

# Biblical Dress Codes and the Nobel Prize

Parashat Kedoshim, Leviticus, Chapters 19-20 | May 5, 2022

It was in 2006 that Dr. Yisrael, or Robert, Aumann of Hebrew University was informed that he had just been awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics for his groundbreaking work in game theory and was expected to present himself in Stockholm before the king, so that he could be awarded this prestigious prize by His Majesty himself. A profile of the professor in *Jewish Action* magazine describes how the awarding of the prize to Aumann, an Orthodox Jewish academic, presented a number of unique challenges.

First, each Nobel Laureate was allowed to invite 16 guests. For the Aumanns, with five children, 19 grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren, inviting the whole family presented a difficulty. Fortunately, *Jewish Action* tells us, another Nobel winner declined to come, and his 16 spots were given to the Aumanns.

Then there was the royal banquet. The Swedish royal family insisted that any kosher food be indistinguishable from that eaten by all other guests, but the menu of the Swedish chef was a state secret. The chef agreed to share, just this once, his menu beforehand so that kosher parallels could be served.

But the most interesting challenge lay in the dress code for the ceremony, because it conflicted—at least initially—with a mysterious law in Leviticus. It is Professor Aumann's response that will help us understand why this law appears precisely in the passages we study here.

After the biblical description of Yom Kippur, the Bible discusses prohibitions against eating blood, against eating an animal that died on its own rather than through ritual slaughter, and other related laws. But then we have several chapters that seem to be largely about the Jewish moral vision. For example, chapter 19 begins with two laws central to the Jewish faith:

*And the Lord spoke unto Moses saying,*

*Speak unto all the congregation of the children of Israel, and say unto them, Ye shall be holy: for I the Lord your God am holy.*

*Ye shall revere every man his mother, and his father, and keep my sabbaths: I am the Lord, your God. (Leviticus 19:1-3)*

In this fascinating passage, two commandments are joined: Sabbath observance and reverence for parents, and the point is profound. One of the central themes of the Sabbath is the honoring of the Almighty as Creator, and the Bible further informs us here that mother and father are owed honor and awe because they have partnered with God in becoming the creators of their children. Then, as the passage proceeds, the chapter delineates a whole host of ethical obligations.

For example:

*Ye shall not steal, neither deal falsely, neither lie to one another.*

*And ye shall not swear by my name falsely, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the Lord.*

*Thou shalt not defraud thy neighbor, neither rob him: the wages of him that is hired shall not abide with thee all night until the morning.*

*Thou shalt not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but shall fear thy God: I am the Lord. (Leviticus 19:11-14)*

The ethical regulations of this chapter are bracketed by chapters 18 and 20, which contain the laws pertaining

to sexual morality. But mixed among the ethical rules of chapter 19 is a mysterious *mitzvah*, a biblical obligation, a Divine declaration for which no explanation is offered and whose ultimate rationale is not easy to understand. It comes at the end of Leviticus 19:19:

*...neither shall a garment mingled of linen and wool come upon thee.*

The word in the Hebrew describing such a garment is “*shatnez*,” and to this day, traditional Jews do not wear garments containing both linen and wool. What is the rationale behind this rule? Some suggest that the Torah’s concern is a mixing of a sheep product, from the animal world, with linen, which comes from the agricultural world. The Torah, according to this approach, seeks to preserve the boundaries between the animal world and that of agriculture. Yet, according to Jewish law, there is no prohibition against mixing any other agricultural or animal materials. It is permitted, for example, to wear a garment of wool and cotton, or leather and linen. Even more mysterious is the fact that, whereas the Bible in Leviticus prohibits wearing a *shatnez* garment in general, it also obligates it in exceptional circumstances. Thus, some of the priestly garments actually contain *shatnez*. The law is therefore mysterious indeed—and that may be precisely the point. For the rabbis, this prohibition of *shatnez* allows us to see how the many commandments of the Torah can be divided into two categories, utilizing two different words for laws in the Bible.

First, there are “*mishpatim*.” A *mishpat*, for the Talmud, is an obligation whose reasons the human intellect can intuitively understand. The obligation to honor and revere our parents, for example, is a paradigmatic *mishpat*. But then, for the rabbis, that are also “*chukkim*.” A *chok* is an obligation that is obeyed without our full understanding of why the Divine demands it of us. *Shatnez*, for the rabbis, is just such an obligation. These chapters in Leviticus then ultimately include not only *mishpatim*, but also *chukkim*.

What are we to make of this mixture of *mitzvot*? Why does Scripture segue seamlessly between rules and regulations that we can easily understand and mysterious laws whose explanations may elude us? In order to understand this, we return to our Nobel prize winner,

Yisrael Aumann. Another article about Aumann by Sara Yoheved Rigler describes a challenge that his family faced while planning for the sojourn to Stockholm:

Every male present at the Awards Ceremony, including his seven-year-old grandson, is required to wear tails and a white bowtie, provided by the Nobel Foundation.

Since the Torah forbids wearing *shatnez* [a mixture of linen and wool], Prof. Aumann realized that he would have to have these garments checked for *shatnez*. This required having the Chief Rabbi of Sweden pick up one such outfit and bring it to Israel, where it could be checked with a microscope in one of Jerusalem’s many *shatnez* labs. The examination revealed that the tuxedos were indeed *shatnez*...

As Aumann’s profile in *Jewish Action* further informs us, the Aumanns:

...solved this problem by renting *shatnez*-free formalwear from an Israeli rental agency and having it flown to Stockholm for the ceremony.

We are then further informed that when asked what was most memorable about his Nobel experience, Robert Aumann cited not the ceremony itself, but seeing the blue and white of the flag of Israel flying over the royal palace of Sweden.

This striking story captures the spirit of our Levitical passage. In an article titled *Majesty and Humility*, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik notes that the union in the Torah of *mishpat* and *chok*, laws that can be easily understood and laws that defy attempts at explanation, together represent the majesty and the humility of the human mind. On the one hand, there are so many commandments whose ultimate purpose can be intuited by our intellects. This signifies the capacity of the mind with which humanity has been gifted by God. Yet, as we have also seen, even as Judaism celebrates our intellectual

capacity, it simultaneously stresses how we pale before the Almighty's omniscience. The commandments that we can understand are therefore joined to *Chukkim*, to commandments that we obey despite their surpassing our understanding. As Rabbi Soloveitchik puts it:

Precisely because of the supremacy of the intellect in human life, the Torah requires, at times, the suspension of the authority logos. Man defeats himself by accepting norms that the intellect cannot assimilate into its normative system. The Judaic concept of *hok* represents human surrender...

And we are now able to understand why Professor Aumann's sartorial selections are so symbolic. *Shatnez* is a paradigmatic *chok*. Professor Aumann is someone who has lived the life of the mind, whose institute at Hebrew University is actually named the "Center for Rationality," who has entered academia and achieved fame and fortune entirely through his extraordinary intellect, through pure thought. According to Rigler's article:

When their father was lying on the couch with his eyes closed, their mother would hush the children: Don't bother Abba [Father]. He's working.

All he does is think. Yet, at the pinnacle of his achievement, when Aumann is being honored by the world for his intellectual insights, he obeys the law of *shatnez*, whose very essence embodies the notion that there are many things that the human mind—no matter how gifted—cannot comprehend, that there are rituals that we are obligated to observe solely because of the commandment of the Almighty.

Think of the dichotomy, the dialectic of a man receiving the Nobel Prize from the King of Sweden in his *shatnez*-free formal wear. Attired in the garments of the palace that are simultaneously tailored to the dictates of Jewish law, thereby embodying at the same time human greatness and limitation, rationality and faith, majesty and humility.

It is therefore so fitting, we might add, that an Israeli awarded the Nobel Prize in Sweden in a garment that he took pains to ensure was *shatnez*-free, was also so emotionally impressed by the honor that he had brought to his country by seeing the blue and white of the Israeli flag flying over the Swedish palace.

The story of Israel is itself a symbol of majesty and humility, of both human achievement and Divine mystery. It is on the one hand, a tale of human strength and perseverance, as Herzl put it, "if you will it, it is no dream." But some secular versions of Zionism sought in statehood the normalization of the Jewish people and the end of anti-Semitism. In the end, Zionism achieved anything but that. Israel is a flourishing modern democracy, but it is also a miracle. Israel is simultaneously a modern democratic marvel and an enduring reminder of the mystery that is the endurance of the Jewish people. There is therefore no one better than Professor Aumann to help us understand the poetry of our passages, why the ethics and morality of Judaism are juxtaposed with a mysterious *chok* such as *shatnez*.

Rigler tells us in her article that:

Later I asked Prof. Aumann: "*Shatnez* is the antithesis of rationality. How do you reconcile these opposites?"

"I don't see any contradiction between *shatnez* and rationality," the venerable Nobel Prize winner replied. "Not everything in the world has to do with rationality. You do all kinds of things that are orthogonal."

To illustrate the meaning of "orthogonal," Prof. Aumann got up and strode to the whiteboard on the opposite wall of his office. "If you have a line," he explained, drawing a green line pointing to the right, "then you can go in the opposite direction," and he drew a brown line pointing to the left. "But you can also go off in a totally different direction," he added, drawing a purple line going

straight up. “That’s called orthogonal.”

Returning to his seat, Prof. Aumann continued. “*Shatnez* is not irrational. It has nothing to do with rationality. When you sit down and play the piano, are you doing something rational? No! Are you doing something irrational? Also, no! It’s orthogonal to rationality. The whole lifestyle of a religious Jew is not rational or irrational. It’s a beautiful way of living.”

[...]

“...to understand the Torah, you have to understand it as one whole, not separate pieces.

“If you play just one bar of music and you don’t play the whole sonata, of course it doesn’t make any sense. It’s part of the whole sonata, that’s what speaks to you.”

Thus does Aumann bring to life the spirit of Leviticus’ joining of *mishpat* and *chok*, ethics, but also obligations that are not entirely explained. And it is therefore entirely appropriate that the day on which he was awarded the prize was also one in which his family reflected one of these chapters’ most beloved verses—the one with which we began,

*Ye shall revere every man his mother, and his father, and keep my sabbaths: I am the Lord, your God. (Leviticus 19:3)*

As we have seen, the Bible here seeks to honor God as Creator, but it also tells us that our parents are God’s partners in creating us, and that we therefore owe them honor and awe. For the rabbis, the juxtaposition of these two laws, Sabbath and reverence for parents, also warns us that in honoring our parents, we ensure not to forget to honor God above all else. It is therefore appropriate that the multitude of members of the Aumann family who had descended upon Stockholm to honor and celebrate their father also honored the Sabbath, thereby highlighting different aspects of these Levitical laws.

Rigler tells us that:

Although the Awards Ceremony was scheduled for late Saturday afternoon, the shortness of the Swedish winter day enabled the Aumann family to attend after the close of Shabbat. On Shabbat afternoon, they—all 34 of them—walked to a hotel located just 200 meters from Stockholm’s Concert Hall, where the Awards Ceremony would take place. As soon as they made *havdalah* [the ceremony separating Shabbat from the rest of the week], the Aumanns dashed to the Concert Hall, arriving just 90 seconds before King Karl XVI Gustaf’s arrival and the closing of the doors.

At the royal banquet afterwards, Prof. Aumann’s entourage were served a special kosher dinner on new china plates with the obligatory royal pattern that were specially kilned for them. Their place settings were completed with newly-forged gilded silver cutlery and recently blown gold-stemmed crystal.

Thus did Leviticus live in Stockholm. Thus was the luxury of the king utilized to celebrate the keeping of kosher. Thus was a man honored for his mind, but also for his faith. As an economist, Professor Aumann was celebrated by a king, but Aumann ultimately allows us to understand how the Bible calls on Jews, first and foremost, to humble ourselves before the King of Kings.

*Discussion Questions:*

1. Rabbi Soloveichik argues for the importance of having biblical commandments that elude rational explanation. Why, then, do the rabbis often encourage us to search for reasons and explanations for all the commandments?
2. Rabbi Soloveichik points to the modern State of Israel as an example of an achievement that was the result of human effort as well as of Divine providence. What other events in Jewish history combine these aspects?