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Shatnez: A Mitzvah That's Always In Style!

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What Is Shatnez?

If life is like a piece of fabric, then we can truly say that a Jew's life is woven with *mitzvos*.

The *mitzvah* of shatnez is mentioned twice in the Torah: "A garment of mixed kinds – of shatnez – shall not come upon you" (*Vayikrah*, 19); "You shall not wear shatnez – wool and linen, together." (*Devorim*, 22)

If even one small part of a woolen suit – such as the thread for the buttons – is made of linen, the Torah forbids us to wear it. The tiniest thread of wool together with the tiniest thread of linen in a garment equals forbidden shatnez. Wool comes from the hair of sheep. Linen comes from the stem of the flax plant.

The *mitzvah* of not wearing shatnez is in the category of *mitzvos* called *chukim*. These are *mitzvos* for which the Torah does not tell us a reason. They are the "decrees of the King," as Rashi calls them, and we show our faith in Hashem by observing them without knowing the reason. We trust that there is a good reason even though we do not know it.

It's interesting to note that the ancient Egyptians wore clothes made from wool and linen. Our sages tell us that the Jews merited to be taken out of Egypt because they didn't change their names, their language, and their dress. Torah commentators explain that "dress" refers to the fact that the Jews didn't wear shatnez as was common practice amongst the Egyptians.

COMMON THINGS WHICH MUST BE CHECKED FOR SHATNEZ

1. Wool suits (especially boys' and men's) often contain shatnez. Often, they are constructed with linen canvases, interlinings, reinforcements or threads.
2. Wool dresses; sweaters, and coats must also be checked.
3. Women's skirts, dresses, and jumpers in multi-colored tweed or linen-look fabric may contain linen and wool in the interwoven threads.
4. Women and children's clothing with sewn-on designs (appliqué) may contain shatnez. Sometimes a sweater that is neither wool nor linen will have an appliqué with *both*.

YOU LEARN SOMETHING NEW EVERY DAY...

Mrs. Green was renovating her house. She bought new carpeting for her living room. It was two shades of orange. Visitors to her home often commented on the beautiful carpet.

One evening Mr. Green told his wife, "Tonight, in my halacha shiur, we learned some fascinating laws about shatnez that many people are unaware of. Did you know that carpets can contain shatnez? According to halacha it is forbidden to walk barefoot on such a carpet. Let's have all our carpets tested."

The Greens brought swatches of their carpets to be shatnez-tested. When the new two-tone carpet was examined, the lighter shade was found to be wool, and the darker shade was made of ...you guessed it – linen!

The prohibition of shatnez is not only for clothing. The Torah forbids wearing or covering ourselves with shatnez. In addition, our rabbis forbade giving our body *any physical benefit* from shatnez. This includes sitting, standing or walking on something that contains shatnez.

An inexpensive pillow is sometimes stuffed with recycled fabric. It's possible for it to contain wool and linen. If it does, there is a way you can still use it – just make a little hole. This makes the pillow no longer shatnez. For something to be shatnez, the wool and linen must be together. As long as the wool and linen are completely sewn up inside the pillow, they are shatnez. When you make a hole, they are no longer trapped inside. Even though the stuffing is not coming out of the pillow, the hole makes the pillow permissible for use.

POPULAR MYTHS TO ERASE FROM YOUR MIND

Unfortunately, there is still not enough awareness about shatnez. Here are some popular beliefs that are false:

FACT #1 - If the label doesn't say "wool and linen," then the garment doesn't have shatnez.

This is completely false. Many times a company will only write the *basic* fiber content of an item but will not write about the thread used to sew on buttons or the trimmings. It is also possible for an item to be MISLABELED.

Recently, in a Jewish store, someone bought a jumper with the fiber content listed as: "Wool and Silk." When it was checked for shatnez, it was found to contain wool and LINEN.

FACT #2- Linen is a material that is no longer used.

This is FALSE. Many tailors and clothing manufacturers use linen fabrics. In recent years, with the increase in imports from China, linen has returned to the market, and it is no longer expensive.

FACT #3- Only expensive suits contain shatnez.

People believe this because inexpensive suits are often made of polyester, while more expensive suits are made of wool. However, nowadays, both wool and linen can be found in lower-priced suits.

FACT #4- It's unnecessary for children's clothing to be tested for shatnez because small children are not required to keep these mitzvos.

Just as the Torah forbids parents to feed unkosher food to a child, it forbids parents to put shatnez on a child.

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

A] HOW IS CLOTHING CHECKED FOR SHATNEZ?

The shatnez tester has two goals:

1. He checks for different fabrics within a garment. *Some of these different fabrics are the lining of a coat, the thread used to sew on buttons, the fabrics making up an appliqué design. The tester opens seams in order to gain access to the stiffening fabrics used in collars, shoulder pads, waistbands, etc.*
2. The tester aims to identify the fabric. *The shatnez tester removes a thread from the garment. He looks at the fiber to see how shiny it is, the way it curls, or the way it breaks. He might even put the thread in his mouth to feel it. If it is gummy, it is a plant fiber, possibly linen. (Not all testers do this because the microscope is more reliable.) The tester places the thread on a microscope slide, covers it with a glass cover, and examines the fiber under the microscope. Based on his knowledge, he can determine what kind of thread it is.*

B] WHAT ARE SOME OF TODAY'S CHALLENGES IN TESTING FOR SHATNEZ?

The shatnez tester must be a detective. There are some materials that imitate the look and feel of linen and wool.

Ramie and hemp, for example, are two materials that look just like linen. Up until 20 years ago, there was no way for shatnez testers to differentiate between these similar materials. Even now with advanced checking techniques, it is still very difficult to identify them.

Cashmere, mohair, camel, and llama hair aren't hair of sheep, so there is no prohibition against them. It is difficult to tell the difference between wool and cashmere or mohair fibers, because they are similar.

C] HOW CAN I HAVE MY CLOTHING CHECKED FOR SHATNEZ?

Today, keeping this *mitzvah* has never been easier!

- Many clothing stores now provide shatnez testing as a free service to their customers.
- <http://www.shatnez.n3.net/> gives a list of Shatnez Laboratories in America.
- You might have a local shatnez tester who will check your clothing in his home.
- You can call 1-800-SHATNEZ and ask them for advice. (They might tell you over the phone if the item needs to be tested.)

You can sign on to receive free shatnez consumer alerts and bulletins at shatnezceo@verizon.net or shatnezhedqtrs@yeshivanet.com .