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Conservative Judaism - history of the Yarmulka

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Expert: Rabbi Barry Dov Lerner - 3/28/2004

Question

Hello Rabbi. My name is Shaun MacMullin and i am 25 adn was raised a Baptist Christian, but stopped attending services over ten years ago for various reasons. The reason that I am contacting you is I am involved in a group project about the recent vote passed in France that prohibits people from wearing visible religious symbols. My part of the presentation is to delve into the history and significance of certain symbols, including the Yarmulka. If you could tell me the history and significance of the Yarmulka (or at least a web site that has it)I would greatly appreciate it.

thank you very much

Answer

Dear Shaun,

Thanks for writing, but no one knows.

This from the Encyclopedia Judaica may help

Also: Bareheadedness,; Wig

HEAD, COVERING OF THE. Jewish tradition requires men to cover the head as a sign of humility before God, and women, as evidence of modesty before men, although the Bible does not explicitly command either men or women to cover the head.

Men

According to the description of the priestly garb in Exodus (28:4, 37, 40), the high priest wore a miter (miznefet), and the ordinary priests a hat (migba'at). It was generally considered a sign of mourning to cover the head and face (II Sam. 15:30, 19:5; Jer. 14:3-4; Esth. 6:12). In talmudic times, too, men expressed their sense of grief while mourning by covering their heads, as did Bar Kappara after the death of Judah ha-Nasi (TJ, Kil. 9:4, 32b; TJ, Ket. 12:3, 35a). A mourner, one on whom a ban (herem) had been pronounced, and a leper, were, in fact, obliged to cover their heads (MK 15a), as was anyone who fasted in times of drought (Ta'an. 14b). These people had to muffle their heads and faces. It was considered an expression of awe before the Divine Presence to conceal the head and face, especially while praying or engaged in the study

of mysticism (Hag. 14b; RH 17b; Ta'an. 20a). The headgear of scholars was an indication of their elevated position (Pes. 11b); some of them claimed that they never walked more than four cubits (about six feet) without a head covering (Shab. 118b; Kid. 31a; also Maim. Yad, De'ot 5:6, and Guide 3:52). The custom was, however, restricted to dignified personages; bachelors doing so were considered presumptuous (Kid. 29b). Artistic representation, such as Egyptian and Babylonian tablets or the synagogue at Dura Europos, generally depict Israelites, (and later Jews) without head covering. On the other hand, some rabbis believed that covering a child's head would ensure his piety and prevent his becoming a thief (Shab. 156b).

According to the Talmud (Ned. 30b), it was optional and a matter of custom for men to cover their heads. Palestinian custom, moreover, did not insist that the head be covered during the priestly benediction (see J. Mueller, *Hilluf Minhagim she-bein Benei Bavel u-Venei Erez Yisrael* (1878), 39f., no. 42). French and Spanish rabbinical authorities during the Middle Ages followed this ruling, and regarded the covering of the head during prayer and the study of the Torah merely as a custom. Some of them prayed with a bare head themselves (Abraham b. Nathan of Lunel, *Ha-Manhig* (Berlin, 1855), 15b, no. 45; Or Zaru'a, *Hilkhot Shabbat* 43). Tractate Soferim (14:15), however, rules that a person who is improperly dressed and has no headgear may not act as the hazzan or as the reader of the Torah in the synagogue, and may not invoke the priestly benediction upon the congregation. Moreover, the covering of the head, as an expression of the "fear of God" (*yirat shamayim*), and as a continuation of the practice of the Babylonian scholars (Kid. 31a), was gradually endorsed by the Ashkenazi rabbis. Even they stated, however, that it was merely a worthy custom, and that there was no injunction against praying without a head cover (Maharshal, *Resp.* no. 7; *Be'ur ha-Gra to Sh. Ar.*, OH 8:2). The opinion of David Halevy of Ostrog (17th century) is an exception. He declared that since Christians generally pray bareheaded, the Jewish prohibition to do so was based on the biblical injunction not to imitate the heathen custom (*hukkat ha-goi*; *Magen David to OH 8:2*). Traditional Jewry came to equate bareheadedness with unseemly lightmindedness and frivolity (*kallut rosh*), and therefore forbids it (Maim. Yad, De'ot 5:6).

The covering of the head has become one of the most hotly debated points of controversy between Reform and Orthodox Jewry. The latter regards the covering of the head, both outside and inside the synagogue, as a sign of allegiance to Jewish tradition, and demands that at least a skullcap (Heb. *kippah*, Yid. *yarmulka*) be worn. Worship with covered heads is also the accepted rule in Conservative synagogues. In Reform congregations, however, it is optional.

The word may come from the Hebrew "yira" to be respectful + "malkhut" of the divinity.

Good luck

Rabbi Dov