Dressing Up: Thoughts for Parashat Toledot, November 17, 2012

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Many years ago, when I was a new young rabbi, an unkempt hippie walked into our synagogue on a Shabbat morning. He was wearing dirty jeans, a gaudy plaid shirt, and long hair with a pony tail. He wasn't wearing a jacket and tie as is the proper male attire for our synagogue.

This hippie was quickly ushered out of the synagogue, to the relief of a number of veteran congregants. After all, who would want such a disrespectful person to be at our prayer services?

I gave a sermon that morning about how to dress when attending synagogue. We should wear special Shabbat clothes; we should dress as though we were coming to an important meeting with a king or with the President of the United States; we should dress with the same respectfulness as we would have if we were to attend a serious gathering of human dignitaries. Men should be wearing jackets and ties. Women should be dressed modestly. The sanctuary is a holy place and is worthy of our respect. It is not a club or a sports arena.

But then I went on with the sermon. Yes, we should know enough and be respectful enough to dress properly when coming to synagogue. However, if someone from the outside comes into our synagogue who doesn't understand the proper decorum—this person should be greeted warmly and not ushered out of the synagogue! Anyone walking into the sanctuary is looking for something Jewish and spiritual, and it is our responsibility to make the person feel as comfortable as possible. We should politely instruct the person to dress more appropriately next time he/she attends synagogue; but as long as he/she is in our synagogue, we should demonstrate patience and inclusiveness.

Different synagogues have different dress standards, some more formal, some more casual. The overriding principle, though, is that one's Shabbat clothes should be on a more distinguished level than one's weekday clothes. One's outfit when attending synagogue should be more refined than one's outfit when attending a baseball game. One should dress in accordance with the standards of

the synagogue he/she attends.

Rabbi Eliezer Papo, in his classic book of Jewish Ethics Pele Yoetz, wrote: “Our Rabbis taught that the Shabbat is honored by wearing special, clean garments. Happy are the Jewish people! Even the poorest among them has a beautiful garment for Shabbat.”

Some people do not yet understand or internalize the special quality of Shabbat and holiness of the synagogue. They need to be instructed patiently and kindly. Synagogue “regulars” need to set the proper example in their own manner of dress.

In this week’s Torah portion, we learn that Esau—generally depicted in rabbinic literature as the epitome of violence and boorishness—had “choice garments” which he kept at home. The rabbis found virtue in the wicked Esau since he kept a special suit of clothes which he wore when he was in the presence of his father. Even the uncouth Esau knew that it was good manners to dress respectfully in the presence of his father.

The way we dress reflects our attitudes. Having special clothes for Shabbat and synagogue underscores our special feelings for Shabbat and synagogue. Dressing our children in Shabbat clothes teaches them that Shabbat is holier than weekdays; dressing them up for synagogue teaches them that synagogue is holier than other places. These are visible manifestations of invisible feelings of respect and religious awe.

Much of our society tends to blur distinctions between holy and secular. It is not fashionable to argue for standards of dress and behavior, since the prevailing mood calls for allowing everyone to do his or her own thing. However, this casual free-for-all attitude underestimates the impact of dress on our mental framework. If we can wear the same things on Shabbat as on weekdays, then Shabbat loses luster and sanctity. If we do not dress up to attend synagogue, then the synagogue’s significance in our lives is diminished.

Wearing special clothes in honor of Shabbat and holidays and dressing nicely in honor of attending prayer services at a synagogue may seem to be superficial and external matters. Yet, the way we dress surely impacts on our inner life, our attitudes, our ability to distinguish between the holy and the secular.

Angel for Shabbat