

# *The Agony of the Yarmulka — A Confession*

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WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT THAT, OF ALL the halakhic ritual that I subject myself to in pursuit of Orthodox Jewish tradition, the wearing of the *yarmulka* would turn out to be the most traumatic?

To introduce you to this unusual phobia of mine is difficult. Unless you have experienced the embarrassment of wearing the *yarmulka* in public, and by that I mean not a hat or cap or beret or any other camouflage, you have not yet crossed the threshold from acquired comfortable private observance of Judaism into a disquieting, uncomfortable public expression of a tradition that you may not necessarily want each and everyone out there in the world (*die welt*) to be privy to.

Not even a Talmudic dictum, certainly not from the Torah, this Jewish tradition of covering the head has its expression in the modern day *kippah*. You can tell a man by his dress, you can tell a Jew by his headdress. From the stylized *kippah s'rugah* or crocheted *yarmulka* of the "left wing" Mizrachists through the leather or suede of the modern Orthodox New Yorker to the velvet *yarmulka* of the Hasid, the material matters as much as the size. From the sixpenny size, representing he who would "rather not wear it" to the largest crocheted one, representing the "right wing" Merkaz Harav and Gush camp, the size reflects the intensity of commitment or, at least, of the overt affiliation to the parent social group. All shades of orthodoxy are thus reflected in the size and material, once you are trained, you can size up an individual instantly, without need for further investigation!

We are told by the Code of Jewish Law that covering the head is in deference to the presence of the Almighty and that one should not walk for more than four paces without a head covering. An act of deference, it is well known in the East, where people cover their heads out of respect, in contrast to the West where one usually bares one's head in deference to the Holy (church) or even the upper class (the squire, a "lady" or "gentleman").

Yet, for me, growing up as an observant Jew in a secular world, no single observance has caused me greater sacrifice and more grief than this one. I can easily tolerate the embarrassment and excuses of early Fridays,

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holidays, and even dietary restrictions, but the *yarmulka* again and again challenges my deepest commitment. To remove it would plunge me into a longed-for world of anonymity, which I crave, not having constantly to “stand out in a crowd.” It’s not even the people you work with that are the problem, they soon recognize you to be as mortal as they, with similar human inadequacies and failings. They rightly learn to accept you despite your “little beanie.” It’s the constant meeting with strangers, where you are sized up by your dress and categorized as friend or foe, fiend or fanatic, normal or eccentric, of similar class and background or “extremist sectarian.” To stand separately, as a Jew is supposed to, is one thing, but the relentless self-awareness soon turns into the very thing that it was designed to do, i.e., to prevent social intercourse with people of different persuasions. Yet that is precisely what my father had brought me up to reject: not to be a Jew in the ghetto, protected and shielded, but to be a “*Yisroel mensch*,” a Jew out in the secular world interacting with the enlightened. He and his father had rejected that isolation in Vienna at the turn of the century, when its gates were opened to the Jews of the *sheva kehillos* (the seven communities surrounding the city) for the first time in four hundred years. This flush of excitement and the wondrous involvement in a new world that was open to him was, I suppose, genetically transmitted to me.

Yet, I know I could have received a *hetter* (a rabbinical dispensation), in fact, I received one prior to entering medical school in London at the age of eighteen, at a time of momentary weakness. The rabbi told me, in fact, that “this much was not expected of you” and that he, himself, had refrained from wearing a skullcap in Germany whilst attending university and gymnasium. However, I hesitated and thought, “Would this not be, for me, a betrayal?” The weight of the failure of Vienna in 1942 and the death of my father’s father by the inaction of those “enlightened” Europeans in that city weighed too heavily. So, I continued to suffer the embarrassment yet again as I walked into the medical school amphitheater in front of 120 students to take my seat.

Coming to the United States changed everything initially. In New York, the *yarmulka* was commonplace, and immediately I felt unconscious of its ubiquitous presence on my head, but, then, also, I felt a general devaluation of the currency of many *mizvot*, as the social and cultural milieu of living among millions of Jews seemed to distract me in its vitality and dynamism. Maybe halakhah has less meaning if one is culturally involved in things Jewish and Yiddish. This same question was even more poignant when I visited Israel. Was Zionism and living a life in Israel a fair substitute for the ritual that kept Jews distinct in the *Golah*, and was ritual now redundant? I wanted ever so much to disassociate myself from the politics of orthodoxy there. I felt a much greater kindred to those who were constructively “building the land,” as Rav Kook put it, than with those with a *yarmulka* similar to mine who engaged in “other” activities.

On moving to Boston, however, much of the European embarrassment returned and the flushed face before a weekly audience at Harvard now gives me a nostalgia for my days at the London hospital. Once again, it has reluctantly become for me a focal point that represents all that separates me from a modern secular professional class that I yearn to be part of, but never can. Earlier, I had thought it was entirely due to my self-imposed isolation because of the *yarmulka*, however, slowly I am beginning to realize that, even without the *yarmulka*, the isolation continues and that I probably could still not be part of that world.

It must mean something. However, I'm not sure I yet understand and a deep ancestral sigh down inside me keeps telling me that it is more important than I think. As I get older and the enthusiasm and innocence of my youth wane, and as I compromise morals and principles more and more, I feel that possibly I should not be privileged to wear the *kippah*. Maybe one's personal standards need to merit this level of external observance. Indeed, it was my father who always told me that those who wish to compromise themselves in public should not wear the *yarmulka* during visits to a nightclub, etc. He also felt that the *yarmulka* itself can propel a person to maintaining standards by, in a sense, preventing that person from misconduct by its very presence. So, ever so slowly, I begin to feel that maybe it is the *yarmulka* that is "keeping me" and even paying me back for those years of agony. Slowly, ever so slowly, I'm finally making my peace with this most difficult of *mizvot*.

An addendum — my sons came home with new *yarmulkas* this week. Painted on them were figures of Superman and He-man — fate has, indeed, a divine sense of humor!

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