

**Ki Teitze: Embracing the Unknown**  
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This week in our Torah portion....

- LOTS of Laws
- Laws about family relations
- Laws regarding sexual misconduct
- Laws regarding forbidden relationships
- Laws protecting the vulnerable
- Miscellaneous laws
- AND laws about neighbors, nature, and clothing

A lot of times, it can be easy for us to gloss over these laws, telling ourselves they are antiquated. After all, we are not biblical Jews. Our Jewish practices are based on the rabbinic period of Judaism, starting after the destruction of the Temple, when the first rabbis began to make Judaism livable and relevant for the context that they found themselves living in. Without a temple, many changes had to be made. For instance, sacrifices at the Temple were no longer a possibility. How were we going to give daily love to God? The rabbis formulated prayer to take the place of sacrificial offering.

For halakhic Jews (aka strict law-abiding Jews), the codification of the rabbis' interpretations into law, starting with Mishneh Torah and going through the Shulchan Aruch, dictates the way they live their day to day lives. For progressive Jews, we see the work of interpretation, however, as an ongoing process. Therefore, many times the way we understand a law from the Torah might be vastly different than the way it was codified into law in the 15<sup>th</sup> century or may choose to not observe it all.

One of the laws in our Torah portion this week has always perplexed me. Many of the laws in the Torah come with no explanation at all in the Torah, and this happens to be one of them. Deuteronomy 22:11 states,

לֹא תִלְבַּשׁ שְׂעִטָּיִם צְמָר וּפְשָׁתִים יַחְדָּו

Do not wear *shaatnays*, that is, wool and linen, together.

Deuteronomy is the second time we learn this law in the Torah. The first time was back in the holiness code, in Leviticus 19:19, which Reform Jews will read a part of on Yom Kippur afternoon in just a few weeks.

When I read this verse, the first thing I ask is, What!? Why!? I can't wear clothes that contain a mixture of wool and linen? That is because, most of us, me included, usually approach Judaism with a rational lens: If we are going to do something, we must be able to make sense of it. If we cannot rationalize it, we are not compelled to follow it.

For just a moment, let's put this lens aside to examine this verse in both Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The word *shaatnays* only appears these two times in the entire Torah! When I looked it up in the BDB, (the biblical dictionary), I learned that the word itself comes to mean a type of forbidden cloth for garments because of its mixed contents. In our verse, those mixed contents are specified as wool and linen. In Leviticus, however, they are just described as kilim,

meaning two kinds. In any case, the Torah is clear: Do not wear clothing that is made of this mixed cloth material!

A few commentators help us to learn what our rabbis were thinking about why we should not wear clothes with *shaatnays*. Daat Zkenim teaches: The reason for this prohibition is that the dividing curtain in the Temple was made of a mixture of fine linen and wool dyed blue. G-d did not want Jews to wear something symbolizing that dividing curtain behind which was the Holy Ark from the lid of which the voice of G-d could be heard. (by Moses)

Interesting, Chizkuni teaches something different: The reason why only these two categories of yarns are forbidden to be mixed is that the two were involved in the first murder, Kayin's offering to G-d had consisted of leftover flax that he had grown, while Abel had offered sheep which grow wool. Seeing that these two species had been indirectly responsible for the first disagreement between two human beings ending in the death of one, we are to be forever mindful of this. An alternate interpretation: These two fibers, the ones used in the garments worn by the priests when performing service in the Temple are permitted to be worn in the same garment by the priests on such occasion.

All of these are wonderfully creative justifications for the law to not wear *Shaatnays*! Our rabbis deserve an A+ for ingenuity. None of these explanations, though, is necessarily the reason for the law. Truthfully, the Torah does not tell us.

Sforno, another medieval commentator addresses the elephant in the room head on. He writes, “One of the foremost ways in which to demonstrate our fear/reverence of the Lord is not by observing commandments which we find reasonable and useful, but by observing those commandments which we fail to understand, or worse, which run counter to what our intelligence dictates to our mind as being useful. Hence the Torah urges: *את הוקותי תשמורו*, you must make a special point of meticulously observing God’s *chukim* or statutes.”

*Chukim* ("decrees") are **commandments with no known rationale and are perceived as pure manifestations of the Divine will.**

So as a Reform Rabbi, what can I suggest that we do with *chukim*? I’m certainly not here to tell you that when Shabbat ends, you should find a certified *shaatnays* checker to inspect all your clothes and linens with a microscope for a mix of wool and linen. Though, I am certainly not here to stop you from doing so if you so choose.

What I am here to suggest, is that we as Reform Jews should not simply pass over *chukim* without giving them at least a chance. Reform Judaism, like all branches of Judaism, encourages us to relate to the divine and seek that which is beyond our own human comprehension. I do think that sometimes, we as Reform Jews can be afraid to do that, afraid to go beyond that which we know and understand. But, when we do this, we miss out.

Can you think of a time when someone asked you to do something with them that seemed completely incomprehensible, and you ended up doing it anyways? Perhaps the person who

asked you, is someone you love. Love, by definition, is not rational. The things we do for those we love are inspired by our hearts, not our head.

As we approach the Jewish New Year, I encourage us all to try and approach our Judaism with a little less confidence that something is not meaningful unless we understand it. Instead, let us try to be more open to that which appears antiquated, incomprehensible. Perhaps which such an approach, Judaism will lend us meaning we never could have imagined. Shabbat Shalom.