

Why Are We Obsessed With Clothing?

Clothing is a significant obsession in American life; every occasion has a different garb. Judaism too, associates many traditions with clothing. Why so?

The Clothing Mania

When I first became a Chabad rabbi, after moving here from Israel, I went to put up mezuzos at the home of a Jew I had just met. When we entered the master bedroom, I saw big chests lined with shoes, exactly like the kind of shelving units you might see at a shoe store. In my naiveté I innocently asked, “Does your wife sell shoes?” The man smiled ruefully and answered, “No, my wife buys shoes.”

This was my introduction to the clothing element of American culture. In America, we have a whole collection of special clothing for every event. For shul in the morning we have one collection of clothing and for Shabbat afternoon we have a second wardrobe and when we go out in the evening we again have to change our clothing to “evening outfit.” For our Sunday morning round of golf we wear a golfing outfit and when we come home for lunch we have to change into our casual Sunday clothing! It would be a disgrace to wear the same outfit twice in a row!

When we announce a program at Chabad, the first question I

am asked is, “How should I dress for this event?” I usually can’t answer this question. As you know, I wear the same clothes morning and night, summer and winter, whether it’s hot or cold. I can’t help but answer, “As long you’re dressed, it’s all right.”

Clothing has a certain “infinite” quality. For example, if you loved every kind of food in the world there is only so much your stomach can fit. However, when it comes to clothing you can keep on changing and changing, outfit after outfit as long as you live.

Dressing also has an endless amount of rules. For example, at a wedding, the mother of the bride has to wear a special wedding gown. The sisters also each have a gown that is custom made to make them look extra special. But if you are only a cousin you dare not come dressed too fancy for your dress may put the sister’s gowns to shame! And if someone should mistake you for a sister it may be a big insult to the immediate family. And there are rules like these for every occasion.

Jewish Garments

The truth is that even religious, even Chassidic Jews have this hang up on clothing. How many times have Rabbis been approached with the question, “Why do Chassidim always wear black”? Or “What’s the significance of the long coats?”

But this is not just a Chassidic custom. Jewish law explains that everything is in some way connected to the clothing you wear. For example, every Jew must have a special outfit just for Shabbat. That’s not all—the Shabbat clothing had to be nicer than your regular clothes!

Then again, Jewish Law dictates that the clothes you wear on holidays must be even nicer than your Shabbat clothes.

In addition to these, Jews have a special outfit for prayer – the Tallit. The interesting thing about wearing the Tallit is that even people who are not so strict about other laws and traditions, will still wear the Tallit to prayers. The Tallit has become a distinguishing sign that one is a Jew. In fact, Jews are even buried in their Tallitot.

This week's Torah portion is largely dedicated to clothing: the garments of the kohen – the priest. Among these clothes are three basic types: the regular kohen's outfit, made of four garments; the High Priest's outfit of eight garments and on Yom Kippur the High Priest would alternate between his regular outfit and a purely white outfit in which he would enter the Holy of Holies.

Rashi explains that it was actually the priestly uniform that made the priests fit to serve in the Temple, and the Talmud adds that so long as the kohen was in uniform he was a priest; once he removed his clothes he was no longer fitting for priestly service.

Again we return to the question, why this hang-up on clothing? Does it really make a difference what a person wears? Judaism and Chassidus especially teach that being a mentch “internally” is the main thing. One's external appearance should not really matter at all.

Of course, the answer is in Torah.

The Human Element

At the very beginning of Genesis, we find that the very first garment ever worn by man was created by the hand of G-d. This is surprising, because since creation, man has had to discover everything he might need to settle and inhabit the earth. Man had to figure out on his own how to light a fire, plow a field or build a house. None of these abilities were given to us as a ready gift from G-d. But when it came to clothing, not only did Adam not make his own clothes, he didn't even have to put them on. G-d dressed him in them!

Some explain the importance of clothing as follows:

Clothing is not simply protection from the cold or for decoration. Clothes represent the wearer: they are the first impression. Clothes are what separate men from beasts. By dressing Adam in clothing, G-d was in effect teaching us that dressing is not optional. Rather, it is like an addition to the created man, like a second more noble skin. For this reason, clothing is human dignity while bareness is for the beasts!

Man is the only creature on earth that needs clothing. Clothing also has a very strong influence on us. When a child dresses in respectable clothes he feels and automatically behaves respectably. The better we dress the more menschlach we tend to act.

Therefore in Judaism, the holier the occasion, the more we dress up, because clothes define the separation between man and beast. On Shabbat we dress nicely. On holidays we dress even nicer. On Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, we wear a

white kittel over our regular holiday clothes, and for prayers we wear a tallit over everything else.

Chassidim also wear a gartel or sash to prayers. The gartel doesn't cover anything, it is simply meant to remind the worshiper that he is standing before G-d. The belt separates the higher, vital organs such as the heart, the lungs and the brain (mind) from the lower, less refined organs. The symbolism here is that when praying one must direct his heart upwards towards G-d in heaven, not downward.

But the main lesson we can learn from our need for clothing is that we were created in the image of G-d. Therefore, we must never be satisfied with our physical existence and constantly strive to rise above the physical and to elevate our lives. Excuses such as "This is how G-d made me" or "This is my nature" just won't do for us humans. Nature is naked, instinct is unrefined. Just as we need nice clothing to cover our bodily nakedness, we need a refined cover for our natural instincts.

We just passed the holiday of Purim, when Jews customarily dress up in extravagant costumes. The purpose is that through the extra garment one should be able to extricate himself from his natural inhibitions.

As we said before, people act in accordance with their mode of dress. Indeed, it is quite amazing to see the change these costumes make in people. And on Purim that is the goal - *venahapoch hu*, to turn your world upside down.