

# The Clothes Make the Man

As the Catholic priest Erasmus<sup>1</sup> said, “The clothes make the man.”

I’ve been bothered by this statement for years. Why should what we wear influence what people think of us? There is the rabbinic principle of מראית עין, that people judge based on what they see rather than what is in actuality.<sup>2</sup> Then again, there is the statement I learned from my Senior Rabbi in Tucson that “perception is reality.”

I gave further thought to Erasmus’s statement when I wrote my weekly email on Parshat Tetzaveh about Aaron’s sacral vestments as *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest). Two of the questions I asked for contemplation were, “Does it really matter which garments we are wearing at any given time? If it does, how does what you wear change how you feel or how people respond to you?”

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<sup>1</sup> Erasmus, a Humanist and great scholar of the northern Renaissance, was born in 1466 in Rotterdam, Netherlands and died in 1536 in Basel, Switzerland.

<sup>2</sup> An example is one could not wear a kippah in a non-kosher restaurant, even if s/he is just eating cold lettuce, because others might see him/her there and assume the restaurant is kosher or (even worse) presume you are eating *treif* (non-kosher food).

A congregant who shall remain anonymous responded via email as follows: “Unfortunately, perception is people’s reality. What you wear is how people measure you up. It is all about material things in this world. People only want to associate themselves with people who are successful (measured by financial status and not moral or religious standards). However, people get appalled; if you state what I just stated publicly they will get outraged, as you have insulted them by this truth. So, sadly yes it does matter what you wear. You dress in a suit every day you get respect; if you don’t, they will not think very highly of you no matter your level of education. Very sad, but true. Personally, I think you should not be judged based on your clothes, as people who don’t have the means to wear glorified clothing are human beings too and should get the same respect. Why should people get respect for what they wear and not what they do or who they are?”

There’s a rabbinic principle of תכו כבירו, that one’s inside needs to match his/her outside. Rabban Gamliel, who happened to be from a well-to-do family, ensured that this needed to happen when he served as

*Nasi* (head) of the *Sanhedrin* (the “Jewish Supreme Court” consisting of 23 or 71 members, depending on the time period). In order to be part of Rabban Gamliel’s Beit Midrash (House of Study), one needed to have integrity of character while also looking the part of a scholar.<sup>3</sup> If one just had the fancy clothes or the *yihus* (lineage) of a scholarly family but was corrupt of moral character, s/he would not have been admitted to Rabban Gamliel’s Beit Midrash. One’s תוך, or inside, needed to match his בר, or outside.

Why bring this up at Parshat Ki Tetzei? For those who saw my verse and questions for the week, you might have noticed the focus on the following: “*A woman must not put on man’s apparel, nor shall a man wear women’s clothing; for whoever does these things is abhorrent to the LORD your G-d.*”<sup>4</sup> In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what is considered man’s clothing and what is designated as women’s clothing?

When I first came to Jericho, Karina was the only woman wearing a tallit. I spoke to a Ritual Chair who said that women do not

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<sup>3</sup> Babylonian Talmud Brachot 28a

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 22:5. The word “abhorrent,” or תועבה, is the same word that is used in the prohibitions of masculine same sex relations in Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13.

customarily wear *tallitot* at the Jericho Jewish Center because it is considered בגד איש (men's clothing).<sup>5</sup> This was a bit of a shock for me coming from a JTS where female rabbinical and cantorial students were **required** to take on the obligations of wearing *tallit* **and** *tefillan*<sup>6</sup> and from a synagogue in Tucson, where some women chose to wear *tallitot*.

With that being said, let us not focus on my experience but rather on what it means to have gender restricted clothing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century- and whether such restrictions should still exist. It is not so long ago when women were forbidden to wear pants at many Conservative congregations because it was considered men's clothing. Today it's more common for women to wear pants to synagogue. Similarly, the only time a man would wear a dress is on Purim. However, in Scotland it's quite normal for men to wear kilts.

On one hand, the issue of "the clothes make the man" is culturally relative. On the other, there are still some established perceptions as to

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<sup>5</sup> The chair made clear to me that women are certainly welcome to wear tallitot at JJC, it just isn't what is customarily done. I do not have time here to go into women's exemptions from positive, time-bound mitzvot.

<sup>6</sup> A related discussion but not for today is the Conservative Movement's debate on whether **all women** (not just women who are clergy) should be required to observe the mitzvot of tallit and tefillin. Rabbi Karen Reiss Medwed wrote a *Teshuvah* (responsum) on this topic.

what is “women’s clothing” and what is “men’s clothing;” and we know that perception is reality. A few of the women I know who wear *tallitot* have told me they would be uncomfortable wearing *tefillan* because the black boxes feel “masculine” to them. This touches on (but cannot address fully today) the issue of gender norms and whether we are heading towards a “gender free” society or one which still has gender boundaries.<sup>7</sup> Related to that is whether egalitarian means “exactly the same,” “separate but equal,” or something else.

I chose this mitzvah of avoiding the “abhorrence” of crossdressing out of the 74 *mitzvot* in Parshat Ki Tetzei because I felt it is a timely topic, not only for the synagogue but also for life in general. Too often the push for egalitarianism has been not only about “equal rights,” with which I strongly agree, but rather about a belief that men and women are exactly the same, with which I strongly disagree.<sup>8</sup> Equal opportunity should **not** attempt to minimize differences between any people, regardless of gender or sexuality. I respect those who feel it is

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<sup>7</sup> A related topic is what those who are transgender do if we are still living in a society of gender norms. Not enough time to discuss this or the Kinsey Scale.

<sup>8</sup> The Talmud teaches that **no two people are the same**, so I don’t see how we can go the route of saying that all people, regardless of gender or sexuality are exactly the same.

imperative to keep the distinctions of בגד איש (gendered clothing) just as I respect those who don't want to deny anyone the opportunity to wear what s/he desires. At the end of the day, however, I don't want us to lose sight of the bigger picture, the need to focus on תכו כברו, matching our insides to our outsides. Let us never forget to do that, and in so doing may we always have integrity and may we be slow to judge others regardless of how they appear to us on the outside.