

Removing *Shatnez* from *Shatnez*
The *Universal Judaism* perspective

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The Association for Universal Judaism

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Shatnez, the mixing of wool and linen is explicitly banned in the *Pentateuch* in two places:

...neither shall a garment mingled of linen and wool come upon thee.
(*Lev.19:19*) ¹

You shalt not wear a garment of divers kinds, of woollen and linen together
(*Deut. 22:11*)

For this reason alone, the rabbis considered it to be of critical spiritual importance:

Anyone who is careful to avoid wearing *shatnez* will merit to be dressed in garments of salvation and a cloak of righteousness. ²

So scrupulous is the ban, that if even one single thread co-mingled with the other, perhaps through an identification label, the garment was rendered *shatnez*. ³ One could not even, for the sake of warmth, use a blanket that was *shatnez*. ⁴ In fact, it was thought that a terrible illness could result from wearing *shatnez*. ⁵ *Shatnez* was such a serious offence, whiplash was considered the appropriate punishment. ⁶

Nonetheless, obeying the ban against *shatnez* was something that a Jew had to take totally on faith because it is classified as a *chok*, a *statute*, traditionally interpreted to mean a Divine decree for which there is no easily discernable, self-evident or logically explicable reason ⁷.

Yet, this never stopped searching Jewish hearts and minds from seeking and speculating on a reason for the ban on *shatnez*, one that would turn blind-faith into clear-sighted understanding. These days, one need only scan *Google* for “*shatnez*” and mega-bytes of innovative explanations flash across the screen, some metaphorically-inspired, others fantastical yarns spun throughout the centuries. Here’s a few:

The ban on *shatnez* is the result of the dispute between *Kayin* (Cain) and *Hevel* (Abel). When *Kayin* brought an inferior offering of linen, and *Hevel* brought a superior offering of wool, the result was jealousy and murder. Therefore, *shatnez* was banned.— *Rabbi Isaac Luria, 16th Century Kabbalist*

To mix wool and linen destroys the spiritual fabric of the universe. Since each and everything on earth, except for man, has its own celestial force that influences it, when these are mixed together, they can entangle their spiritual counterparts.– *Rabbi Aaron Halevi of Barcelona, reputed author, Sefer HaHinuch #62*

Linen represents the vegetative aspect of life, seeking only to sustain itself and reproduce. Wool represents the animal aspect of life, which has instinctual spirituality. The human being must take a separate approach to each: he must ennoble the latter, while perfecting the former. – *Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 20th century Torah commentator*

The moral offence of *shatnez* pertains primarily in regard to the sheep. Following a Kabbalistic idea, in the future, animals, including sheep, will eventually evolve into a state similar to the current state of people. Thus, God commanded us to keep these fibers separate, so that we heighten our sensitivity towards animals and their welfare. – *Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, First Chief Rabbi of Eretz Israel*

Why, in fact, is the intermingling of wool and linen forbidden by God? For those Jews who put religion and revelation over reason as their guide for truth, the fact that the ban on *shatnez* is explicit in the *Torah* and upheld by the rabbis is adequate reason to observe it. For other so-called “liberal” Jews, including myself, who value reason and science as their primary guide for truth, its observance is problematic. Because the ban on *shatnez* is a “mere” *chok*, without any apparent rational foundation, it is suspect as mere superstition, some vestigial curiosity of a now defunct, animal-sacrificing, blood-torching *cultus*, as spiritually irrelevant today as the sprinkled ashes of the red heifer.

Yet, ironically, we liberal Jews often find ourselves wearing traditional *tallit* in our liberal synagogues, still scrupulously woven so as to not co-mingle wool and linen. Why? Why not intermingle wool and linen, if we are so self-freed from the restraints of *Torah* and tradition? Are we hypocrites as some of our more traditional brethren have sometimes accused us? Are they obstinate dinosaurs of a less-liberated age, as we’ve sometimes accused them?

These two threads– religion, reason– do not readily intermingle; they represent a *shatnez* within *shatnez*. I believe this *shatnez* is what keeps our so-called “denominations” separate, undermining the unity of our *klal*. I also believe it is this same *shatnez* that makes teaching bright, inquisitive, contemporary Jewish minds so problematic in this scientific age. Until we remove this *shatnez* between religion and reason, it will be difficult, painful, to unify Jewish thought and the Jewish people.

With this in mind, I humbly offer what I believe is a very simple reason behind the forbidding of *shatnez*. I believe this is a shockingly simple solution to this great mystery. I believe it converts this *chok* into its interpreted “opposite” – a *mishpat*, a clearly-understood, self-evident, logically-discernable *ordinance*.

In so doing, I believe the seemingly-conflicting threads of religion and reason, *chok* and *mishpat*, will begin to co-mingle in a way that combines tradition, faith, science and yes, even commonsense, without the loss of *awe* for our God– Creator and Redeemer of Israel and the World.

I also believe this understanding of *shatnez* will point the way to a new, ancient, authentic, traditionally-radical, thoroughly contemporary, secular, scientific spiritual approach to Hebrew thought and life which I dub *Universal Judaism*, and to which I have decided to devote myself as a teacher. 9 I believe the perspective of Universal Judaism has profound implications not just for Jews, but, for its sister-peoples, Christians and Muslims, as well as for the whole world, as we shall briefly discuss toward the end.

To remove the *shatnez* from *shatnez*, let us begin by releasing our minds from a state of “foreign occupation”. Let us leave the Greco-Roman mindset, the *Diaspora*. Let us (at least *try*) to release ourselves from the belief that we, the Jewish *People*, are just another *ethnos* or *religion* 10 existing under the civic government of Rome, whether pagan or later, Christianized– or today, that we are merely one more secular democratic nation in the world global community, itself a Roman derivative.

In keeping with a new era, marking our return to ancient roots, let us shift our perspective and get back to basics. Let us return to seeing ourselves as a *people*, on our *land*.

While metaphysical and metaphorical speculations as to the meaning of *shatnez* have been fanciful, if not fantastical, all we need to do to remove the *shatnez* from *shatnez* is come back down to earth. All we need to do is *ground* our interpretation of *shatnez* upon land, our particular land: the Land of Israel.

Reversing the “Platonic curse” of the past 2000 years, all we need to do is see the physical as more real than the metaphysical, the phenomenal as more real than the metaphorical, and the real as more certain than the idea. All we need to do is see Life as being more holy than our beliefs, interpretations or religions, and truly see it as “God’s Creation”– a Creation that, even on this tiny earth, expresses a Divine *Order* or *Commandment*, a design, determination, *fiat* or revelation of His/Her/Its Nature. 11

Long, long before wool and linen became fanciful symbols of metaphoric religious speculation or custom, long before we imported the foreign word “religion” into Hebrew, long before we were seduced to being just “one of many” within Imperial Rome and its subsequent variations– “wool” and “linen” were, like Jews, very real. They were part of a very real Creation, connected to land.

Wool begins from the very real hair of very real sheep, not woven from the divine idea of “sheepishness.” Likewise, linen also begins from the very real filaments of very real flax, not seeded from the concept “vegetative”.

Real wool and flax must both be farmed and gathered. There is a timing to the sowing and reaping of wool and flax called “seasons”. These seasons are experienced according to variations particular to a certain geographic area, in this case, the ancient land of Israel.

This local timing takes place within and alongside of grander timings beyond it: the timings of the sun, the moon, and countless stars known to the ancient world; and today, the timing of countless galaxies, and possibly multiple universes or dimensions, increasingly revealed to the contemporary eye.

This timing is inextricably bound to life on earth, in what we currently call “ecology”. Sheep, flax, all living creatures, animal and vegetable, macroscopic and microscopic – and yes, even human beings – depend upon this timing.

From wool and flax, woolens and linen must be fabricated by human hands. This requires human timings as well; timings that involve the relationships of individuals, young and old; timings that involve the cooperation of all scales of groups – families, tribes, nations and species, implying moral and ethical requirements as well.

Look at the calendar of Gezer, a 10th century limestone tablet discovered near the city of Gezer, 20 miles northwest of Israel, and coordinate this with the Hebrew and Gregorian calendars. One will quickly see that in the ancient Middle East, flax was hoed in the month of *Adar*, the beginning of spring. ¹² This is also about the time for shearing sheep since their fabulous overcoats are no longer needed.

This supplies the simple key that unlocks the complex mystery of *shatnez*:

Flax is hoed, when wool is gathered.

Flax is harvested when wool is growing.

Thus, wool can be prepared for colder months, during the warmer months, while flax can be prepared for warmer months, during the colder months. The right crops arise at the right time, according to God’s *Order* or *Commandment(s)* in nature, as the English puns equivalently. This timing must coordinate with the right and

proper timings for human activities. The result: clothing. A product of heaven and earth– of God, His Land, and His People who reside upon it.

At the heart of this *chiddush*, this *discovery*, is such a core spiritual principle in the life of Israel that it is repeated and repeated and repeated, in variation after variation after variation, virtually ubiquitously throughout all our foundational texts. Here's but a tiny list:

Gen. 17:21; 18:10; 18:14

Lev. 26:4

Num. 13:20

Deut. 11:14; 28:12

2 Kings 4:16; 4:17

Job 5:26; 38:32

Ps. 1:3; 145:15

Prov. 15:23; 20:4

Jer. 5:24

Ezek. 34:26

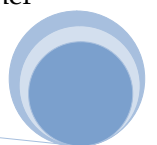
Dan 7:12

This core spiritual principle, put in the most eloquent words of *Ecclesiastes* 3, is as follows:

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven... a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted.

The principle that God would provide for us– *in the right and proper season*– is foundational to the life of the people of Israel. God's Laws properly acknowledged and lived, would ensure the earth's bounty, in its right and proper season. Conversely, continued bounty, in its right and proper season, required observance of God's *Laws*, living according to how He "ordered" things, His *Order* or *Commandments*. This is the basic principle behind *covenant*.¹³

And it shall come to pass, if you hearken diligently to my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, that I will give you the rain of your land in its due season [emphasis added], the early rain and the late rain, that thou mayest gather



in thy corn, and thy wine, and thy oil. And I will send grass in thy fields for thy cattle, that thou mayest eat and be full. Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and you turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them; and then the Lord's anger be inflamed against you, and he shut up the heaven that there be no rain, and that the land yield not its fruit; and you perish quickly from off the good land which the Lord gives you. (*Deut. 11:13*)

This is the very essence of what it means to possess a *brit*, a living covenant *on the land* – the *alignment* of human conscience and human activities to God's Order, including His timings in nature, so Israel's civilization and God's Creation would co-exist and co-operate harmoniously:

Wherefore it shall come to pass, if you hearken to these judgements [*mishpatim*], and keep them, that the Lord thy God shall keep unto thee the covenant and the troth which he swore to thy fathers: and he will love thee, and bless thee, and multiply thee: and will bless the fruit of thy womb, and the fruit of thy land, thy corn, and thy wine, and thy oil, the increase of thy cattle, and the flocks of thy sheep... (*Deut. 7:12-13*)

These were not obscure *chukkim* to be obeyed without understanding why, merely because they were "tradition". These were *mishpatim*—scientific, universal, natural laws – the obvious way God designed Creation, His Judgments as to the scheme of things. Alignment to God, by observance of His *mishpatim*, which were built into the fabric of His Design for nature, ensured wealth, which, in an agrarian-based society meant children and other forms of "produce". The foundation of *covenant* was obvious, self-evident, natural within Creation.

This covenant with God's land was not just a formal "religious" or "governmental" edict, an austere doctrine to be obeyed under the threat of legal or religious prosecution. This covenant was something lived *spirito-naturally*; it was a *living-law* inscribed in the fabric of nature. Live it, live *with* it, *alongside* of it and *harmoniously* together with it, and prosperity would follow, for us, as it did for our ancestors: For Abraham (*Gen. 17:6 ff.*). For Jacob (*Gen 30:39 ff.*). For the Hebrews, who left Egypt bereft of land but compensated through gifts (*Ex 12:35*). Through the obeying of God's Order or Commandments in nature (seasonality, for one), the blessings of the land, the Goodness of human activity, and the Goodness of God's Creativity were set in alignment, therefore generating an even greater harvest of Goodness— but, always, *in its right and proper season*.

Conversely, failure to uphold this *living covenant* through a *mis-alignment* of human activities, in a way that was counter to God's Design, would produce not prosperity, but poverty. Like Adam, the Garden's abundance would recoil from us, despite the excessive sweat of our brow. (*Gen. 3:17 ff.*)

We are here speaking of a *cause and effect, ila v'elul*, the very *principle* of *mitzvot*, the *scientific* relationship between the actions of Jewish human beings and their experience in life– on their land, under their God: *Covenantal dynamism!* For either a right relationship or a wrong relationship– either aligned to God's Order or misaligned to it– a blessing or curse (*Deut. 30:15 ff.*) would follow. This is no formal legal action taken by a mortal "judge" or "king" or "rabbi". This is a natural action, an actual *response* issued through His Creation i.e. a judgement, pro or con, by the Judge and King of all the earth, the Creator and Redeemer of Israel and the World: Our God. *The God. Divine Nature* Itself.

Here, there is no separation between "science" and "revelation". There is science and science IS revelation. There is revelation and revelation IS science. There is revelational-biology or bio-revelationalism. Reason and religion are inseparably-indistinguishable. Were such dualities ever God's problem? No. They are our problem, because we've forgotten the true living universal nature of our laws, such as the separation of wool and linen, but, instead, revere them, abstractly, as "religious" laws. We fail to see that these laws are *real scientific creationally-verifiable consequences*; obey them, and nature flourishes; disobey them and nature fails, human beings fall, too.

This is summed up by the prophet *Hosea, 2:9*, who plainly corroborates this simple solution to the mystery of *shatnez*:

For she did not know that it was I who gave her the corn, and the wine, and the oil, and multiplied silver and gold for her, which they used for the Ba'al.

Therefore I will take back my corn *in its time*, [emphasis added] and my wine *in its season*, [emphasis added] and will take away my wool and my flax which were to cover her nakedness.

The poetic reiteration of "in its time", "in its season", obviously extends to wool and flax. A right and proper righteous relationship between Israel and God causes the earth to flourish. A whorish relationship between Israel and God causes the earth to be defiled and barren. The consciousness of human activity must either be covenantally - aligned to God's Order in nature, or we will not eat easily from the land. In the extreme, should our unrighteousness continue and God's Commandment in nature be disregarded, our *covenant* not just ignored but mangled, the land would actually vomit us out (*Lev.18:28*).

This is such a foundational principle for our people that it appears at the nucleus of our identity as a nation, in the wilderness story. Here, the Israelites, having relied upon the Egyptian fleshpots for their sustenance, are finally freed from their servitude and their "meal ticket". Released from civilization back into the freedom of God's Creation, they are frightened. They do not know how they are going to survive.

So, to help the Israelites trust Him more than the most powerful civilization at that time, God sends them *manna*. But, they are warned, do not take more than their *daily need*. Why? Because to hoard the *manna* would mean that the Israelites did not trust God's *Order* or *Commandment* to provide *manna in its daily-season*; instead, they would trust only the *manna* itself. They would seek the created over the Creator, a form over the Formless. In short, the *manna* would become an idol.

Therefore, it is obvious: Just as the failure to trust the daily-seasonal supply of manna would be a denial of the God of Creation, so, the refusal to trust that, in its right and proper seasons, wool would be provided for warmer clothing and flax would be provided for cooler clothing would also be a denial of God. The refusal to separate wool and linen, in their seasons, is a flat-out denial of the living-law of seasonality, the Temporal Hand by which the Eternal God cares for all life, His Order/Commandment within the design of nature. The disavowing of the seasonal separation of wool and linen is a usurping and coercion of the Order of Creation by human beings, which undermines the relationship of Israel and their Creator God.

In our manufacturing-based economy, so divorced from the land– in a globalist culture still based largely upon Roman economic law instead of Jewish law which has immense respect for the land ¹⁴ – we've forgotten the spiritual truth expressed behind this ban on *shatnez*.

We've come to arrogantly believe that through our industries, we have totally circumvented seasonality, unhinged ourselves from the requirements of nature. Our current ecological crisis indicts us.

We've actually begun to think that it is human technology, currency, manufacturing plants, stock-markets and economies that feed us, and not the Lord God of Creation. We've actually given priority to corporate laws that defile the land in the name of higher GNP's, rather than uphold Creation in the Name of God. And we've done this in the name of religion, quoting Hebrew scripture! So-called "Jewish" businessmen, who give large sums to the UJA, are culprits, too!

So, no! The essence of the ban against *shatnez* is not a superstition, nor is it, essentially, a fantastic metaphor. It is bio-centric wisdom, a natural-ontological insight based upon a spiritually and scientifically discernable fact: All life, including human life, is provided for in its right and proper season.

This is the Creator God, the One God! This is the God that provides for human beings. We do not need to push nature, to combine wool and linen improperly, to stay clothed and protected. Nor, for that matter, do we have to resort to "insider tips" to push the seasonality of the stock market, and garner a greater harvest, more *manna*, than God and His Righteousness might have naturally provided, which as we've seen recently, only resulted in great barrenness falling upon Wall Street.

Therefore, the ban against *shatnez* is hardly, as some scholars including Rambam have maintained, merely a superficial way of distinguishing us from idolatrous nations, a “dress code” so-to-speak. ¹⁵ Perhaps it became viewed this way after time, when we were left with just the empty shell of a “religious law” described in words, rather than a once vibrant, living, law, binding our life to our land and our land to God. But, his “rationalist” view is hardly God’s Rationale. The living law separating wool and linen, in their right and proper seasons, distinguished us from idolatrous nations not in a superficial way, but in quite a *substantial* way. We were distinguished from nations that built their civilization on the ruthless coercion of nature, such as the Hittite, the Amelkite or the pagan Roman. We were distinguished as a nation that *first* strove to sanctify (live according to) God’s Laws in nature– and only *secondarily*, as a consequence, receive satisfaction of our hungers and creaturely-desires. Through the living-separation of wool and linen, and many other once living laws, such as *kashrut*) ¹⁶, we were truly distinguished, *chosen*, to be an *am*– a nation covenantally-aligned to God’s Laws in Creation– not a *goy*, a mere *country*. ¹⁷

Sadly, in today’s Jewish congregations, this distinction has become, like the observance of the ban on *shatnez* itself, more of a sentimental claim or religious marketing platform than a true, living, spiritual distinction. Our inquisitive youth highly doubt that breaking a “religious law” by wearing a fine-blend of wool and linen will spark God’s ire. After all, in today’s non-agrarian world, their experience-in-life demonstrates just the opposite: A fine blend of wool and linen, an *Armani* suit, perhaps purchased in Bloomingdales, makes them look highly employable and contributes to their monetary success. God doesn’t seem to punish them for breaking the “religious law” of *shatnez*; God seems to reward them.

Today’s youth interpret our “religious laws”, such as the banning of *shatnez*, as not being real, as something “irrelevant” or “meaningless”, because it is divorced from human life experience and the *real-process of life in Reality*, such as seasonality.

Are they wrong?

Only now are we prepared to solve the last part of the mystery of *shatnez* – for it has been, for centuries, a great curiosity that although the Israelites were enjoined to ban *shatnez*, yet, the curtain which veiled the Holy of Holies, as well as the garment of the High Priest, *seem* to have actually co-mingled wool and linen:

Moreover thou shalt make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twined linen, and blue, and purple, and scarlet: (*Ex. 26: 1 ff.*) . . . And thou shalt make a veil of blue, and purple and scarlet, and fine twined linen . . . (*Ex. 26:31 ff.*)

And thou shalt make the robe of the efod all of blue. And there shall be a hole for the head, in the midst of it: it shall have a binding of woven work round the hole, as it were the hole of a suit of armour, that it be not torn. And beneath upon the hem of it thou shalt make pomegranates of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, round about its hem . . . And thou shalt weave the coat of fine linen, and thou shalt make the mitre of fine linen, and thou shalt make the girdle of embroidery . . . (Ex. 28:31ff.)

These verses only *seem* to imply a mixture of wool and linen because, if one looks carefully at the *Torah* passages involved, the Hebrew does not specifically mention the word “wool”, but only the word “linen”. It does however; mention an array of magnificent colors that are a part of the weaving of the High Priest’s robe as well as the sacred curtain. Such colors could easily imply wool threads, because it is difficult to imagine any other indigenous material which could take such intensely-colored dye. ¹⁸

Although the rabbis clearly state that the High Priest’s garments were *shatnez* ¹⁹, it is also possible that wool was not co-mingled with linen and the vibrant colors were furnished a different way. It is possible that the rabbis interpreted wool into these passages based upon their own legal conclusions that it was legitimate to adorn *tallit* made of linen with fringes made of wool ²⁰ or perhaps, vice-versa, that such an adornment was legal, because of the nature of the High Priest’s garment.

Confusing matters even more, it appears that translators, perhaps knowing these commentaries, began to translate these passages using words like “yarn” which are not in the original Hebrew, making it seem virtually certain that wool was co-mingled with linen. This is true both of the JPS translation ²¹ and the New International Version ²², one a contemporary Reform Jewish translation, one a Christian translation, but both, in a way, *shatnez*, too freely mixing interpretation with translation:

As for the tabernacle, make it of ten strips of cloth; make these of fine twisted linen, of blue, purple, and crimson *yarns* [emphasis added] (Ex. 26: 1ff.) . . . You shall make a curtain of blue, purple, and crimson *yarns*, [emphasis added] and fine twisted linen; (Ex. 26: 31ff.)

Make the robe of the ephod entirely of blue cloth, with an opening for the head in its center. There shall be a woven edge like a collar around this opening, so that it will not tear. Make pomegranates of blue, purple and scarlet *yarn* [emphasis added] around the hem of the robe . . . Weave the tunic of fine linen and make the turban of fine linen. The sash is to be the work of an embroiderer. (Ex. 28:31ff.)

If traditional interpretation is wrong, and the High Priest’s garment is not *shatnez*, then nothing is really lost to the above interpretation. So, for a moment, let us give

tradition the benefit of the doubt and assume that the High Priest's clothing as well as the curtain veiling the Holy of Holies did, in fact, mix wool and linen. If so, why?

And why too, according to the rabbis, is *shatnez* also considered perfectly acceptable as a burial shroud?— though this may be a later cultural development, for it is not even hinted at in the *Torah* itself, but only in later commentaries. ²³

The explanation for these odd exceptions only requires us to add a simple extension to this interpretation. Indeed, it is so simple and obvious, that it leads me to believe that the tradition affirming the use of *shatnez* for the High Priest's robe, as well as for burial shrouds, does not arise *impromptu*, but is a logical, coherent consequence of the same original meaning of *shatnez*.

Since the High Priest enters the Holy of Holies where dwells God's Living Presence, separations of seasonality, if not all earthly timings, are subsumed. Natural seasons with the natural separations of wool and linen are *sub-ordinate* (ordered under) to the One God. The Creator is beyond all seasons, from Whom they propagate. The curtain hemming in the Holy of Holies separates God's Time from everyday temporality. The High Priest's activity, sowing and reaping penitence, is beyond seasonality. Indeed, unlike average Israelites, priests were absolved from seasonal sowing and reaping; they were given their fair share of harvests, including wool and linen, to support their yearly temple duties. So here, in the context of exalted priestly activity, the presence of *shatnez* is not a denial of God, but, an affirmation of God.

And, obviously, the strict separation of seasons implicit in the ban of *shatnez* is equally irrelevant upon death. Seasonality, which is only involved within a *living* body, ceases upon death. The body returns to dust, or, in later more spiritual constructs, the soul returns to God. Either way, the separation of seasons as an earthly, bodily experience, is subsumed into its creational or heavenly origin. Here too, in the context of a burial shroud for the dead, the presence of *shatnez* is not a denial of God, but, an affirmation of God.

In both so-called "exceptions", the proximity of the Eternal neutralizes the strict mortally-experienced compartmentalization of seasons. Standing before the Creator, from whom all skeins of temporality proceed, and to which all skeins of temporality return, wool, and linen can be mixed.

Thus, even the apparent exception to this *mishpat* is not an exception, but, instead, a specification. Such a coherence leads me to believe that it may be entirely factual that the High Priest's garment, the sacred curtain and burial shrouds were *shatnez*. But, even if it is not factual, but is rabbinic interpretation retrojected upon *Torah*, it seems their interpretation was still, nonetheless, based upon an authentic

knowledge of the true meaning, or once living-meaning, of this ancient law, or, at the very least, an intuitive sense of it.

So there. We have removed the *shatnez* from *shatnez*. This previous *chok*, I believe, has been fully converted into a *mishpat*, and a magnificent one at that. The authority of religion and the authority of reason have been co-mingled authentically. Indeed, the conflict between these has been dissolved.

The true law of *shatnez* is, I believe, derived from the seasonality-of-nature, God's Design. It is not fundamentally a "religious" law, i.e. woven from traditional interpretations, but, is an expression of a Living Law of Life, both spiritual and natural, because it is ordered by God the Creator. The essence of *shatnez* is universal by nature, pertinent to all humankind. It *became* a near religious law, when we had forgotten the origin of this law, but were left with the vestiges of customs. Holding to these customs with an iron-clad faith, elaborating upon them with layers of interpretations, ritual and legal requirements, they became aspects of a religious culture— sadly, like so many customs, disconnected from the original knowledge and World View which engendered them.

History is not tidy. Knowledge once possessed can become lost. Nonetheless, religious customs, such as the non-mingling of wool and linen, which are the embodiments of previously-lived knowledge, can be precious *reminders* of God's Laws. Preserving these reminders, against all odds, meditating upon them for centuries, so that their veiled inner-knowledge might one day crack open like a planted seed, is the great gift of Jewish traditionalism. Sometimes it is good to favor religion over reason!

But, sometimes it is also good to favor reason over religion: Reminding ourselves that this religious custom is not, in and of itself, the Law of God is critical or, we lapse into a kind of "religious idolatry" let alone superstition. Reminding ourselves that this custom is "just" a custom, that it is not unchangeable, immutable and eternal— that it is not itself a Divine-requirement of salvation nor the *sine qua non* of the Jew— this, is the great gift of the Jewish liberal.

Can we hear each other?

I believe we can, if we begin to look ourselves through the lens of *Universal Judaism*.

Today, modern biblical criticism has virtually decimated the simple, naïve "fact" that the whole of the written (let alone the oral) law was actually given to Moses at Sinai. Because of that, the contemporary Jew has often been left with emptiness, shakiness, a loss of a traditional faith-certainty: the Torah *qua Pentateuch*, may not be "from God" after all.

But, the beauty of Universal Judaism's *perspective* is that, even in the midst of such biblical criticism, we are assured that our laws *are* "from God". They are *bio-ontological*. They are built-into Creation, so they can be considered a *revelation* of God's Nature: a revelation of how earthly-nature was designed, how, like seasonality, it was *ordered* by the Creator according to His Laws or Commandments, and to which we must adhere in order to be covenantally-aligned as people.

With the help of the Universal Judaism's perspective, loss of the "myth" of the *Torah* does not destroy the *value* of the *Torah*. The *Torah* is bigger than religion. The Jew is more than religion, too. No Platonic hyperbole/*midrash*, that expands the literal *Pentateuch* into the very *Blueprint* of Creation is necessary to give our law the status of a revelation or *logos*.²⁴ The Universal Judaism perspective achieves this simply, more naturally, more physically, less metaphysically. It is more scientific than speculative. It is more commonsense than contrivance. It is more real than idea. It is more Jewish than Greek. It is freer from the *diaspora*-of-thought, in which we Jews have been imprisoned, for far too long.

When one compares ancient Israel to other ancient countries, where sex with beasts, body slashing, child sacrifice and other savory *abominations* of nature were taking place, and one witnesses the resulting *de-generacy* that took place in their cultures – one realizes, more than ever, the extraordinary gift of Universal Judaism's perspective. By our obeying God's Commandment, aligning ourselves to His Order in nature, our civilization could continue to be *generate*, to prosper, to flower, to bring forth new generations in abundance (*Ex. 23:25-26*).

We, as a people, are still alive. Others have died. The law saves.

"It [Torah] is a Tree of Life to those who cleave to it." (*Prov. 3:18*)

These days, when we are becoming scientifically aware of the effect of seasonality on affect, manic-depression, suicide and chronic pain²⁵, this ancient Israelite insight is a ram's horn, calling us to return. These days, when we are becoming aware of the nutritional inferiority of produce grown non-locally and consumed non-seasonally, this ancient universal perspective is far more relevant and spiritually-persuasive to contemporary Jewish youth than mere fastidiousness and scrupulousness to keep the fibers of wool and linen separate in our clothes.

I am convinced that the Universal Judaism perspective is critical to reinvigorate Judaism and is necessary for fathoming the spiritual meaning of Israel for the world.

I am further convinced that the Universal Judaism perspective is necessary to help heal the deep inter-religious divides that have plagued Jews and our daughter-

peoples, Christians and Muslims, who, I believe, inherited some of our religious confusions and reflected them back upon us.

No less, I am convinced that the Universal Judaism perspective can help ease the classic theological conflict between so-called “historical” religions and “natural” religions, the latter having been too glibly condemned via the epithet “pagan”.²⁶

This excessive distinction-turned-duality has destroyed the unity of humankind and infected Western Civilization and its religions with bigotry. While retaining the distinction is critical, retaining the duality is cancerous.

Moreover, when one considers the huge number of contemporary Jews that now seeking spiritual awakening through Hinduism, Buddhism, Wicca and other “naturalist” religions, the Universal Judaism perspective can help them better appreciate the core Judaism, that they are essentially re-discovering, albeit from non-Jewish sources.

Lastly, now that we Jews have returned to our *land*, and we’re discovering how to be “naturally ourselves” after the Greco-Roman *Diaspora* – this Universal Judaism perspective has profound implications, especially in an Israel which is far more secular than religious.

The Universal Judaism perspective can begin to anchor secular life back to its deep Jewish spiritual roots. The Universal Judaism perspective can begin to transform an empty secularism– a mere collection of common-sense, agreed-upon, ethical, material or economic rules within “modern” capitalist democratic society– and re-connect them, deeply, to the very Mystery of Creation of which we are all a part. Israeli culture can begin to rediscover and practice the Universal Judaism insight, that every human action must cooperate with Creation’s Design, i.e. be in *alignment* to God’s Will on the *land*.

What a magnificent spiritual expression of the meaning of our return home: alive in the present, without the “trappings” of religious formalism, from which so many *chalutzim* shied away.

This holds the promise that the *State* of Israel can once again become an *am*, the *Nation* of Israel, truly covenanted, linked in deep, abiding integration with the Laws-of-God-in-Creation, witnessing these, in a contemporary form, as a Light unto the nations.²⁷

For me personally, unearthing this Universal Judaism perspective and removing the *shatnez* from *shatnez*, has meant the unknotting of my heart, mind and will. Less tangled in all these intellectual, emotional and historical skeins, I experience a freer, fuller, more complete, more unified assent (ascent) to God’s calling as a Jew, and as a human being.

It is my hope that this will do the same for you.

Footnotes

¹ Translations, unless otherwise mentioned, are from *The Jerusalem Bible*, Koren Publications, Jerusalem, Israel 1977.

² *Chochmas Odom, Hilchos Shatnez*, 106:28.

³ www.Roshpinah.com/commentary.html; July 13, 2005

⁴ *Yoreh Deah* 299:1

⁵ *Zohar, Devarim* 22:11

⁶ *Sefer haHinuch*, #551, Feldheim Publishers, Jerusalem, N.Y., 1992. Hereafter cited as Sefer.

⁷ Rashi, commentary on *Bemidbar* (Num.) 19:1

⁸ See universaljudaism.org. Also see naturallawjudaism.org an earlier stage in its development. Universal Judaism maintains that the essence of Jewish Laws are Universal Laws built into the design of nature. One might be tempted to call this perspective “natural law” but Universal Judaism uses this phrase differently than is done classically; this is why I now prefer the name Universal Judaism.

The term “natural law” is usually used in the general sense of there being laws of human life that are *self-evident* and based upon Universal Reason. It has been equated by one superb traditionalist scholar to *Noahide* laws; for an insightful discussion, See *Novak, David. Natural Law in Judaism*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

The Universal Law of nature, expressed through Universal Judaism, is far more organic, living, than classic natural law theology, which is more philosophical or “mental”.

However, Universal Judaism is nonetheless discernable by reason (as classic Natural Law), *because* it outlines those lines or boundaries which are necessary and sufficient for the continuity of life, and human life. They are built into the design of Creation. Therefore, they may be said to be “created by God” or “God’s Will”, i.e. Universal.

The Universal Laws built into nature fundamentally express the *Order* in/of Creation. This is God’s *Order* in nature, or, as the English word puns meaningfully, God’s *Commandment*.

God's Orders or Commandments in nature are those lines we must acknowledge, in order to live in harmony with Creation, i.e. in *alignment* or *covenant* with the Creator's Will in nature. Basic Torah is universal in nature!

This approach to Torah, without the religious-concept of "revelation", is *both* scientifically-discernable and spiritually-describable perspective, reason and the essential-religious are inseparable. This was implicit in the Rabbis assertion of the "Torah" as the "blueprint" of Creation. See fn. 24 below. I trust this discussion of *shatnez* will make some of these theoretical points more precisely.

⁹ With great thanks to my teachers, far too numerous to name here, but especially Rabbi Jack Bemporad, Rabbi Barry Friedman, Rabbi Robert Wisdom, Rabbi-Professor Robert Seltzer. And, last but not first, the late, great Professor Ellis Rivkin, upon whose shoulders we all stand and are made tall.

With special thanks also to Boaz and Chanah Miller, congregants in the Bucks County Free Synagogue, who are my spiritual parents in this enterprise.

¹⁰ It is so curious that there is no indigenous Hebrew word for "religion", itself from a Latin word, *re-ligere*, meaning to "bind back". Jews tend to use the word *daat*, meaning "law" as equivalent for *religion*.

I believe we still think of ourselves as a religion because that is the category that we were permitted within the Roman empire. In what way is "religion" separate from "life", in the Natural Law Judaism perspective?

We are a people. Our spirituality and our naturalness are one.

¹¹ With respect to women, but, especially to the "Formless" aspect of God, I have used *His/Her/Its* here. But henceforth, for the sake of ease and readability, I shall revert to "His". May others feel free to use the word "Her" as freely.

¹² The Calendar of Gezer is currently in the Syria/Palestina Collection, of the Archeological Museum in Istanbul, Turkey. Scan Google; www.heraldmag.org/2001/01jf_1.htm

¹³ In this paper, I am addressing primarily first aspect of Israel's covenant with God, which is the "naturalist" aspect, involving the inter-relationship between human invention and God's creation, what would correspond in traditionalist thinking to the *Noahide* covenant.

The historical aspect of our covenant, which involves the unification of the world-of-nations under the One God, I shall reserve for another time. Nevertheless, the historical aspect of Israel's covenant is, in part, a witnessing of the former to the nations of the world.

¹⁴ Roman Law permitted untrammelled right to ownership of anything (and sometimes anyone) on earth; razing land, burning whole societies to the ground, destruction of plant and life stock was common place. In general, the “physical body” of the earth was not at all respected or sanctified. This is a completely different approach from Jewish Law, where, for example, if one went to war, one was not permitted to cut down a tree (*Deut.*) 21:10). See: Kahana, Kagan, K., Three Great Systems of Jurisprudence, Stevens & Sons, Limited, London, 1955.

¹⁵ *Guide* 3:37

¹⁶ *Kashrut* as a living law, like *shatnez*, is also remarkably simple, though the context for its formulations has never been made clear. However, this is beyond the scope of this particular paper.

¹⁷ I prefer to translate “goy” as *country*, because this comes from the root word meaning “conflict”. Thus, to know the God who is One, is to have peace. To not know The One, is to live in divisiveness or conflict. I believe this language clarifies more precisely the distinction of *am* and *goy*.

¹⁸ *Sefer*, #386.

¹⁹ *Yoma* 69a

Also, as to Rambam’s claim that the ban on *shatnez* was there to separate us from other nations– in regard to the High Priest, it is even more problematic. It appears that Egyptian High Priests of Amun, at the end of the 20th dynasty, wore linen only. Did then the Israelites add wool to the linen so that the Israelite High Priest wouldn’t appear to be the same as the other nations? See: *The Life of Ancient Egyptians*, Intercity Oz, Inc., 1999-2003.

²⁰ *Men.* 40a.; *Yeb.* 4a

²¹ Tanakh, The Holy Scriptures, Jewish Publication Society Philadelphia, Jerusalem, 1985.

²² New International Version, International Bible Society, 1984.

²³ *Nid.* 61b

²⁴ *Bereishis Rabbah* 1:1

²⁵ For example, Google, “Seasonal Affective Disorder”, “Seasonality and Chronic Pain”, and “Seasonal Foods”. There are far too many citations to include here.

²⁶ The term “pagan” literally means “from the land”, a “peasant” in the sense of “connected to land”, *am ha-aretz*, in Hebrew. However, dichotomous categories

such as *thought vs. matter, mind vs. nature, men vs. women, Roman-Greek vs. Jew, saved and not-saved*, which have characterized the previous era's war-like theology, is seriously problematic. In what way can you separate Jews from "land"? In what way can you separate God from a natural, bio-centric ontology, and retain a unity-of-Creation, and a credible soteriology? Is ecology a plot from Satan? Are pagans damned?

There has been much, I think, *Gnostic* contamination. The perspective of Natural Law Judaism can help remove this dangerous *shatnez* from which we are recovering in this era.

²⁷ *Isaiah* 49:6

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