

Jewish Costume in the Middle Ages and Renaissance

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Jewish clothing in the period of our study was very much like the clothing of the country in which they lived. It tended to be of the highest fashion, because many Jews were merchants who had both substantial incomes and access to the finest fabrics and the best tailors, many of whom were also Jewish. However, there are certain costume trends that were peculiar to Jews. They all were the result of laws: either Jewish laws imposed from within the community, or civil and religious laws imposed upon them from without.

Some Jews interpreted Judaic law to require that men past the age of their barmitzva should wear their prayer shawl (**Tallit**) at all times and that the fringes (**Ziziyyot**) of it be visible extending beyond the hem of their garments. (The Book of Numbers XV:38) When they were involved in religious services or practices most Jews would wear the shawl about their shoulders and head, in lieu of a kipah (hat).

Pious Jews who wished to wear the ziziyyot all day long created a special garment in the Middle Ages, a scapular that could easily be worn under clothes. The ziziyyot were fixed at the four corners; this undergarment is the so-called **arba kanfot** (four corners). It was not noted before 1350, when it was mentioned in Jacob ben Asher's Tur orah hayyim, and there is only a single illustration of it, from the second half of the fifteenth century, in Germany.¹⁵

The hat was the other piece of Jewish costume that was legislated both from within the Jewish culture and from without. Most Jewish men kept their heads covered at all times (including while sleeping); however, this was not required by biblical law. This custom continues in orthodox Judaism unto this very day. There was one traditional form of hat which was apparently unique to the Jewish community, although its exact form tended to vary from place to place and change throughout the period. The hat was vaguely funnel shaped, featured a spike at its apex and often terminated in a small ball. While it is true that this hat was required by law to be worn by Jews after the Council of Vienna in 1267, according to Thérèse and Mendel Metzger in their book Jewish Life in the Middle Ages it can be seen being worn by choice by Jews long before this date. While this hat must seem strange to modern sensibilities they also point out that in this period it was not considered bizarre and was directly derived from the classical **Petanus**. It is also true that the hat served to point out the Jews as sources for ridicule, scorn and even violence, yet it was also displayed with a sense of pride. It can be found being used as a decorative motif in manuscript illumination borders, and even blazoned in Jewish heraldry.

There were many edicts and laws passed by non-Jews which determined how Jews should dress in their countries. The "Badge of Shame" worn by Jews in Nazi Germany has its roots in the middle ages, where they were required to wear a badge to identify them as Jews. Pope Innocent III ruled at the fourth Lateran Council in 1215, that "Jews must wear on their garments in a visible place a badge that would distinguish them from Christians: `The order is given then', he wrote, `to let Jews wear clothes by which they might be distinguished from Christians, but not to force them to wear such as would lay them open to the danger of loss of life' such was the

¹⁵Thérèse and Mendel Metzger. *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (New York: Alpine Fine Arts, 1982. p. 150)

effect of the order, since the badge marked them as inferior and undesirable."¹⁶ Most commonly the badge took the form of a wheel. Its color and exact design varied throughout time and place but it was almost always round. Occasionally the badge differed in shape as well. In Sicily in 1221 a law was passed that required every Jew to wear a blue badge in the form of the Greek letter "T" (τ). In the reign of Edward I of England, the law decreed that every Jew past the age of seven should wear a piece of yellow taffeta above the heart. In 14th century England this badge took the form of the two tables of law. In sixteenth century Portugal the badge was a six pointed star although it was not in the form of the Mogen David but rather like an asterisk (*).

"As so often happened, the badge laws had social as well as financial ramifications. Sometimes the badge had to be purchased from an official source. Exemption from wearing the badge was likewise available through purchase from local authorities. A Jew found not wearing his badge was subject to a fine--yet another source of local revenue--and forfeiture of his garments."¹⁷

Restrictions were also placed on what clothing a Jew could wear. The Fourth Lateran Council also stated:

"We decree that such Jews and Saracens of both sexes shall be marked off in the eyes of the public from other peoples through the character of their dress. Particularly, since it may be read in the writings of Moses that this very law has been enjoined upon them."¹⁸

On the Iberian peninsula, the Cortes of Valladolid in 1258 passed numerous sumptuary laws which forbid Jews from wearing "White leather, red cloth, Scarlet stockings and suchlike with gold and silver decorations. Jews were to wear dark colors or black. . . in 1268. . . Jewish women were then allowed to use white leather and red cloth but the prohibition on gold decorations and ermine remained."¹⁹

It was not just Christians who passed such laws for the Jews. The Arab world also required Jews to dress in certain colors: in the fourteenth century, Jews wore yellow clothes and badges, Christians wore blue and Samaritans wore red. In the sixteenth century Jews in the Ottoman empire were required to wear a red fez in order to identify them.

All in all, according to Abba Eben, the Jews of the middle ages and the renaissance took the rules of dress and sumptuary laws in stride and many Jewish leaders even welcomed them, for they "saw them as barriers to assimilation and, therefore, as aids to the survival of a distinct Jewish community." (p. 132)

Bibliography

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¹⁶Elie Kedourie *The Jewish World: History and Culture of the Jewish People* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1979. p.171)

¹⁷Abba Eben, *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews* (New York: Summit, 1984. p.167)

¹⁸Eben, p.167

¹⁹Geoffrey Wigoder ed. *Jewish Art and Civilization Vol I* (New York: Walker, 1972 p. 131)

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