

Why Jews Wear Kippot

“A blessing on your head, Mazel Tov, Mazel Tov”

More even than the words that Tevye the Milkman in Fiddler on the Roof hears in his dream, we Jews are reminded of our blessings in one very important way. Whether we call it by its Hebrew name, kippah, or its Yiddish moniker, yarmulke, a covered head is a basic part of worldwide Jewish tradition.

Rabbi Shraga Simmons writes that the wearing of a kippah or yarmulke “... is perhaps the most instantly identifiable mark of a Jew.” He goes on to tell us that while western custom dictates that we take off our head coverings as a sign of respect, in Judaism just the opposite is the case. To show respect a Jew covers her/his head. Why? Where does this idea come from and why is the wearing of a yarmulke one of the oldest and most obvious signs that the wearer is Jewish?

Rabbi Simmons goes on to say that “The uniqueness of a Jewish head covering is hinted at in the blessing we say every morning, thanking God for "crowning Israel with splendor" (Talmud - Brachot 60b). So it is entirely appropriate that we Jews found a word like “yarmulke” to represent our relationship with God. Yarmulke is the Yiddish word for head covering and it comes from the Aramaic, “yira malka” which means that we are “in awe of (God) our King.”

Kippah is the Hebrew word and it means “dome.” Hence the evolution of the Jewish head covering into a little circular “dome” that we place on the top of our heads. In fact, in his article, “Kippot in Jewish Custom,” Cantor Jonathan L. Friedmann gives us Rabbi Solomon Luria’s take on kippah fashion, dating back to the 1600’s. Friedmann writes, “A man suffering from severe headaches asked Rabbi Luria if he was permitted to eat bareheaded. Rabbi Luria responded that, while there is no official requirement to wear head coverings even during prayer, the custom had become so widely accepted that anyone going about without a kippah was considered impious. He therefore suggested that the man wear a soft kippah made of fine linen or silk.”

Or as Paul Harvey would say, “And now you know the rest of the story!”

There are other references in our sacred books that shed light on why we Jews have been covering our heads for centuries. Rabbi Simmons sites the Talmud where we read “that the purpose of wearing a kippah is to remind us of God, who is the Higher Authority "above us" (Kiddushin 31a).”

Cantor Friedmann explains that “The practice of wearing kippot did, however, make its way into the Shulhan Arukh (Jewish Code of Law - mid-16th century), which reiterates the decree that one should not walk more than four cubits (about six feet) with an uncovered head.” Friedmann also tells us that “In the Middle Ages, French and Spanish rabbis introduced the practice of covering one's head during prayer and Torah study, and Maimonides (1135-1204) similarly ruled that a Jewish man should cover his head during prayer (Mishne Torah, Ahavah, Hilkhote Tefilah 5:5).”

rabbi barbara

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And in the Torah we find that although only “The Kohanim serving in the Temple were required to cover their heads (Exodus 28:4),” modern sages saw each Jew as equal to every other Jew and as such, wearing a head covering became an equal opportunity experience for Jewish men and women of any of the three classes.

Several years ago, while a pulpit rabbi in Bradenton, I was asked about my own wearing of the kippah. Back then congregants noticed that wherever I went, my head was covered, often by color coordinated kippot (a la’ Rabbi Luria!) As now, back then it was also summer and time for vacations. When I announced my plans some of the congregants asked, “But rabbi, when you are on your vacation will you wear your kippah?”

This question made me think, “Does a kippah need a vacation? Does a rabbi need a vacation from her kippah? Is there ever a time when I should put my kippah in my purse and just be a “normal” person?” And then I remembered an incident I had with lost luggage, how angry I was and how my very own kippah stopped me in my tracks. I was hot, tired and angry and just as I was about to shout at the poor girl who happened to be working the Lost and Found desk that day, I remembered what was on my head. I was wearing a sign of my Jewishness, a symbol that serves to remind me of who I am and how I should behave.

My kippah gave me the opportunity to remember that I must treat everyone with dignity and respect. The words I choose and the tone of voice that I use are very important. I know myself. I can be sarcastic and critical (in three different languages!) or I can say something pleasant. I can choose to speak words that help rather than words that hurt.

Rabbi Simmons puts it well when he says, “Indeed, wearing a kippah is a big statement, and obligates the wearer to live up to a certain standard of behavior. A person has to think twice before cutting in line at the bank, or berating an incompetent waiter. Wearing a kippah makes one a Torah ambassador and reflects on all Jews. The actions of someone wearing a kippah can create a Kiddush Hashem (sanctification of God's name) or conversely a Chillul Hashem (desecration of His name).”

So, in the airport in Italy my hand moved to my head and I touched my kippah. I asked myself, “When annoyances come, how would a good Jew behave?” Yes, I had a good reason to be upset, but my kippah helped to stay calm and reminded to speak to everyone, including the baggage staff of Al Italia, with kindness and respect.

This is the month when many of us begin planning our vacations. Soon school will be out and we’ll start googling our way through on-line brochures of beaches and mountain tops. It may not be necessary to pack a kippah or a tallit or to wear a necklace with a chai or a Magen David. But it is necessary for us to remember our Jewish heritage, our traditions and our mitzvot and then, pack them in our hearts.

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Back then in Bradenton in 2001 and today in Italy in 2009, my answer is still “Yes.” I will wear my kippah on the street, on the train and on vacation, too. Wearing it is my way of remembering that no matter how complicated or difficult life can become, my Jewish traditions will help me show dignity and respect to all people. My kippah will remind me of the words of Torah and give me the opportunity to be a “Light unto the nations.” With God’s blessing on my head, my kippah will help me to behave as a Jew.

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