez*, garments containing a mixture of wool and linen. As we will see, while the meaning of a biblical law may not be explicitly stated, the discussion of its components and details in biblical and rabbinic texts presupposes an understanding of its purpose.

The Torah states in Leviticus 19 and Deuteronomy 22 that Israelites are forbidden from wearing *sha’atnez*:

ויקרא יט:יט

אַתְּחַקְתִּי תִשְׁמְרוּ בְהַמְתֵּךְ לֹא-תִרְבֵּיעַ כְּלָאִים שְׂדֵךְ לֹא-תִזְרַע כְּלָאִים וּבְגָד כְּלָאִים שֶׁעֲטָנָה לֹא יַעֲלֶה עָלֶיךָ:

Leviticus 19:19

You shall observe My laws. You shall not let your cattle mate with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; you shall not put on cloth from a mixture of two kinds of material.

דברים כב:יא

לֹא תִלְבַּשׁ שֶׁעֲטָנָה צֹמֶר וּפְשֵׁתִים יַחְדָּו:

Deuteronomy 22:11

You shall not wear cloth combining wool and linen.

While these two prohibitions against *sha’atnez* do not explain its significance, a quick scan of the contexts in which *sha’atnez* arises in the Bible will demonstrate its meaning. Perhaps



most revealing is the description of Mordecai’s garb when he goes out before Ahasuerus as the newly installed second-in-command:

אסתר ח:טו

ומרדכי יצא | מלפני המלך בלבוש מלכות תכלת וחור ועטרת זהב גדולה ותכריח בוץ וארגמן והעיר שושן
 צהלה ושמחה:

Esther 8:15

Mordecai left the king’s presence in royal robes of blue and white, with a magnificent crown of gold and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool. And the city of Shushan rang with joyous cries.

The Scroll of Esther identifies “royal robes” with a mixture of “fine linen and purple wool,” a parade example of *sha’atnez*. This mixture is precisely that with which God enjoins Moses to clothe the priests and construct the cloth for the tabernacle:

שמות כד:ו

ועשו את־האפדן זהב תכלת וארגמן ותלעת שני ושש משזר מעשה חשב:

Exodus 24:6

They shall make the *ephod* of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, worked into designs.³

שמות כו:א

ואת־המשכן תעשה עֶשֶׂר יריעת שש משזר ותכלת וארגמן ותלעת שני כרבים מעשה חשב תעשה אתם:

Exodus 26:1

As for the tabernacle, make it of ten strips of cloth; make these of fine twisted linen, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, with a design of cherubim worked into them.

In case the command to construct the cloth of the Tabernacle out of *sha’atnez* should be lost on the reader, Rashi makes explicit that God here endorses the use of *sha’atnez*:

רש"י על שמות כו:א

שש משזר ותכלת ותלעת שני. הרי ארבעה מינין יחד חוט וחוט – אחד של פשתן ושלושה של צמר.

Rashi on Exodus 26:1

Fine twisted linen, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns—four kinds together in each and every string, one of linen and three of wool.

³ See also the “חשן משפט / breastplate of decision” in Exodus 28:15.



However, Rashi is far from the first rabbinic interpreter to reflect the Torah's use of *sha'atnez* for the holiest constructions. The ancient rabbis also recognized the Torah's systematic reservation of *sha'atnez* for priestly contexts:

משנה כלאים ט:א

אין אסור משום כלאים אלא צמר ופשתים. ואינו מטמא בנגעים אלא צמר ופשתים. אין הפהנים לזבשין לשמש בבית המקדש אלא צמר ופשתים.

Mishnah Kilayim 9:1

The prohibition of *kilayim* applies only to [sheep's] wool and linen, and only wool and linen can become unclean by *nega'im*. The priests, while in the service in the Temple, only wear [garments] of wool and linen.

The Mishnah's juxtaposition of several seemingly unrelated aspects of the Torah's legislation concerning *sha'atnez* reflects that the rabbis understood the Torah's disparate and unstated treatment of *sha'atnez* to be coherent and deliberate. This juxtaposition reveals that the prohibition of *sha'atnez* for laypeople and its presence in the *mishkan* are two sides of the same coin: the Torah prohibits *sha'atnez* in profane contexts and reserves it for holy ones. The Torah's reservation of *sha'atnez* for only the holiest people and constructions reveals its implicit meaning to be fine ornamentation. This is why camel wool does not qualify for *sha'atnez*—it is of a lower quality than sheep's wool. The Torah reserves the finest material for God's home on earth, the *mishkan*, and those who work within its four walls. By limiting the most impressive garb for the holiest activity, the Torah legislates and communicates to us that we should not dress opulently in profane environments. The Torah channels the human desire for finery by directing it towards service of God.

Rather than see the proscription of *sha'atnez* as a senseless decree meant to ensure blind obedience to God, this contextual reading of biblical and rabbinic sources reveals the prohibition to be a preventative measure against ostentatious dress, and as a way of sublimating potentially harmful human desires (e.g. opulence) to positive ends. This understanding of *sha'atnez* explains why, according to the rabbis, the same Torah that prohibits *sha'atnez* permits one to violate this prohibition when wearing *tzitzit*.⁴ For if the reason one cannot wear *sha'atnez* is that it is inappropriate to don opulent dress in a profane context, then surely one can wear *sha'atnez* on the garment that represents their holiness through its resemblance of the priestly vestments. Rabbi Dr. Jacob Milgrom explains the holy and priestlike quality of *tzitzit*:

⁴ Based on the juxtaposition of "לא תלבש שיעטנד צמר ופשתים יחדו" and "כנפות כסותך" and "גדלים תעשה-לה על-ארגע" in Deuteronomy 22:11-12. See Sifrei Devarim #232, Talmud Bavli Nazir 58b, Nazir 41a, Yevamot 4a, Yevamot 5b, and Rashi to Deuteronomy 22:11.



The requirement of the blue thread—royal blue—is a sign that Israel is a people of nobility, whose sovereign is not mortal, but divine. But more than this: Israel is a ‘kingdom of priests and a holy nation’ (Exodus 19:6). Every Israelite wears his priestly clothing, the *tsitsit*. The tassels are a reminder of this holiness, as the passage from Numbers makes clear. In short, “You shall be holy for I, the Lord your God am holy (Leviticus 19:2; cf. 11:44; 20:26).” Though Israelites who are not of the seed of Aaron may not serve as priests (Numbers 17:5), they may—indeed, must—strive for a life of holiness by observing the Lord’s commandments.⁵

The Torah regulates the use of *sha’atnez* to steer its people clear of excessive materialism and focus their finery on worship of God. Of course, there is the potential for undue opulence in this realm as well, such as the outpouring of funds on synagogues and Judaica, and the concomitant neglect of less grand but more pressing affairs, like the plights of the marginalized and disadvantaged in our society. We might therefore heed the message of *sha’atnez*, and pick up where the Torah left off: focusing our desire for finery on the service of God both in synagogues (מקדשי מעט) and in the realm of *hesed*, wherever we seek to fulfill God’s holy decrees.

⁵ “Of Hems and Hesses: Rank and Authority Were Expressed in Antiquity by Fringes on Garments,” *BAR*, May/June 1983.

