



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

BADMIDBAR / במדבר

Don't Judge a Jew by His Cover

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

TUESDAY MAY 15, 2007 / כ"ז אייר תשס"ז

PARSHA:


BADMIDBAR / במדבר

SERMON TITLE:

DON'T JUDGE A JEW BY HIS COVER

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Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family
In loving memory of
ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
Emil W. Herman  who loved and supported Torah learning.



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One of the very first things a Jewish child is taught is to wear a kipa. We teach our boys to wear a kipa even before their first haircut, especially when in the synagogue.

The kipa has become a Jewish badge. If you see someone from afar who is wearing a kipa you can be sure he is Jewish. There is however, no obligation, no mitzvah to wear a kipa. A Jew must cover his head, but he can do that with whatever he wants. You can even cover your head with a wig! The point is that your head should be covered.

Why must we cover our heads? The Alter Rebbe writes in the Shulchan Aruch (Birchos hashachar), "For us Jews, wearing a belt and a hat is not the same as for all other peoples. For other people wear belts and hats for their own comfort or benefit. For the Jew, however, wearing a belt separates between the heart and the "nakedness", and wearing a hat keeps our heads covered. Although there is no prohibition against being bare headed, still this is the way of modesty and holiness. For this is how one draws the fear of heaven upon him."

The reason, then, is in order to have fear of heaven. The Alter Rebbe reiterates this law (in Hilchos Hanhogas Haboker). "One must not walk... or even sit bareheaded. And children must be taught to cover their head. This way they will come to fear heaven." In other words, a head covering will serve as a constant reminder that there is someone above you, and this awareness will inspire fear of heaven.

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However this is not the only time we cover ourselves. On holidays when the Kohanim ascend on the bimah to bless the congregation everyone covers themselves. Why? The Alter Rebbe writes, "When the Kohanim are blessing the congregation they should not look at them for they must not become distracted... for they are praying that G-d should bless the entire congregation. Also the congregation should not look at the Kohanim, for they too must not become distracted. It has therefore become the custom in many places that the Kohanim cover their faces and hands so that no one should be able to see them."

In other words, in order that no one get distracted and instead of thinking about G-d, get carried away watching the handsome Kohanim, or the cute children, we all cover our faces with the Tallit.

There is yet another instance. The bride at her Chupa wears a veil over her face. No one can see her and she can't see anything at all. Many reasons have been given for this custom. Some say it's done in the name of modesty.

In this week's parsha we read that the tribe of Levi was charged with the transportation of the Mishkan when the Jews traveled through the dessert. The tribe was divided into three families, Gershon, Kehot and Merari. Gershon and Merari were given the task of dismantling the Mishkan and loading it onto wagons. While Kehot was given the task of carrying the Mishkan's holy "furniture", the Ark, the Altars, the Show Bread Table, the Menorah and all of the vessels used in the services. However, before the Kehotites were permitted to touch these objects the Kohanim



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had to cover the vessels, so no one should, G-d forbid, gaze at the Holy Ark, for G-d decreed that anyone who saw it would die.

Rashi states (Gen. 29:34), "Whoever is referred to with the expression עַל-כֵּן had a large population, except Levi, because the Ark destroyed many of them." That's why there are so few Levi's, for anyone who sees the Shechinah diminishes in number, and Levi saw the Shechinah. It's that simple.

Of course, when the Levi's realized what the Holy Ark could do to them they would all run to take the other vessels first.

What could be so wrong seeing the Holy Ark that it should result with death?

Some say that since the Holy Ark represents G-d's presence in this world anyone who sees the Ark will immediately associate that form and shape to G-d. Since G-d has no form or shape, it is therefore forbidden to see something that will give G-d a certain shape in our minds. We would replace our understanding of G-d as being essentially removed from any shape and form, with a physical image of what we now see as "G-d's image". It could make G-d mundane, even ordinary in our eyes.

But there is more to it. By covering whatever it is that represents the Shechina, we come to realize that there is more present than we can see with the naked eye. What we are looking at is just a cover. There is something unknown beyond the physical.

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In truth this is also the reason for all the other "covering ups" that we just mentioned.

Why do the Kohanim cover themselves when they bless us? The Zohar says, "It is forbidden to see the hands of the Kohen when he spreads them out (to bless you) for the Shechinah rests upon them."

Similarly, with the Kipa. The Zohar says, "that a man must not go four cubits while bareheaded, because the *Shechinah* rests upon his head." Again anything that symbolizes G-d's presence must be covered.

And regarding Jewish brides some explain that during the Chuppah the Shechinah shines upon her face and therefore we cover it - for no one is allowed to stare at the face of the Shechinah.

What lesson could each of us learn from this? The Rebbe had a saying on the verse, "Don't look at his appearance." When one looks at a Jew he must know that the body is but a cover for something much deeper. They say "What you see is what you get." For a Jew this rule doesn't apply. What you see is merely a case for a Jewish soul that thirsts for Judaism. Before you judge a Jew, remember to look past that cover.