Black Hats, Torah Study for the Wealthy, Vacation Sites--Answers of Rabbi Marc D. Angel for the Jewish Press

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Is it important to wear a black hat from a hashkafic perspective?

The answer depends on one's hashkafa! If one thinks it is desirable to have "frum" men all dressed in the same uniform, then it's important.

However, if one's hashkafa favors diversity, personal responsibility, individualism…then one must be troubled by the insistence that "frum" boys and men wear black hats and the rest of the "hashkafic" uniform that goes with the hat. Conformity of dress tends to conformity in thought, a surrender of one's own thinking to the demands of the group and/or the group's authorities.

Diversity is a positive value. The Talmud (Berakhot 58a) teaches that one recites a special blessing when witnessing a vast throng of Jews, praising the Almighty who is hakham harazim, the One who understands the root and inner thoughts of each individual. Their thoughts are not alike and their appearance is not alike. Respect for individuality and diversity is a sine qua non of healthy human life.

Insistence on the "black hat" uniform leads to artificial stereotyping. People are judged by how they dress, not by who they are. Moreover, boys and men from non-Ashkenazic backgrounds feel pressure to adopt the Ashkenazic "frum" look, leading to needless intra-family and intra-communal tensions. Why not allow

people to dress as they think best within the bounds of modesty? Why ostracize those who refuse to conform to an artificial standard of religious garb?

The black hat fedora first appeared in 1882 as a female hat, worn by a character in a French play named Princess Fedora Romanoff. In 1924, Prince Edward of Britain adopted it as a male head covering. It's difficult to see why the "frum" community would find a hat with this history to be a mark of proper Torah hashkafa!

If a Jew wins the lottery, should he continue working? Or should he quit his job and study Torah all day?

The real question is: if a Jew—male or female—is wealthy enough, what is the ideal way to spend one's life? The answer is: each person needs to decide for himself/herself what will be most meaningful, most constructive, most appropriate in the eyes of the Almighty.

There is no one ideal path, not even studying Torah all day. Each person is endowed with particular talents and inclinations, and must find the best path forward based on his/her realities. Some may find their fulfillment by devoting full time to Torah study. Others may find different ways to serve Hashem, based on the gifts that Hashem has given to him/her.

It is obviously desirable for everyone—whether employed or so rich as not to need a job—to spend time each day studying Torah. But it's also important to follow one's own path in life.

Should a wonderful rabbi, Torah teacher, kiruv professional quit the job and thereby abandon all those he/she is influencing for the good?

Should a gifted research scientist abandon scientific work that can lead to improvement of the lives of millions of people?

Should a successful business owner close his/her business and thereby deprive employees of their livelihoods?

Should people who genuinely find satisfaction in their work be told to quit their jobs in order to study Torah full time for the rest of their lives?

“If I were a rich man”…couldn’t I do wonderful hessed work, make massive improvements in yeshivot and day schools, finance Torah publications, support the needy here and in Israel etc.? Couldn’t I devote time and resources to art, music, medicine, environmentalism, social justice, world peace?

Suggesting one ideal road for all people is inherently misguided…and unjust.

Is it proper to plan a vacation in a location that doesn't have a daily minyan?

Here are a few things a man must consider when planning a vacation.

Will there be a daily minyan—preferably according to my minhag—in the vacation destination?

Will my wife and children be happy vacationing there? Does my wife have a different preference?

Even if the locale has a daily minyan, is it really a place where I want to spend my vacation time? Is it beautiful? Does it provide proper facilities for rest and recreation?

What if I and my family enjoy camping, where there will be no daily minyan? What if we wish to travel to National Parks or other scenic destinations where we can’t be sure of finding a daily minyan? May we travel to various countries where we will surely learn a lot about other cultures and see world famous landmarks…but where no daily minyan may be available?

The answer to these questions is: each person must make a personal decision. One must weigh the pluses and minuses of each option, and then make plans that

will be appropriate for oneself and one’s family.

Whatever decision is reached, please enjoy your vacation…and remember to pray with kavana and gratitude.

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