

The Kippah – what, why and when

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Most people know that we are supposed to wear a Kippah when on the Synagogue premises, but where does this practise come from, do we really have to do it, and must we cover our heads when we're not at the Synagogue...

Head coverings in ancient Israelite culture



Kippot on sale in Jerusalem

The Tanach contains scarcely anything about head coverings; neither do ancient monuments furnish very much material. The Israelites on Sennacherib's marble relief appear with no headdress, and although the ambassadors of Jehu on the Shalmaneser stele have a head covering, their costume seems to be Assyrian rather than Israeli. Only one passage of the older literature is of any significance: I Kings 20:31 mentions תְּכָלִים "chavalim" together with שִׁקִּים "sakkim," both of which are placed around the head. This calls to mind pictures of Syrians on Egyptian monuments, represented wearing a cord around their long, flowing hair, a custom still followed in Arabia. Evidently the

costume of the poorest classes is represented; but as it gave absolutely no protection against the heat of the sun to which a worker in the fields is so often exposed, there is little probability that it remained unchanged very long, although it may have been the most ancient fashion.

The Israelites most probably had a headdress similar to that worn by the Bedouins. This consists of a keffieh folded into a triangle, and placed on the head with the middle ends hanging over the neck to protect it, while the other two are knotted together under the chin. A thick woolen cord holds the cloth firmly on the head. In later times, the Israelites, both men and women, adopted a turban-like headdress more like that of the fellahs of today. The latter wear a little cap, usually made of cotton cloth folded doubly or triply, which is supposed to shield the other parts of the head covering from perspiration. With boys, this often forms the only head covering. Under this cap are placed one, often two, felt caps; and the national head-dress of the Turks, the red tarboosh. Around this, finally, is wound either an unbleached cotton cloth with red stripes and fringe, a gaily-flowered "mandil," a red-and-yellow-striped keffich, a black cashmere scarf, a piece of white muslin, or a colored cloth. Such a covering not only keeps off the scorching rays of the sun, but it also furnishes a convenient pillow on occasion, and is not seldom used by the fellahs for preserving important documents.

That the headdress of the Israelites must have been of this kind is shown by the noun צִנִּיף "Tzanif" and by the verb חָבַשׁ "Chavash" (to wind; comp. Ezekiel 16:10; Jonah 2:6). "Tzanaf" means "to roll like a ball" (Isaiah 22:18). As to the form of such turbans, nothing is known; perhaps they varied according to the different classes of society, as was customary with the Assyrians and Babylonians, whose fashions may have influenced the costume of the Israelites. Middle Eastern and North African Jewish community headdress may also resemble that of the ancient Israelites. In Yemen, the wrap around the cap was called מַצָּר "Matzar".

Traditions

The kippah was traditionally worn only by men (women covered their heads more completely with scarves, hats, or wigs). Today, some non-Orthodox women wear a kippah as well. Some Jews wear kippot only while praying, making blessings, or studying Jewish religious texts; more traditional Jews wear kippot the entire day, making sure not to walk more than four cubits (about two meters) without a head covering, especially outside.

Most head coverings are acceptable according to halakha because there is no Jewish law regarding head coverings. A kippah is a convenient alternative due to its compactness and lightness; it has become identified as a symbol of Judaism in the last century. Haredi men, who mostly wear large black cloth or velvet yarmulkes, often wear fedoras with their yarmulkes worn underneath. The double head-covering has Kabbalistic meaning to the Hasidim, especially.

Often, the color and fabric of the kippah can be a sign of adherence to a specific religious movement. The Israeli Religious Zionist community is often referred to by the name *kippot serugot* (Hebrew כיפות סרוגות), literally "knitted kippot," though they are typically crocheted. Modern Orthodox Jews often wear suede or leather yarmulkes, requiring clips to hold them in place. Members of most Haredi groups usually wear black velvet kippot.



Typical white "Na-Nach-Nachman me'Uman" style Breslov yarmulke.

Some Breslov Hasidim, known commonly as Breslovers, most notably the followers of the late Rabbi Yisroel Ber Odesser, wear a large white knitted yarmulke with the Na Nach Nachma mantra on it. (Rabbi Yisroel found this mantra in the form of a little note that fluttered out of a book he was perusing, one day in 1886 or 1887. The note, called the "Letter from Heaven" and "The Holy Note", is hand copied onto parchments that are worn around the neck.)

Breslovers most commonly wear full-head-sized crocheted yarmulkes, which are aptly named "Breslovers".

"Kabbalist" yarmulkes are very popular today, consisting of a larger size and usually crocheted in a single, dark color. These seem to be reflections of the "Breslover" kippot, which are designed to cover the entire head almost down to the ears.

Etymology

The word Yarmulke is a Yiddish word. It may come from Turkish, but the most common explanation is the folk etymology claim that it comes from an Aramaic phrase "Yari Malka", meaning, "Fear of the King". This implies that one wearing a yarmulke should fear "the King", meaning God. In Hebrew, the word *kippah* means dome.

Purpose

The sources for wearing a kippah are found in the Talmud. In tractate Shabbat 156b it states *Cover your head in order that the fear of heaven may be upon you.* As well, in tractate Kiddushin 31a it states *Rabbi Huna the son of Rabbi Joshua never walked 4 cubits (2 meters) with his head uncovered. He explained: "Because the Divine Presence (Shekhina) is always over my head."*

While there is a minority opinion that wearing a kippah is a Torah commandment, most *halakhic* decisors agree that it is merely a custom. The prevailing view among Rabbinical authorities is that this custom has taken on the force of law (Shulkhan Arukh, Orach Chayim 2:6), because it is an act of *Kiddush Ha-Shem*, "Sanctifying the Holy Name". From a strictly talmudic point of view, however, the only moment when a Jewish man is required to cover his head is during prayer (Mishne Torah, Ahavah, Hilkhot Tefilah 5:5).

A Hasidic/Kabbalist tradition that the kippah reflects several ideas: one is that Ha-Shem covers us with His Divine Palm; indeed, the Hebrew word *kaf* means either "cloud" or "palm of the hand". The Hebrew letter *kav* is the first letter of the word *kippah*.

Some have a custom of wearing two head coverings, typically a kippah covered by a hat, for Kabbalistic reasons; the two coverings correspond to two levels of intellect, or two levels in the fear of God. The High Priest of the Temple in Jerusalem, the *Kohain Gadol*, also used to wear a woolen kippa under his priestly headdress (Talmud Chulin 138a).

Others wear two head coverings for fashion reasons (i.e., e.g., the kippah and a baseball cap or dress hat) so that they may appear fashionable in public, while still having the kippah for indoors.



Just Joking

A grandmother is sitting on the beach with her beloved grandson when a freak wave sweeps him out to sea, where the ocean instantly devours him. The distraught woman sinks to her knees wailing, pleading with God to spare the child's life.

Suddenly, there is a celestial thunderclap and her prayers are answered. Another wave gathers the boy up from the depths and plunks him safely, miraculously, beside the old lady, at which she turns her eyes heavenwards, and says:

"He had a cap."