

Dressing for Shabbat

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HOW SHOULD ONE DRESS FOR SHABBAT PRAYER? TRADITIONAL SOURCES ADVISE DRESSING “DIFFERENTLY” FOR SHABBAT ALTHOUGH THAT DIFFERENCE IS OPEN TO INTERPRETATION. THE SAME SOURCES, HOWEVER, ALSO STRONGLY CAUTION AGAINST CRITICIZING OR QUESTIONING ANOTHER PERSON’S CLOTHING. WE CAN LOOK AT HOW THESE TWO SEPARATE ISSUES BEAR ON EACH OTHER.

The Talmud records a discussion over clothes in tractate Shabbat (113a-114a). Rabbi Huna holds that one should change clothes for Shabbat or, if one lacks a change of clothing, one should lower the hem on one’s clothes. Since in Talmudic times wealthy people wore longer clothes than those who had to work in the fields, Rabbi Safra asks whether Rabbi Huna’s rule might be construed as ostentation. The Gemara answers that this is not the purpose of the rule; the goal is simply to wear something different from everyday.

Following this line of reasoning, if you wear a tie all week, do not on Shabbat; if you wear a skirt all week, wear pants on Shabbat; if you dress up all week, dress plainly on Shabbat; if you dress simply all week, dress colorfully on Shabbat; and so on. Since this approach does not mandate a specific dress code, the determination of what is suitably “different” becomes subjective.

From where in the Torah itself, asks the Gemara, do we deduce changing our clothes for Shabbat? Rabbi Aha ben Abba cites Leviticus 6:4, referring to the priests’ changing of clothes. In an evocative statement, the School of Rabbi Ishmael adds that one changes clothes for Shabbat just as

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the servant wears one set of clothes to serve the master wine and another to cook the meal.

To what extent should people praying together within a Jewish community dress similarly? Classic Jewish texts do not compel conformity for its own sake, but also do not advocate individual self-expression. Communal codes were introduced in the Middle Ages limiting the size of wedding celebrations, prohibiting gold or silk thread, and requiring the wearing of outmoded or conservative fashions. However, the dress codes appear to have been motivated to reduce ostentation and deflect anti-Semitic agitation at conspicuous Jewish consumption rather than to induce spiritual devotion based on uniformity. (See, for example, A. Rubens, *A History of Jewish Costume*). While rabbis often urged Jews to dress differently from non-Jews, Jews more often assimilated to general social costumes throughout our history.

Another consideration in dress choices is the doctrine of *tsniyut*, modesty. Primarily directed at covering up women’s bodies, *tsniyut* more generally tries to use dress codes to keep sexual feelings—and the presumed accompanying distraction from prayer—at bay. Just as the traditional interpretation of Song of Songs cloaks its eroticism with non-physical allegories, synagogue dress codes have sought to keep sexuality away from prayer. At the other extreme is the position recently advanced by Judith Plaskow in *Standing Again at Sinai*, which views sexual energy as part of or consistent with spirituality, and so encourages dress which exhibits or enhances physical beauty at Shabbat prayer.

These considerations lead to no clear rule, yet the issue of Shabbat prayer attire remains an important one. Most congregations have at least a tacit dress code, which often bears sociological or political associations as much as it speaks to religious orientation. For some Jews, how to dress may be the most important issue in preparing to attend a religious service and may even determine which type of service or community they feel comfortable joining. Yet our tradition shows how superficial clothing is: Leviticus Rabbah (9:3) tells how Rabbi Yanai mistook an ignorant man for a scholar because he was elegantly dressed. And contrary to conventional synagogue wisdom, business attire seems to be at odds with the goal of dressing distinctively on Shabbat.

One rule, however, derived from our tradition supersedes all

other considerations. One should never criticize another congregant's dress for Shabbat prayer, because such criticism could shame the other person. The Talmud aptly compares embarrassing a person to murder (BABA METZIA 59a). Rules against *lashon hara* (sometimes translated as gossip or slander) forbid shaming another even in private, even if you are unsure that the comment would indeed shame the other person, and even if you personally might not be embarrassed were it said to you. A person who is annoyed at another is apt to embarrass the other and must be particularly careful.

Exodus Rabbah (18:5) notes that clothes are the glory of a person's body. Thus, criticizing a person's attire always entails the possibility of embarrassment. Some dress to make a statement, some to avoid a statement, some to conform, some to deviate; and people do each with varying degrees of success. Indeed, almost any mention of a person's clothing may be taken as implied criticism and so lead to embarrassment. As a moral issue, this overrides all other considerations.

Our tradition may or may not guide us in dressing for prayer. But it does insist on the mutual respect that makes us better off leaving such decisions in the hands of the individual.

PIRKE AVOT REVISITED

*If not now, then soon. And if not soon,
then we never come to this restaurant again.*

*The day is long. The coffee is feh. The workers make many
personal phone calls. Lunch is not so bad. The afternoon is
slow. The Boss is hiding in his credenza. The clock ticks on.
Soon it is time to go home.*

ALAN ZOLDAN