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Shatnez in Turkish Talleisim: What Happened and the Lessons to Be Learned

Interview With Rabbi Yosef Sayagh

Recently, a significant number of 'Turkish' talleisim made in Tunisia were found to contain shatnez, while yet others were found not be 100% wool. When this first came to light, not all the details were clear and we were advised to refrain from reporting the story until all the facts emerged. We sat down with Rabbi Yosef Sayagh of the Lakewood Shatnez Laboratory, who provided background information, as well as some of the relevant halachic details, regarding the recent find.

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Yated: Can you provide a basic background of what was found and which talleisim are/were affected?

Rabbi Sayagh: The only *talleisim*, which are an issue, are 'Turkische' *talleisim*.

First let us briefly discuss the history of *Turkische talleisim*. *Turkische talleisim* have been made from wool that comes from Turkey. The reason why, historically, *Chassidim* have used *talleisim* with Turkish wool is because Turkey was a country that was known not to have any linen. Thus, if there was no linen around, the wool was obviously pure of *shatnez*, and for that reason they preferred to use *talleisim* made of Turkish wool.

The Belzer Rebbe, the *Sar Shalom*, was quoted as saying that after the *churban Bais Hamikdosh*, the *maalos*, the qualities, of the land of Eretz Yisroel, became dispersed to other areas of the world. The mountains, for example, went to Switzerland. The *shvach*, quality, of wool, he said, went to Turkey. That is another reason why some *Chassidim* preferred to use *Turkische talleisim*. Until the recent revelation, *Turkische talleisim* were widely used by Belz and Skver amongst other *chassidim*. (It is reported that the Skverer Rebbe this past week stopped wearing a Turkish *tallis*.)

Now to the present *Turkische talleisim*. Currently, you will notice two types of *Turkische talleisim*. One is a thicker type, and those were purchased at least 20-25 years ago. Then there are thinner *talleisim*, which were purchased more recently. In both types, we found problems. Today, *Turkische talleisim* need to be *shatnez* tested. This is because at the present time, there *is* linen in Turkey, and furthermore, today, 'Turkische' *talleisim* are actually made in Tunisia.

Yated: Why, indeed, are these talleisim referred to as Turkische talleisim now that they are no longer from Turkey but from Tunisia?

Rabbi Sayagh: Good question. I asked the importer, "Are you getting Turkish wool for the *talleisim*?" He didn't know what to say. He didn't have an answer for me.

Yated: When you refer to a Turkische tallis, which part is made in Turkey, or in Tunisia, the tallis, the tzitzis, or both?

Rabbi Sayagh: The importers bring in the woven *talleisim* - that is, the *begged*, with the black lines - to this country. So it is just the *begged*, not the *tzitzis*, which come from Tunisia.

Yated: *Is there a way to identify which talleisim may be problematic?*

Rabbi Sayagh: Interestingly, there is. Each supplier has his unique way of identifying his *talleisim*. If you look at the first of the black stripes on the *tallis*, you can see, based on the design, which supplier imported the *tallis*.

The *talleisim*, which have been found to contain *shatnez*, are those with the checkerboard design (see photo).



If you see this checkerboard design, you know that the *tallis* was imported by Greenvald and may contain *shatnez*. As of now, no other Turkishe *talleisim* other than Greenvald's have been found to contain *shatnez*.

However, all other Turkishe *talleisim* have the possibility of not being 100% wool, as we'll discuss.

Yated: *To clarify, this problem is not applicable to those talleisim produced under a reliable hashgacha, such as the Badatz, correct?*

Rabbi Sayagh: 100%. This is an important point. The *Badatz* in Eretz Yisroel also produce 'Kemo Turkishe *talleisim*.' What they do, however, is bring spun wool yarn from Germany to Eretz Yisroel. Those *talleisim* are not an issue at all and people should not mistakenly confuse those *talleisim* with the problematic ones we are discussing here. Those are produced under the *hashgacha* of the *Badatz* of the Eidah Hachareidis.

So, the majority of *talleisim* being used are not problematic because they have been manufactured under a reliable *hashgacha*. The Turkishe *talleisim*, however, are not produced under any *hashgacha* at all. It is perhaps ironic that these *talleisim*, which were being used by some because of the *maalah* that the place of origin was linen-free, have now been found to be problematic.

Yated: *How was it discovered that a significant number of Greenvald talleisim contained shatnez?*

Rabbi Sayagh: During the *Aseres Yemei Teshuvah* of this year, two separate people, each one on their own, dropped off Turkishe *talleisim* to be checked for *shatnez* at Valu-Clean Cleaners in Monsey, which has a *shatnez* service. One person's *tallis* ended up containing threads of wool in one direction and threads of polyester in the other direction, while the second *tallis* was discovered to have been made from recycled wool. (Virgin wool is wool taken from a sheep and manufactured into materials. Recycled wool comes from garments, which are shredded and are then made into threads and fibers.) The two people said that they dropped off

their *talleisim* to be checked because after the *talleisim* had worn out, it appeared to them that they weren't made out of pure wool.

The one who tested these *talleisim* and discovered the problem was Rabbi Daniel Steinberg of Kiryas Yoel, who was trained by the Lakewood Shatnez Laboratory. Rabbi Steinberg felt that once it was determined that other fiber might be present in the *talleisim*, there could also be the possibility of linen - *shatnez* - being present as well. Rabbi Steinberg then contacted Rav Aharon Goldmintzer of the Bais Din of New Square and a policy was instituted in Skver that all Turkishe *talleisim* have to be sold with a *hashgacha*. Thus, the stores in New Square selling *talleisim* began dropping off every *tallis* by Rabbi Steinberg in Kiryas Yoel to first be checked. If he certified it as being okay, then it could be sold.

Yated: At this point, was shatnez indeed found?

Rabbi Sayagh: No. The problem at this point was that the *talleisim* were either made from recycled wool, or perhaps the *tallis* was partially made of polyester.

The Maharam M'Rottenberg is of the opinion that *chutei tzemer* - woolen *tzitzis* - only *pater bigdei tzemer*, are only effective for woolen garments. Regarding a garment that contains additional material other than wool, it is questionable whether the *tzitzis* are effective for that garment (see *Magein Avrohom* and *Mishnah Berurah*, *Orach Chaim*, *siman* 9.)

The *Magein Avrohom* and the *Mishnah Berurah* state that it is preferable to have a *tallis* made purely of wool, without the presence of any other type of material.

Yated: Moving forward, what transpired two weeks ago?

Rabbi Sayagh: Two weeks ago, on Wednesday of *Parshas Yisro*, one of the stores in New Square got a new shipment of 40 *talleisim* and dropped off the *talleisim* in Kiryas Yoel by Rabbi Steinberg to be checked. He found two types of *talleisim* containing *shatnez*. One type containing *shatnez* had linen threads running parallel to the black stripes on the *begged*, while the other type containing *shatnez* had linen threads running perpendicular to the black stripes on the *begged*. That night, Rabbi Steinberg printed up a consumer alert, which was immediately sent out to all *shatnez* laboratories worldwide, all *kashrus* agencies, and many consumers. By Friday, the word had gotten out and the *chassidische* world was in turmoil.

That *Motzoei Shabbos*, *Parshas Yisro*, the Belzer Dayan of Monsey, Rav Betzalel Tuvia Wettenstein, put together a group of *bodkim*, *shatnez* checkers, to come to the Belzer Bais Medrash on Maple Terrace in Monsey Sunday morning to check *talleisim*. The testers there included myself, Rabbi Yoel Schochet of the Lakewood Shatnez Laboratory, Rabbi Chaim Rosenberg of the Monsey Shatnez Laboratory, and Rabbi Daniel Steinberg. The testing began from *vasikin* Sunday morning, which was approximately 6:15. People at the *bais medrash* were waiting to *daven*, but they couldn't put on their *talleisim* until they were tested and found to be *shatnez*-free.

We checked many *talleisim* in Belz. We found six *talleisim* with linen threads/*shatnez*, and many more were found to be blended with other fibers, such as polyester, acrylic, rayon, rabbit hair, alpaca, angora, horse hair and camel hair, amongst other fibers.

The next day we were in New Square. We got there early in the morning. Again, the *bodkim* were myself, Rabbi Yoel Schochet, Rabbi Chaim Rosenberg, Rabbi Daniel Steinberg and Rabbi Fishel Zeigerman of the Williamsburg Shatnez Laboratory. Rav Aharon Goldmintzer, the Skverer Dayan, coordinated the Skverer campaign. In Skver we found about ten *talleisim* of

shatnez, and again, many others - about 60 - were found to be blends. I myself found about 26 *talleisim* that were blends.

On Tuesday, a group of *bodkim* went to Boro Park, which has a larger Belzer *kehillah*. Those who coordinated the testing there and deserve credit for their efforts are Rabbi Yosef Tyberg of the Boro Park Shatnez Laboratory, Rabbi Ari Engel, Rabbi Aharon Ostreicher and Rabbi Chaim Mann. The testing took place at the Belzer Bais Medrash on 45th Street. The checkers who participated were Rabbi Aharon Drebin and Rabbi Rachamim Harari of the Flatbush Shatnez Laboratory, Rabbi Yosef Tyberg, Rabbi Daniel Gurwitz and Rabbi Sasson Gelb of the Boro Park Shatnez Laboratory, Rabbi Fishel Zeigerman of the Williamsburg Shatnez Laboratory, Rabbi Yoel Schochet, Rabbi Moshe Zisow and myself of the Lakewood Shatnez Laboratory, and Rabbi Yisroel Rabinowitz of Passaic.

In Boro Park, 19 *talleisim* were found to contain *shatnez*. The checkers tested approximately 800 *talleisim* in Boro Park alone.

Yated: In inspecting the talleisim, did you have to check the entire begged?

Rabbi Sayagh: In these particular *talleisim*, it is insufficient to check in one area alone. If one area is found not to contain *shatnez*, a different area may still contain *shatnez*.

Yated: Is there any special expertise needed to check these talleisim?

Rabbi Sayagh: Only a *shatnez* professional is able to confirm that the *talleisim* do not contain *shatnez*. Being a professional *bodek shatnez* requires the mastery of microscopy, which includes using both a compound microscope and a polarized microscope. One must also be able to identify all types of fibers under the microscope and learn *tevias ayin*, being able to identify the fibers by seeing them. Finally, there is the knowledge of textile engineering and garment construction, and learning the various weaves and fabrics and how garments are constructed. With this knowledge, a person can ensure that garments are *shatnez*-free.

Yated: Why does one need this knowledge to check the talleisim?

Rabbi Sayagh: Because we found *talleisim* with all kinds of animal hair in them and one must be able to identify the various fibers correctly.

Also, as mentioned, the entire *tallis* must be checked, so *tevias ayin* and knowledge of textile engineering is vital.

Yated: What are the lessons to be learned from all this?

Rabbi Sayagh: The obvious lesson from this ordeal is as follows. Here you have *talleisim* made by Arabs in Tunisia that have been sold in Eretz Yisroel and in the U.S.A for many years and nobody ever questioned them. Unfortunately, so many people have been *nichshal*. We asked the owners of the *talleisim* that contained *shatnez* how long they owned their *talleisim*, and they responded that they had them for the last 2-1/2 to 3 years. This means that in the past three years, there have been many *talleisim* containing *shatnez* that have been circulated, and for many years they were blended with other fibers. This emphasizes the fact that anything, which is being manufactured by non-Jews, has to be *shatnez* checked even if a Jew sells it.

Applying this more broadly, there are so many clothing manufacturers overseas, and so many people importing garments from China and elsewhere, and these items are being sold in *heimishe* stores without a *hashgacha*. Unfortunately, there are many people who assume that if

an article of clothing is sold in a Jewish store, this means that it is *shatnez*-free. This is simply not true.

A recent example is the Mayoral children's coat made in Spain, which was being sold in *frum* stores since September and was just found to contain *shatnez*. The Mayoral coats were sold in Jewish stores in Lakewood, Boro Park and Williamsburg. These Spanish coats contained linen scraps in any of several locations inside the lining. The contents label listed 50% Wool 50% Viscose.

Now these coats were being sold since September! Why is it that *shatnez* wasn't found until recently? After this came to light, I myself checked quite a number of the coats and found most of them - 90% - to contain *shatnez*. Why is it that we didn't find the *shatnez* until now? Obviously, people are assuming that if they walk into a Jewish store and buy something, it must be acceptable.

There have been many such episodes.

All Jewish stores should take a lesson from this. Since people assume that what they are selling is okay, they should perhaps have a sign hanging in the store stating, "Don't assume that everything in this store is checked for *shatnez*."

A prominent person from London called me this past week and wanted to know what exactly was the *shatnez* in the Turkishe *talleisim*. He concluded the phone call by saying, "So what has to be checked? Just the Turkishe *talleisim*! a suit or a sweater doesn't have to be checked, right?"

This is a misunderstanding. We are finding *shatnez* all the time in suits and sweaters on a daily basis.

There is a lack of awareness in this regard. Hopefully, this awakening will create an awareness not to take things for granted. A solution could also be for manufacturers and stores to have a *hashgacha* on their garments to ensure that they are *shatnez*-free.

Yated: Any final comment?

Rabbi Sayagh: Anyone wishing to contact me or to request *shatnez* updates may do so via email at shatnezhedqtrs@yeshivanet.com.

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