

Mosaic Reform Traditions

The Reformers maintained that change was all right because historical precedent proved that change was all right....the Reformer claims not to change at all, but only to regain the correct state of affairs, one that others, in the interval, themselves have changed.¹

Wearing a Kippah

From time to time someone will ask, “Why do Jews wear those small hats on their heads?” At other times it is asked, “Does the Bible command you to wear a *kippah*?” Recently, someone has asked, “Do you wear a *kippah* at Mosaic?” There is no wonder why this question is asked, after all, Presidents wear a *kippah* when visiting holy sites in Israel and from time to time non-Jewish people will wear a *kippah* out of respect at a Bar/Bat Mitzvah at a Synagogue or other Jewish event. It is natural to see that this one item of clothing has very special significance for Jewish people and even more natural to want to ask questions about *kippot* (plural for *kippah*). This article will give basic answers to the most fundamental questions people have about the tradition of the *kippah* and its practice at Mosaic Fellowship.

First, why do Jewish people wear those small hats on their heads? The head covering or Hebrew *kippah* is, in some cases, worn as a symbol of respect to God in a synagogue or, as a symbol of religious devotion either by the Orthodox or Conservative Jewish male. In a Reform Jewish Synagogue, the tradition of wearing a *kippah* is not considered mandatory nor is it universally forbidden, so in some Reform synagogues you may see men wearing *kippot* or you may not.² However, most Jewish people, unless they are Orthodox, will only wear a *kippah* in the Synagogue or other sacred Jewish places. Another way of thinking about the *kippah* is that

¹ Jacob Neusner, Jacob Neusner, Alan J. Avery-Peck et al., vol. 3, *The Encyclopedia of Judaism* (Brill, 2000), 1248.

² Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy* “Kippah” William Morrow & Company.

just like in the Western world, a man shows respect by taking off his hat; in Jewish life, he shows respect by putting it on.

Second, does the Bible or rabbinic law command the wearing of a *kippah*? Many people mistakenly believe the *kippah* is as old as Abraham himself and a law straight from Moses. Nothing is farther from reality, as Rabbi Joseph Telushkin comments, “Although the *kippah* might symbolize to many non-Jews a high level of Jewish religiosity, wearing one is a custom, not a law.”³ Lauterbach in a *responsum* also commented on this issue:

QUESTION: Where can one find the rabbinic law prescribing that men should cover their head when participating in Divine worship or when entering a Synagogue? If there is no law to this effect will you please tell me where and when did the custom of covering one's head now generally observed in Orthodox Synagogues originate among the Jews?

ANSWER: There is no law in Bible or Talmud prescribing the covering of the head for men entering a sanctuary, when participating in the religious service or when performing any religious ceremony.⁴

So where does the custom of wearing the *kippah* come from? Jordan L. Wagner suggests the *kippah* emerged in the middle-ages among Jews, as a sign of servitude, who lived in Muslim controlled countries.⁵ Others think it emerged as a direct apologetic against the Christian style of worship which advised against wearing head coverings in formal religious services (1 Cor 11:7).⁶ Others are of the opinion the *kippah* is based off of the common headdress of Bedouins or other Middle Eastern tribal groups. This lack of a uniform answer on the origin of the *kippah* demonstrates the ambiguous origins of this custom.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Krauss, Samuel “The Jewish Rite of Covering the Head.”

⁵ Jordan Wagner *The Synagogue Survival Kit* “Kippah.”

⁶ See Krauss

Further, historically there is no uniformity concerning the laws for the size, shape, color, or material of the *kippah*. In other words, if the *kippah* originated as a rabbinic law/custom then there should be a high level of uniformity in the design, fabric, and style of the *kippot*. However, this is not the case historically, as the Jewish Encyclopedia illustrates there is considerable lack of uniformity in Jewish headdress over the last 700 years (see Appendix A). Further, Jonathan Friedmen in *The Jewish Magazine* concludes the *kippah* originates from regional customs and not Jewish law:

However, while the *kippah* plays a prominent role in the contemporary Jewish world, the obligation to wear a head covering has its origin in regional customs, rather than *halakhah* (Jewish law). Indeed, it is due largely to its status as *minhag* (Jewish custom) that a wide variety of head coverings have been accepted as *kippot*. Without clear guidelines for dimensions, fabric, color, or requirements, the world's diverse Jewish communities have produced a variety of regulatory and stylistic interpretations of the *kippah*.⁷

Thus, we must conclude the *kippah* is a regional custom and not Jewish law since it developed very late in Jewish history (probably the middle-ages); the custom lacks uniformity; it has no rabbinic prescription which means its dating has to be after the publication of the Talmud; its initial symbolic purpose(s) is highly dubious.

Another set of questions that often arise among Jewish believers of Jesus has to do with the relationship between Jewish tradition and the New Testament.⁸ More specifically, does the Apostle Paul, or the NT, reject the custom of wearing the *kippah* in 1 Cor 11:2-16? Paul is on the record:

Every man who prays or prophesies with something on his head dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head.... A man, in fact, should not cover his head, because he is God's image and glory. ”
(1 Cor 11:2f, 7).

⁷ Jonathan Friedmann, *The Jewish Magazine*, “Kippot in Jewish Custom.”

⁸ Henceforth, NT

First, neither Paul or the NT reject all Jewish customs. Towards the end of Paul's missions in Acts he affirms a positive participation in Jewish traditions, "Brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or the customs of our forefathers" (Acts 28:17). Second, Paul perpetuates new traditions for the body of the Messiah in 1 Cor 11:2, "Now I praise you because you remember me in all things *and keep the traditions* just as I delivered them to you" (*emphasis mine*). Paul, like Jesus, evaluated traditions based on their ability to either promote a biblically based habit or decrease the habit (Matt 15:2; Mark 7:8). Third, it is not certain whether Paul in 1 Cor 11:2-16 addresses a Jewish custom or a Greco-Roman custom. If it was the Jewish custom then he must have been referring to the *tallith* – a four-corned shawl having fringes consisting of eight threads, each knotted five times – since we have already shown historically the *kippah* emerged much later. If it was the Greco-Roman custom then he is addressing the use of the "Phrygian cap" as Virgil says: "And our heads are shrouded before the altar with a Phrygian vestment" (*Aeneid* iii., 545).⁹ Or is it possible Paul has in view both customs rather than either one or the other? While we will never know the exact custom beyond a shadow of a doubt, we can assert 1 Cor 11:2-16 does address a local congregation concerning a local custom of wearing headgear with symbolic significance in a formal service where prayer and teaching are taking place.

The argument that religious headgear with symbolic significance is in view, including any Jewish head-covering, and that such is applicable today is, in some respects, the easiest view to defend biblically and the hardest to swallow practically.¹⁰ On the one hand, universally all women have to wrestle with this passage and its application and, on the other hand, Christian traditions (including Messianic) that prescribe headgear for men must also come to grips with this passages application for them. In the Jewish Christian tradition, much like the synagogue,

⁹ A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 1 Co 11:4; see also, Herbert Norris, *Church Vestments*, p. 96.

¹⁰ Dan Wallace, *What is the Head Covering in 1 Corinthians 11 and Does It Apply to Us Today?*

the *kippah* has come to signify something of incredible religious significance among male congregants. Frankly, in many messianic congregations it is considered unorthodox or *goyish*¹¹ for men to not wear a *kippah*. Despite our current messianic rambling, the NT advises *men to not wear any head-covering in any official worship service which has religious symbolic significance because it is disrespectful to God and distorts the role of men and women according to the order of creation* (1 Cor 11:2-16). This, however, is not a dogmatic ruling since Paul leaves open more discussion on this particular custom: “if anyone wants to argue about this, we have no other custom, nor do the churches of God (1 Cor 11:16).” We take this to mean that the majority ruling in the church about this local custom was “no hats for men” and subsequently “hats for women” but there was still room for debate on the custom and latitude in its practice.

Last, do men wear *kippot* at Mosaic? At Mosaic Fellowship, we are open to discussion on wearing *kippot* or in the case of women wearing hats; however, wearing a *kippah* is not prescribed nor women wearing a hat. We do ask those who wish to wear a *kippah* or women who wish to wear a head-covering (usually a hat) to understand it in light of their commitment to the Messiah Jesus and to the Jewish people. Further, we ask that they not sit in judgment of fellow worshipers who do not find significance in this custom or feel conscious obligation to it. In other words, we understand wearing the *kippah* or a woman’s headdress as matter of conscious and identity and not a matter of law or prescription. What is more, we also believe it is important for the purpose of healthy spiritual growth that the person who wishes to practice this custom to have at some level interacted with the text of 1 Cor 11:2-16 and considered fairly the arguments on both sides. Hence, when you come to Mosaic you are likely to see men wearing *kippot* or women wearing hats. However, if any of the leadership at Mosaic were asked, “Must I wear a head covering at Mosaic?” our response is, “If you wish, please do so in light of your sincere

¹¹ *Goyish* or “being like the Gentiles” is often used as a Jewish inner-cultural derogatory characterization by one Jewish group against another group of Jewish people that they are living like the Gentiles by practicing a less than appropriate Jewish lifestyle (in that groups estimation).

reverence and love for the Messiah and the Jewish people but neither Jewish law nor the Bible requires you to do so” or you might hear **הַכֹּל כְּמִנְהַג הַמְּדִינָה** *ha-col k'minhag ha-m-deenah* “everything is according to local tradition.”¹²

¹² Babylonian Talmud *Ketubbot* 66b.

Appendix A



JEWISH HEAD-DRESS AT VARIOUS PERIODS.

1, 2. England (13th cent.). 3-5. Germany (13th cent.). 6-8. France (13th cent.). 9. Rhine Provinces (13th cent.). 10. Constance (1417). 11. Holland (15th cent.). 12. Italy (15th cent.). 13, 14. Germany (15th cent.). 15-17. Rhine Provinces (15th cent.). 18, 19. Worms (16th cent.). 20. Germany (16th cent.). 21. Worms: "Judenschof" (17th cent.). 22. Swabia (17th cent.). 23. Frankfort-on-the-Main (1630). 24, 25. Poland (1765). 26, 27. Warsaw (1825). 28. Cracow (17th to 18th cent.). 29. Podolia (1750). 30. Tunis (1800). 31. Morocco (1800). 32. Moravia (1800). 33. Russia (modern). 34. Caucasus (modern). 35. Russia: Karaites (modern). 36, 37. Tunis (modern). 38. Russia: "Yarmulka" (modern). 39. England: rabbinical (modern).