

Purpose of the Laws of Hybrids

Introduction

Curious Commands

Both Vayikra 19:19 and Devarim 22:9-11 contain various laws relating to prohibited mixtures, including the prohibition to crossbreed animals, sow a field or vineyard with seeds of diverse species, wear a garment made of wool and linen, and plow with an ox and donkey together. As each of these actions seems fairly innocuous, with no obvious harm being inflicted on others, the reason for the prohibitions is not at all self-evident. Why should Hashem care what materials make up one's clothing or whether two different species are planted together? Is there some lesson to be learned from the prohibitions? Last, do all the prohibitions listed in the verses share a common purpose, or is each law independent of the others?

Additional Questions

The verses raise several additional questions:

- **כְּלָאִים** – The Torah refers to the crossbred animals, diverse seeds, and mixed fabrics as "כְּלָאִים". What does this term mean? Does the fact that the term is not applied to plowing with mixed animals suggest that this law differs from the others? If so, though, why is it sandwiched between the other prohibitions of *kilayim*?
- **שַׁאטְנֵז** – The garment of mixed materials is called *shaatnez*. What does this word mean and might it bear any light on the nature of the prohibition?
- **Exceptions** – There are two exceptions to the laws of *shaatnez*: the priestly clothing was made of a mixture of wool and linen¹ and *tzitzit* may be made of them as well.² What is the logic behind these exemptions?
- **"אֵת חֻקֵי תְּשֻׁמֶרֶת"** – In Vayikra 19, the various prohibitions are introduced by the phrase, "אֵת חֻקֵי תְּשֻׁמֶרֶת". What distinguishes a "חוק" from any other law? Why are these specific commandments so termed?
- **Context** – In Vayikra 19, the laws are followed by the prohibition to have relations with a maidservant who has been pledged to marry another. In Devarim 22, they follow the command to make a fence on one's roof lest one fall, and they precede the commandment of *tzitzit*. Is there any significance to the juxtaposition of the various laws? Can the context teach the reader anything about the purpose of the different prohibitions?

¹ The sash (אבנט), Choshen, and Efod were all made of linen with colored strands of wool.

² See Bavli Nazir.

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Exegetical Approaches

This topic has not yet undergone editorial review

Overview

The laws of hybrids (כלאים) are often brought as the classic example of a law whose purpose is not self-evident and inherently logical. Commentators, nonetheless, attempt to explain the reasoning behind the various commandments. Rashbam maintains that the purpose of the laws is to preserve and remind one of the natural order instituted by Hashem, in which every plant and animal was created according to its own kind. Rambam, in contrast, asserts that the prohibition is meant to distance the nation from idolatrous rites which involved mixing of species or fabrics.

Others suggest that the focus of the laws is not man's relationship with Hashem, but with nature, animals, or other humans. Thus, Philo claims that the common denominator between the various laws is that they serve to protect the weak from the strong, as mixing of species naturally harms the more fragile party. Akeidat Yitzchak instead maintains that the prohibitions are meant to emphasize that inappropriate coupling is wrong, leading man to naturally refrain from illicit unions.

Preserving Natural Order

When Hashem created the world, He made each plant and animal according to its species, and mandated that each species should reproduce according to its own kind. Crossbreeding and other mixing of species is prohibited because it goes against Hashem's plan of creation and the natural order He set in the world.

SOURCES: Philo #1, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, R. Yosef Bekhor Shor, Chizkuni, Ramban, R. Bachya, Tur, R. Yosef ibn Kaspi, Ralbag, R. Avraham Saba, Maharal, R. S.R. Hirsch, R. David Zvi Hoffmann

What is wrong with mixing species? All these sources emphasize that since Hashem created each species "according to its own kind,"¹ mankind, too, must not mix species. Yet, they disagree regarding the specifics of why this is problematic:

- **Hubris** – R"Y Bekhor Shor points out that there is a certain hubris in crossbreeding, as if one is trying to turn one's self into Creator, usurping the role of God. Ramban adds that in so doing it is as if one is questioning the perfection of Hashem's world and suggesting that it needs improvement.²
- **Harming creation** – Both R"Y Bekhor Shor and Ramban³ further point out that Hashem created a world that can perpetuate itself, but hybrids can't reproduce on their own. As such, in creating such hybrids, man reduces the good inherent in Hashem's creation.⁴
- **Denial of Hashem** – By acting contrary to Hashem's creation, it is as if one is denying Hashem's role as Creator. R. Hirsch emphasizes that when observing the mitzvot of *kilayim*, on the other hand, one recalls the laws of nature set by God, and hence, Hashem Himself.⁵ The reminder is, thus, ever present throughout one's day: when one is engaged in raising of livestock, working the land, and even when getting dressed.

Reminder of one's assigned place and purpose – R. Hirsch adds another positive aspect to the prohibition. In remembering that all is created "according to its own kind" man is supposed to recall that he, too, has an assigned and unique task in life, to keep Hashem's Torah.

Crossbreeding vs. sowing – Even though sowing seeds of different species one next to another will not create a cross-breed, R"Y Bekhor Shor claims that it is prohibited as a precaution, lest the mixed seeds accidentally combine and create a new plant.⁶ Rashbam, Ibn Ezra and R. Hirsch, instead, assume that the action is prohibited since, regardless of the ability to create a hybrid, it serves as a symbolic reminder that mixing species goes against Hashem's creation.

"שעטנ"י – These commentators disagree whether this commandment is related to the other prohibitions of mixing species or if it is prohibited for different reasons:

- **Connected** – Rashbam suggests that *shaatnez* is simply a variation of the prohibition against making hybrids. Wool is a product of the animal kingdom, while linen emerges from plants and so the prohibited mixture similarly highlights that mixing of species is not desired and opposes Hashem's plan for creation.⁷
- **Unconnected** – R"Y Bekhor Shor, in contrast, assumes that *shaatnez* is its own unique commandment. It is found in the same verse as the laws of *kilayim* of animals and plants only due to the fact that both are prohibited mixtures. According to him, *shaatnez* is prohibited because priestly garments were uniquely made from a mixture of wool and linen and such clothing is reserved for their use.⁸

"לא תחרש בשור ובחמור יחדו" – These commentators disagree whether this commandment is related to the other prohibitions of mixing species or if it is prohibited for different reasons:

- **Connected** – R"Y Bekhor Shor and Ramban⁹ assert that plowing with an ox and donkey is prohibited as a precaution against crossbreeding.¹⁰ Rashbam and R. Hirsch, instead, maintain that the prohibition simply reminds man of Hashem's desire that everything be created "according to its own kind", even if there is no fear of an actual cross-breed.
- **Unconnected** – Ibn Ezra and Chizkuni disconnect this prohibition from those of *kilayim*, suggesting that it relates instead to those laws regarding care of animals.¹¹ Since the two animals have different strengths, it is unfair to the weaker animal to work them together.¹²

Meaning of "קלאים" – Ibn Kaspi suggests that "קלאים" relates to the root "כלא" which means to restrain or withhold. The laws are so called because the plants and animals are being restrained from mixing with unlike species.

Exceptions – There are two exceptions to the laws of *shaatnez*; Rabbinic law mandates that both the priestly garments and *tzitzit* may be made of a mixture of wool and linen.

- According to those who suggest that *shaatnez* is no different than the other laws of *kilayim*, it is not clear why these exceptions should be made.
- According to R"Y Bekhor Shor, though, the exceptions are very understandable, as the entire reason for the prohibition of *shaatnez* is that laymen not wear garments reserved for the priests. Since *tzitzit* has been understood to symbolize that all of Israel should strive to be a "kingdom of priests", this is the one mixed garment that laymen, too, can wear.

Biblical Parallels – R. Hirsch maintains that the prohibition against mixing milk and meat shares the same reasoning as the laws of *kilayim*. It, too, is meant to remind man of the laws of "each according to its own kind" and Hashem's role as Creator.¹³

"אֶת חֻקֵי תְשׁוּמֵרוֹ" – R. D"Z Hoffmann, following the Yerushalmi,¹⁴ suggests that these laws are introduced by the statement "אֶת חֻקֵי תְשׁוּמֵרוֹ" because they are enacted to ensure that the laws of nature (חוקי הטבע) remain intact.



Distancing from Idolatry

The prohibitions were instituted as a reaction to idolatrous customs, in an effort to keep the nation from imitating them.

SOURCES: Rambam,¹⁵ Shadal

Grafting plants and sowing mixed seeds – Rambam asserts that certain idolatrous and superstitious rites of the Gentiles entailed the grafting of plants and sowing of diverse seeds, often accompanied by illicit sexual acts. To distance the nation from such idolatry, Torah prohibited all similar mixtures.

"שֵׁעֶטְגָד" – Rambam states that it was the custom of idolatrous priests to wear wool and linen garments, and as such it is forbidden for Israelites to imitate them.

Exceptions – The fact that priestly garments are made of wool and linen is very difficult for Rambam. One would have thought that their clothing especially should be made differently from those of the idolatrous priests.

Crossbreeding animals and mixed plowing – Shadal suggests that these laws, too, were likely idolatrous practices.¹⁶

Context – Rambam asserts that many of the laws in this section of the chapter, such as the laws of *Orlah*, eating on blood, divination, or cutting the skin in mourning, are similarly aimed at distancing one from the customs and idolatrous rites of foreign cultures. As such, the context would support this understanding of the reason for the prohibition.

"אֶת חֻקֵי תְשׁוּמֵרוֹ" – This position could suggest, as does R. D"Z Hoffman, that "חֻקִּים" refer to laws between man and Hashem and therefore appropriately introduce the laws of *kilayim*, which aim at distancing idolatrous practices.



Caring for the Land & Animals

Mixing of species harms one or both members of the mixture, and in the case of produce, also the land in which they are sown.

SOURCES: Philo #3, Josephus #1,

Sowing mixed seeds – Philo maintains that when sowing seeds of different species together, one species takes nourishment away from the other, weakening it and sometimes causing it not to bear fruit at all. Moreover, planting two crops of diverse types on the same ground will exhaust the land. This is problematic both due to the harm it causes the land and because it betrays a covetous nature and lack of self-control as one seeks to squeeze forth from the land more than it would naturally produce.

Plowing with mixed animals – Plowing a field with animals of different strengths is not fair to the weaker animal who will become exhausted as it attempts to keep up with the superior power of the stronger animal.

"שטרי" – This prohibition has been understood in two ways, both related to the injustice incurred when the strong oppress the weak:¹⁷

- Philo asserts that since wool and linen are of different strengths, combining the two causes the weaker material to tear.
- Rav Kook suggests, instead, that the law was instituted to teach mankind sensitivity toward animals. When shearing wool, one is in essence robbing it from the innocent sheep. Linen, in contrast, is acquired without harming anyone. Since utilizing the flax plant and sheep are not morally equivalent, the Torah seeks to distinguish between the two and thereby highlight that animals are not inanimate objects like plants, and we should care about their welfare.

Cross-breeding animals – These sources do not explicitly address this prohibition, but might suggest that when cross-breeding, the less dominant animal is taken advantage of, as its unique qualities are lost in the newly created hybrid.

Biblical parallels – Philo compares the prohibition against sowing mixed seeds to the prohibition of working the land during the Sabbatical year which similarly is meant to prevent the land from growing exhausted. [For elaboration of this understanding of the Sabbatical year, see Rambam's opinion in Purpose of Shemittah.]

Context – Devarim 22 contains several other laws which might be related to the welfare of animals, including sending forth the mother bird before taking her eggs, or aiding an animal which has fallen under its load. However, as these laws are not listed consecutively, but are separated from both each other and our prohibition, it is hard to say that the context supports this approach's understanding of the laws' purpose.



Preventing Illicit Unions

The prohibition against mixing species relates to concerns regarding sexuality and inappropriate couplings.

SOURCES: perhaps Dead Sea Scrolls (4QMMT),¹⁸ Philo #1, Josephus #2, Rambam,¹⁹ Akeidat Yitzchak #1

Illicit Unions – These sources disagree regarding whether the prohibitions are mainly preventative in nature or if they are inherently problematic:

- **Preventative** – Philo, Josephus, and Akeidat Yitzchak suggest that by banning inappropriate pairing of animals, seeds, and even materials for clothing, the concept that inappropriate coupling is wrong will become so ingrained in man that he will naturally refrain from illicit relations and unions such as bestiality, adultery and the like.

- **Inherently problematic** – Rambam speaks only about crossbreeding in this context. In contrast to the other sources, he maintains that it is a degraded act in and of itself, as it entails that man physically intervene to cause two animals to copulate. Since the Torah wants to reduce one's indulging in sexual acts, it prohibits not only engaging in certain acts of cohabitation, but also forcing animals to mate.

"שעטנ" – It is questionable whether the prohibition against mixing wool and linen is really similar enough to "coupling" to serve as a safeguard and preventive measure. This question is likely what prompts most of these sources to suggest additional reasons for the prohibition. Akeidat Yitzchak, however, suggests that the very fact that these laws restrict man teaches him self control.

Plowing – It is hard to see how plowing with mixed species has anything to do with inappropriate coupling. Rambam maintains that it is prohibited only as a precaution, lest one come to crossbreed the animals.²⁰

Context – These sources might suggest that in Vayikra the command is juxtaposed to the prohibition against having relations with a maidservant who has been pledged to marry another (שפחה חרופה) because both teach man to resist his sexual desires and not have relations with inappropriate mates.

¹ See Bereshit 1:11-12 and Bereshit 1:24-25.

² The Maharal questions this, pointing out that in many areas of life man "improves" upon God's creation, turning wheat into flour, baking bread, and circumcising a child. He quotes Bereshit Rabbah 11:6 which states, "כל מה שנברא בששית ימי בראשית צריכין עשייה, כגון הסרדל צריה למתוק. התורמוסים צריה למתוק. החטין צריכין. "מלאו את הארץ וכבשה" as further evidence that we are actively meant to take the world and work with it to innovate and produce on our own.

³ See also Ralbag.

⁴ Tzeror HaMor and R. Hoffmann also emphasize how Hashem had desired an ordered world, while mixing of species introduces chaos.

⁵ See also Akeidat Yitzchak who points out that the prohibitions serve to remind man that the world was not created by chance, but rather by God with an order and design.

⁶ Ramban goes a step further, suggesting that seeds which are planted near each other might get nourishment from one another, changing their nature and form so that the seeds themselves become as if they were cross-bred.

⁷ R. Hirsch adds that since man's clothing symbolizes man's inner essence, Hashem tells him not to wear a mixture of "animal" and "vegetable". Man is supposed to be above both of these, not a hybrid of the two.

⁸ Wearing similar garments would be like using the scepter of a king, an object which is sacred to him and off-limits to anyone else. See J. Milgrom, *The Anchor Bible Leviticus* (New York, 2000): 1660-1662, who posits that all the laws of *kilayim* might have been instituted for the same reason. He suggests that hybrids, as a whole, were reserved for the sacred sphere and thus prohibited to laymen. As evidence of "holy hybrids", he points to the כרובים, which were a fantastical hybrid animal which adorned the curtains of the Mikdash and were placed on the Ark. He does not bring evidence of mixed seeds or grafted plants playing a role in the Mikdash.

⁹ See also R. D"Z Hoffmann.

¹⁰ Ramban explains that it was common for a farmer to bring his work animals to breed together by the troughs.

¹¹ See the position below which elaborates on this point.

¹² Chizkuni, instead, explains that since an ox chews its cud while a donkey does not, it would cause suffering to the donkey to watch the ox chew while it has nothing to eat.

¹³ In her book, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, (New York, 1966, 2003): 54-58, anthropologist Mary Douglas suggests that the laws of *kashrut* might also relate to "symbolic boundary maintenance". Animals which are off-limits are those who did not neatly fit into specific categories, or were otherwise aberrant. For instance, pig is prohibited because it has split hoofs but does not chew its cud. See the same idea expressed in *Olam HaTanakh Devarim*, ed. M. Weinfeld (Tel Aviv, 1994): 124-125.

¹⁴ The Yerushalmi explains the word "חוקים" to refer to the laws of nature: "חוקים שחקקתי בהם את עולמי".

¹⁵ This is how Rambam understands the laws of grafting, sowing mixed seeds and *shaatnez*. He assumes that crossbreeding and the prohibition against plowing with mixed species of animals have their own independent reason.

¹⁶ Rambam, though, maintains that these prohibitions are distinct, related to a desire to distance man from engaging in sexual acts. For elaboration, see below.

¹⁷ Josephus suggests that the law has its own unique reasoning. It is prohibited to wear a garment of wool and linen since such garments were designated for the priests alone.

¹⁸ The scroll compares the "intermarriage" of priests and laymen to transgressing the laws of *kilayim*, but it is not clear if they are simply using the laws as a metaphor or if they think the purpose of the law is really to teach that such mixing is wrong.

¹⁹ Rambam limits this reasoning to the prohibitions of cross-breeding and plowing with mixed species. He maintains that the other laws of *kilyaim* relate to a desire to distance the nation from idolatry.

²⁰ Though the other sources could say the same, the prohibition is more difficult for their understanding as to begin with they maintain that crossbreeding is prohibited only in order to prevent man from transgressing a different prohibition. If so, this prohibition would be a double safeguard. [It is likely for this reason that Philo offers another explanation for the prohibition.]

