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Sha'atnez – The Biblical Prohibition Against Wearing Mixed Wool and Linen Together and the Observance and Enforcement of the Command in the Orthodox Jewish Communities Today

Orit Shamir

Jewish law forbids *Sha'atnez* – wearing mixed wool and linen together was forbidden for the Jewish population. The article will first explain the meaning and acronym of *sha'atnez*, and then review the *sha'atnez* textiles which were found in the Land of Israel. The possible reasons for the prohibition of *sha'atnez* will be presented and remarks on observance and enforcement of the law in Orthodox Jewish communities today will be made according to ethnographic investigation.²

The concept of *sha'atnez*

Jewish law forbids *sha'atnez* – wearing garments of mixed wool and linen. This is mentioned twice in the Hebrew Bible: It is written in *Leviticus* 19:19, where it is stated that “you shall not put on cloth from a mixture of two kinds of material”. The prohibition of “the mixture of diverse kinds” of material is mentioned

in additional contexts such as interbreeding different species of animals together, working different species of animals under the same yoke, and planting different species of seeds together in a single field. *Sha'atnez* garments are mentioned but the specific materials are not listed. In *Deuteronomy* 22:11, however, it is added that “You shall not wear cloth combining wool and linen”.

Sha'atnez applies only to sheep's wool and linen. Any other combination of plant and animal fibres does not create *sha'atnez*, such as the combinations of cotton, silk, camel hair, mohair, hemp or nettle. The wool and linen may not be spun, woven, sewn, tied, knotted, or knitted together for garment use. Even one linen thread found in a large garment of wool renders the entire garment *sha'atnez*.³ Men and women are equally obligated in all the prohibitions of *sha'atnez* and it is also forbidden to clothe a child in *sha'atnez* garments.⁴

1. I would like to thank Rabbi Nahum Ben-Yehuda for his comments.

2. The Ancient Textiles Study Collection in Israel includes a wealth of textiles, basketry, cordage wood and leather artifacts, fruits and seeds – dating from 8000 BCE until 1800 CE. They can be seen on the on-line web site project of “Selected Artefacts from the Collections of the National Treasures”. In 2018 the collection will move to the National Campus for the Archaeology of Israel instead of the storeroom that is used today and will be called “The Nash Family Center for Ancient Textiles and Organic Materials”. Some of the textiles presented in this paper are stored in this collection. http://www.antiquities.org.il/t/default_en.aspx

3. Brauner 2006, 1; Mishnah tractate Kil'ayim 9:9; Sifrah Qedoshim 2:4; Sifrah Qedoshim 2:4; Sifrah Devarim 235.

4. Brauner 2006, 2.

Site	No. of textiles	No. of <i>Sha'atnez</i> textiles
<i>Wadi ed-Dâliyah</i> (Fig. 2)	58	3
<i>Masada</i> , sewing threads <i>Masada</i> , textiles (Fig. 3)	Thousands, only 122 were published	7 2
<i>Cave of Letters</i> sewing threads	346	1
<i>'En Tamar</i> (Fig. 4)	c. 200	c. 4
<i>Kuntillat 'Ajrud</i> (Fig. 5)	120	3

Table 1. Sites that yielded *Sha'atnez* textiles

This law is strictly observed by the Jewish Orthodox community today and many people bring clothing to special experts who are employed to detect the presence of *sha'atnez* by microscopes⁵ and other means.

Etymology of the word *sha'atnez*

The word is not of Hebrew origin, and its etymology is obscure. Some like Albright⁶ quoted also by Lambdin and Milgrom⁷ suggest that it is of Egyptian origin:

s'd 'to cut' and ng 'thread' or *sht* means weave and *n'dz* means false; the compound *sha'at-nez* therefore signifies a 'false weave' or false textile.⁸

The Mishnah, Judaism's first major canonical document following the Bible, explains the word *sha'atnez* as an acronym of three words in Hebrew: *shua* = 'combed', refers to the combing of the raw fiber; *tavey* = 'spun', the process of spinning fibers into a thread; *nuz* = 'twisted together into threads'. They represent three different stages in the processing

of the wool and linen fibers.

The Modern Hebrew word *sha'atnez* means mixture, and this may be a semantic change as a result of the word's use in Biblical law.⁹ We use this word very often, for example, "the food in Israel is *sha'atnez* of cultures".

Sha'atnez textiles preserved in the archaeological record

Although thousands of textiles in Israel have been examined by the author,¹⁰ not one piece of *sha'atnez* has been recovered from any Roman period Jewish site. This stands in contrast to Roman sites in neighboring areas, as for example in Syria at sites such as Dura Europos and Palmyra,¹¹ and in Coptic Egypt, which have yielded great quantities of textiles made of mixed linen and wool.¹²

Yet a few pre-Roman and Roman sites have yielded *Sha'atnez* textiles (Table 1, fig. 1) and they are discussed in my previous article about this topic.¹³

5. <http://shatnez.n3.net/>

6. Albright 1943, 32, note 27.

7. Lambdin 1953, 155; Milgrom 2000, 1659.

8. Brown, Driver & Briggs 2012, no. 3610.

9. Liebenberg 2014

10. Shamir 2007.

11. Pfister & Bellinger 1945, 25, No. 256; Pfister 1934, 13; 1937, Pls. 2:C, 4:F

12. Baginski & Tidhar 1980.

13. Shamir 2014.

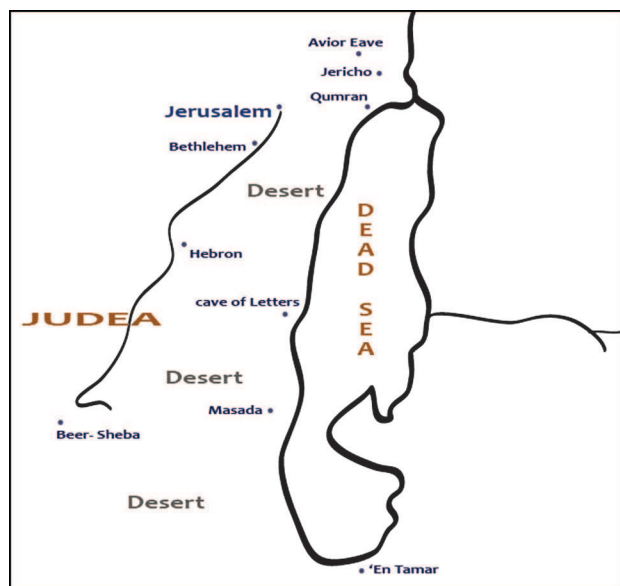


Figure 1. Judea Desert map (Credit: Shamir S.).

Explanations for the Biblical prohibition

The Hebrew Bible does not explain why it is forbidden to mix the two fibers – wool and linen – other than being God's command, but ancient (like the sages) and modern interpreters have suggested different explanations in order to make the rule of *sha'atnez* understandable. I will present a few reasons that could explain *sha'atnez*.

- a.) One explanation is connected with the priests' garments: only priests were allowed to wear *sha'atnez*. Why was it necessary that the High Priest dressed in clothes made of mixed wool and linen while serving in the temple?

Perhaps this was to distinguish between the worship carried out by the priests and that carried out by the Jewish commoners. Therefore, *sha'atnez* was forbidden for the commoners. This explanation is also corroborated by Josephus Flavius (Joseph ben Matityahu, 37-100 CE), who wrote in his

book *Antiquities of the Jews* that wearing *sha'atnez* was prohibited and reserved for the priests of Israel.¹⁴ I will here discuss only one aspect of the priests' clothes and this is the *sha'atnez*. Although the garments of the High Priest were different from the garments of the ordinary priests, most scholars agree that all of them wore *sha'atnez*. Ordinary priests wore *sha'atnez* only in their girdle¹⁵ and the High Priest in additional garments. The Bible describes the priests' girdle in the following way: "And the sash of fine twisted linen, and blue and purple and scarlet material, the work of the weaver, just as the Lord had commanded Moses."¹⁶ Rabbinic Judaism maintains that *sha'atnez* was permitted in the case of the priest's girdle, in which linen was woven with purple, blue, and scarlet yarn. According to the Rabbis (Judaic studies teacher, religious authority in Judaism), the purple, blue, and scarlet was made from wool:

As Boertien states, the use of special fabrics or liturgical garments was, and still is, a common phenomenon worldwide. In Egypt a special kind of Egyptian linen, the 'royal linen', was intended for priestly vestments.¹⁷ In Mesopotamia, where the dominant fiber was wool, the priests were also dressed in linen.¹⁸

The eight garments worn by the High Priest are as follows: The breastplate, ephod, robe, tunic, turban, belt, crown and pants.¹⁹ Three of these garments were *sha'atnez* woven with plied linen threads and blue, scarlet and purple wool threads,²⁰ considered the most expensive dyes and produced from Hexaplex trunculus (*tekhelet*), *Murex Brandaris* or *Thais Haemastoma*—(*argaman*) shellfish—and the kermes (*tola'at shani*) insect.

The Bible instructs that the High Priest's vestment should be decorated and colored, for honor and for beauty: "Make sacral vestments for your

14. Josephus III, 7, 1.

15. https://www.templeinstitute.org/priestly_garments.htm (accessed 01/02/2016).

16. Exodus 28:6.

17. Boertien 2014, 152; Hall 1986, 18.

18. Quillien 2014; Sheffer & Tidhar 2012, 310.

19. Exodus 28:4.

20. Exodus 28:6, 15.

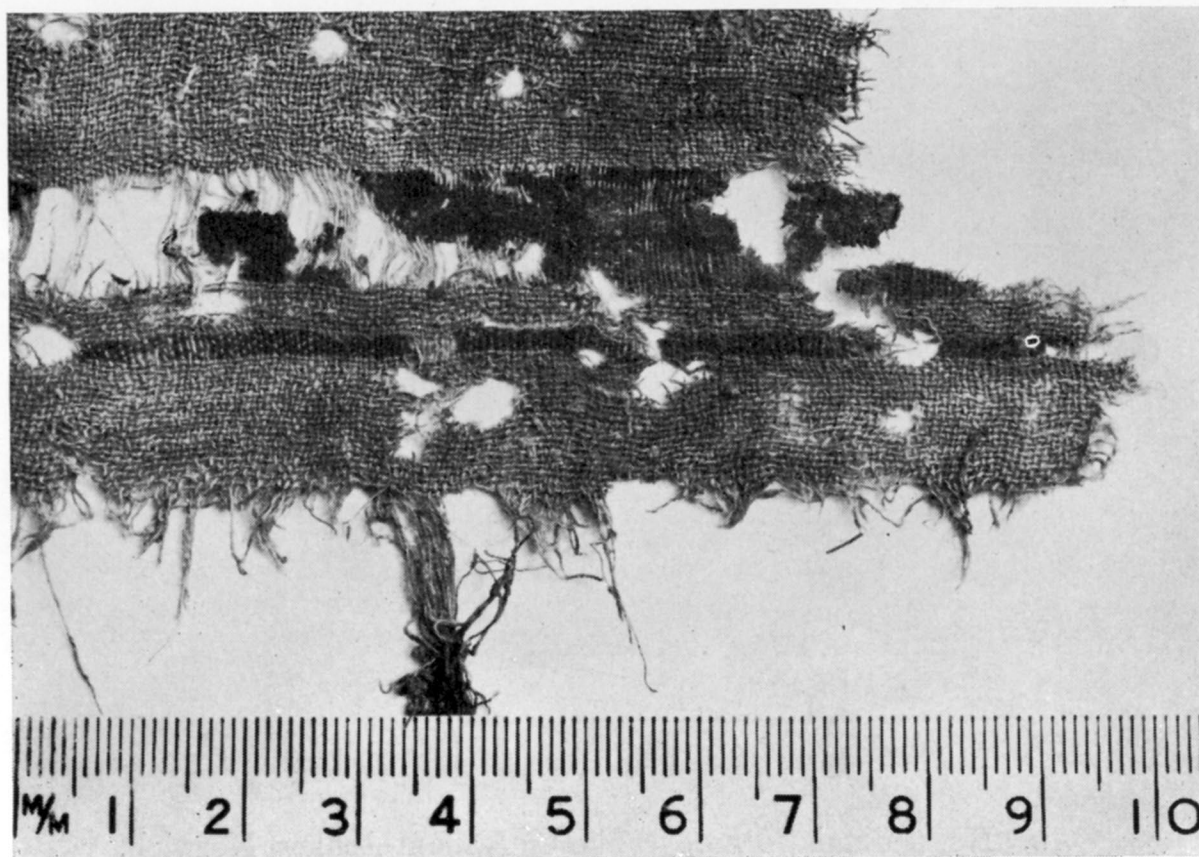


Figure 2. Wadi ed-Dâliyah *sha'atnez* (Crowfoot 1974, Pl. 83b).



Figure 3. Masada *sha'atnez* (Israel Antiquities Authority No. 1995-9026. Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority. Photo by Clara Amit).

brother Aaron, for dignity and adornment.”²¹ Indeed, the Talmud²² informs us that when the Persian king Ahasuerus made a feast for his advisors and officers and sought to impress them with

his greatness (as recorded in the scroll of Esther, which tells the story of Purim), he put off his own royal vestments and donned the uniform of the High Priest, which was more precious than his

21. Exodus 28:2.

22. Babylon Talmud Megillah 10, 2.

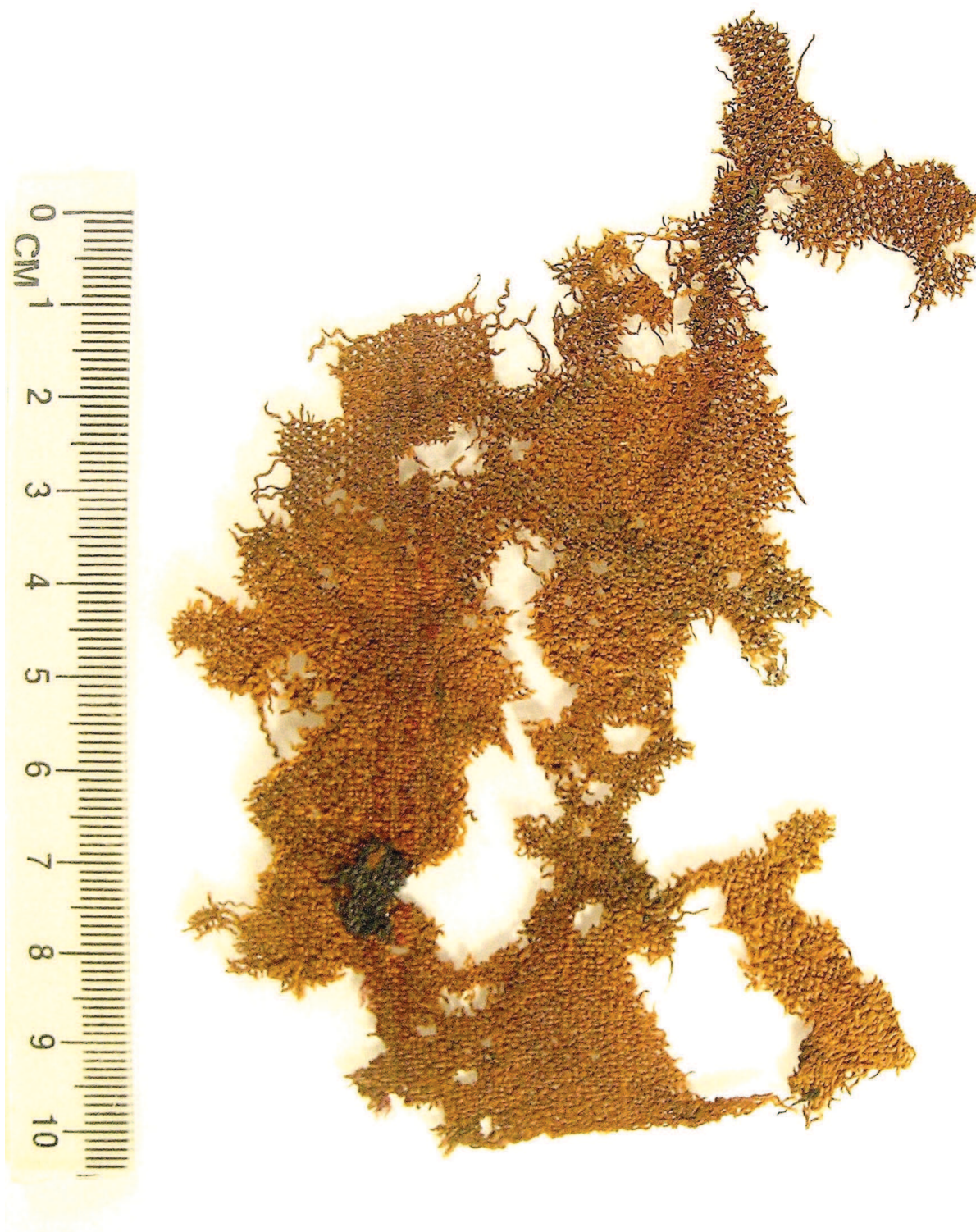


Figure 4. 'En Tamar. Linen textile decorated with wool bands (Israel Antiquities Authority No. 2003-9038. Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority. Photo by Clara Amit).



Figure 5. Kuntillat 'Ajrud. Linen textile decorated with wool bands. Sheffer & Tidhar 2012, 301.

own. These priestly garments were in his possession since the First Temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians. Another aspect of “honor and beauty” means that the uniform must fit each perfectly. Thus, it was forbidden for the pants, for example, to be too long or too short. The garments were made on order for each priest, tailored to fit his measurements exactly.²³

One of the interpreters is R. Shimshon Refael Hirsch. In his work on the philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observances he states: “Only the priest had wool and flax mixed in his clothing, for he represents the community as a unity, and in his personality bridges all dissimilarities.” Rather than thinking of *sha'atnez* as something negative, in fact it represents a higher level of existence to which only certain individuals involved in certain activities can aspire!²⁴

b.) Another explanation is given by the Talmud:²⁵ here, it is suggested that the prohibition of *sha'atnez* is related to Cain and Abel, the first naturally born human beings. They brought

offerings to God: “Now it came to pass at the end of days, that Cain brought of the fruit of the soil, interpreted as flax, an offering to the Lord. And Abel he too brought of the first born of his flocks and of their fattest, and the Lord turned to Abel and to his offering.”²⁶ This mixture ended up being lethal and Abel lost his life.

c.) Another reason is that linen is a product of a riverine agricultural economy, such as that of the Nile Valley, while wool is a product of a desert, pastoral economy, such as that of the Hebrew tribes. Maimonides, a medieval Jewish philosopher,²⁷ argued that the prohibition was a case of the general law against imitating Canaanite customs²⁸ – “And you shall not walk in the manner of the nations...”²⁹ The rules about forbidden mixtures serve to remind the Israelites how their past experiences with Canaanites and Egyptians threatened their national identity.

23. Leviticus 6:3; https://www.templeinstitute.org/priestly_garments.htm

24. Hirsch 1981.

25. Midrash-Genesis Rabbah 5.

26. Genesis 4:1-17.

27. Medieval Jewish philosopher.

28. Liebenberg 2014, 7.

29. Leviticus 20:23, 18:3.

Observance and Enforcement of the Command in the Orthodox Jewish Communities Today

Observant Jews in current times also follow the laws of *sha'atnez*. With the widespread use of synthetic fabrics, the issue of *sha'atnez* is more complicated and especially since many garments are manufactured in various parts of the world by non Jews. In some cases, parts of a garment are being manufactured in one country and other parts in another. The result is that it is difficult for consumers to know the type of fibers that is in that garment.

Considering these developments, the *sha'atnez* testers of North America and their contacts in other countries have an informal network by which alert notices are sent out as new developments are discovered. This is all part of a support system that has been developed around this ancient and mysterious prohibition.³⁰ For example, I found in one of the websites dealing with *sha'atnez* this message: "We are therefore alerting the public that some jackets of the following brands were found to contain *sha'atnez* this past winter: Austin Reed, Brooks Brothers, J. Crew and Zara Man."³¹

Most *sha'atnez* that is found today is located in the collar stiffeners of men's suits especially in the more expensive suits. Most suits today are made of wool or wool blends. To retain the shape of the collar area, a canvas stiffener is generally sewn into the collar and linen is the fabric considered by the clothing industry as being the best material for this purpose.

Since clothing labels cannot be relied upon, there must be another way in which to determine whether or not an article of clothing contains *sha'atnez*. *Sha'atnez* laboratories had been established with the approval of prominent Rabbinic Authorities – in Israel, the U.S., England and elsewhere. The laboratories are staffed by specially trained experts who know where wool and linen may have been used in clothing and other articles, e.g., a suit may contain *sha'atnez* in any over sixty places. They also know how to identify wool and linen scientifically by means of microscopic analysis and chemical testing.

Newly purchased garments are checked to ensure that there are no forbidden mixtures. The sample takers are trained to take appropriate samples from a garment without damaging it.

Even suits that are 100% synthetic may contain *sha'atnez*. American law allows some leeway in labeling. A label that states that a garment is 100% wool may contain as much as 2% of other materials. In addition, the label refers only to the fabric, not to additional sewing threads or material in the padding and ornamentation.

It is permitted to try on a garment in a clothing store without knowing whether it has *sha'atnez* or not. If the label clearly states that the garment includes both wool and linen, then it is prohibited. However, there are different opinions about this case.

Sometimes labels can be misleading, especially in foreign languages, for example: "Laine" in French is wool, while "lin" in French means linen.³²

Removing the *Sha'atnez*

Once the *sha'atnez* in the garment has been located, either the wool or the linen must be removed completely. If the tailor or the store has already removed it, it still must be submitted to verification in a *sha'atnez* laboratory.

Sometimes the sections containing linen are removed from wool clothing or wool from linen clothing. If linen is found in a collar canvas, it is removed and replaced by a non-linen textile.

Training to become a *sha'atnez* checker (fig. 6)

"If you are looking for a job, there is a great need, particularly in smaller Jewish communities, to recruit qualified *sha'atnez* checkers. For those communities or individuals serious about undergoing a training programme, we recommend that you contact Rabbi Joel Shochett, head of The National Committee of *sha'atnez* Testers and Researchers, New Jersey."³³

30. http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/381831/jewish/The-Mysteries-of-Shaatnez.htm

31. <http://www.jerusalemkoshernews.com/2011/01/shatnez-alert-%E2%80%93-men%E2%80%99s-suits/> (accessed on 30/01/2016)

32. <http://shatnez.n3.net> (accessed on 15/12/2015).

33. <http://www.star-k.org/articles/articles/1227/the-mitzvah-of-shatnez/> (accessed on 30/01/2016).



Figure 6. Brussels School Learns *sha'atnez*. http://www.collive.com/show_news.rtx?id=10219 (accessed 31/01/16).

Conclusions

The concern to avoid *sha'atnez* during the Roman period, despite the hardship of war against the Roman army and the certain temptation to buy these textiles from non-Jews at the markets, is impressive and caused technical weaving problems.

Stitching wool textiles with linen threads or *vice versa* is also forbidden in *sha'atnez*. The presence of linen in the sewing threads of the Cave of the Letters and Masada can be explained by the harsh siege conditions of the Roman army.

Another important fact is the almost complete absence of mixed wool and linen (*sha'atnez*) textiles at non-Jewish sites, except in a few cases in the Roman period in a Nabatean burial at 'En Tamar.³⁴ It is striking that most of the textiles in Israel during the Roman period were produced by Jews and purchased by the non-Jewish population. There is a great resemblance between the Nabatean and Jewish textiles (1st-2nd centuries CE), including weaving techniques, colors, decorations such as shaded bands and the number of threads per cm.

This long tradition of keeping the rules of *sha'atnez* exists at least since 3000 years and continues till today.

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