

Attire on the Bimah

March 7, 2002

QUESTION:

What is considered "appropriate attire" for those who lead or assist with services, or otherwise play a ritual role on the bimah, at B'nai Israel?

ANSWER:

There is a longstanding precedent, from the time of the Mishna forward, for Rabbis' setting standards for appropriate dress both in and out of the synagogue. For our purposes, rather than addressing the concept of *tzni'ut* (male and female modesty) on a daily basis, this discussion applies only to appropriate attire when on the bimah, or when leading or assisting with services in the Chapel or elsewhere, at B'nai Israel.

The tradition has discussed a number of characteristics of appropriate dress for Shabbat, synagogue worship, and the Temple service.

Concerning Shabbat, the Talmud (Shabbat 113a) as well as the Reform Jewish Responsa ("Contemporary American Reform Responsa", Vol. 2, p. 693, and Vol. 4, p. 62) both suggest that, if possible, one should wear special clothing, different from that worn during the week for work or school, in order to distinguish the Shabbat from other days in every possible way. However, the tradition also expresses a concern that Shabbat dress not be ostentatious. (CCAR Responsa #27: Dress Code for Religious School.)

Since Biblical times, Jewish and Israelite tradition have also emphasized modesty. For example, in instructing Moses to make special garments for the high priests, God states that Moses should make linen pants "to cover the flesh of their nakedness, from the hips to the thighs." (Ex. 28:42,39:28, Ezek. 44:18.) Similarly, the Kitzur Shulhan Arukh reemphasizes the Biblical theme of modesty, explaining that modesty concerning exposure of the body indicates humility before God." (Kitzur Shulhan Arukh, trans. Hyman E. Goldin, Annotated Revised Edition, Hebrew Publishing Company, N.Y. 1993, Volume 1, Chapter 3:1.)

The high priests also wore garments that were special -richly woven, dyed, and made of fine materials, reflecting skillful workmanship. (Ex. 28:3,39; Ex. 29:29.) According to Exodus, wearing such garments not only adorned the wearer but bestowed dignity upon the function the wearer served. (Ex. 28:2,40.)

The Torah suggests that clothing worn by the priests was symbolic. For instance, Aaron and the High Priests who followed him, wore a ritual garment known as "the breast plate of decision" over their hearts. The stones on the breast-piece correspond in number with the twelve tribes of Israel. (Ex. 28:21) The breastplate was a reminder to the priests that they were serving God on behalf of the 12 tribes; they were our *shlichai tzibor*, our representatives. They wore the breastplate as a "remembrance before Adonai at all times." (Ex. 28:29.) A person who is conducting services, in either "The Temple" or a temple, represents the entire community.

Similarly, the Torah also gives examples, of the way that attire may symbolically express humility before God. Exodus says that, after calling to Moses from the burning bush, God said, "Do not come closer. Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground." (Ex.3:5.) Similarly, the "dress code" for Aaron and the High Priests who followed him required a plain linen tunic on Yom Kippur, the day-of-atonement, rather than the normal gorgeous attire worn by the priests. (Lev. 16:4 and Plaut, The Torah: A Modern Commentary, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, p. 863, note.) The focus was on the service being performed rather than the person.

These concepts concerning ritual dress for the priesthood are relevant to every Jew. As it is taught in Exodus 19:6 "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." While the specific examples discussed in the previous discussion are drawn from Biblical times and largely address now-defunct

sacrificial practices, they demonstrate the Torah's teaching that the way we dress in holy places is symbolic and significant. These teachings serve as guidelines in determining what is appropriate for service leaders and others who play a ritual role on the bimah at B'nai Israel. Therefore building on these teachings, we emphasize the following principles:

- The standards of appropriate dress for those who officiate, assist, or otherwise play a ritual role on the bimah are necessarily different from the standards that would be appropriate for secular dress; these standards must be appropriate to sacred space and sacred time (Shabbat and other ritually significant occasions).
- Those who officiate, assist, or otherwise play a ritual role on the bimah have a responsibility to dress suitably, including wearing clothing that is not a distraction from the religious service and that respects the comfort level of the congregation.
- Attire should reflect modesty and humility before God.
- Attire should be dignified and festive without being ostentatious.
- Attire should reflect awareness that what we wear on the bimah has symbolic significance.
- Attire should be consistent with the understanding that those who play a ritual role on the bimah are standing before God and serving as representatives of the community.

While this responsum is not intended to address every possible situation that may arise-and cannot provide an exhaustive "dress code," individuals who have the privilege of occupying the bimah have a responsibility to consider whether their dress is consistent with these principles. For example, clothing that is inappropriately revealing, excessively worn out, or ripped may be a distraction from worship or detract from the dignity or symbolism of the religious occasion, as might excessively informal clothing, such as shorts and "poolside" sandals outside the context of camp style or religious school t'fillot. The rabbis have the final say concerning appropriateness of any person's attire on the bimah.

Finally, while the specifics necessarily evolve from generation to generation, the tradition suggests that, within the synagogue, there is a value in attire that is identifiably Jewish. {Maimonides, Yad Nil. Avodah Kokhavim 11.1; Shulkan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 1:78.} Within the Reform movement, and at B'nai Israel specifically, we recognize that kippot and tallitot are associated with powerful religious symbolism and, at the same time, affirm that they are optional for both men and women. B'nai Israel does not have a policy either requiring or discouraging the use of these garments. We encourage everyone to become knowledgeable about, and to take into consideration, the symbolic significance of kippot and tallitot in deciding whether to wear them when leading services or reading from the Torah.

Approved by the Temple Board on
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recommendations from the
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