



I am Taking Off My Kippah

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Nathan Lopes Cardozo

Don't be shocked. But I need to be honest. I am contemplating taking off my kippah. No, do not worry. I have no intention of becoming irreligious, or even less religious. Far from it. In fact, I want to become more religious and have come to the conclusion that my kippah prevents me from doing so.

All my life I am trying to become religious, i.e. genuinely religious, but so far I have bitterly failed. Oh yes, I am observant, even "very observant." I try to live by every possible halacha. It's far from easy and boy, do I fail!

But that is not my problem. My problem is that I don't want to be observant. I want to be religious, and that is an entirely different story.

Sure, living in accordance with halacha is certainly a crucial component of being religious, but it is not what makes me religious. To be religious is to allow God entry into my thoughts, my deeds, what I see and what I feel. It is to have a constant, intense awareness of being in His presence, seeing His fingerprints everywhere, and living up to that awareness.

Halacha should be a constant reminder, an appeal to be attentive to Him, even in the midst of our day-to-day mundane affairs. But is it? It should teach us that even our trivialities need to become holy and be worthy of God, so that our common deeds reach Heaven. But does it accomplish that goal? Halacha is the external garment of an inner spiritual process which should be stimulated by those very halachic acts. But does this happen? For it to occur, much more has to be accomplished. To become religious is to face opposition, even of oneself - to dare, to defy. The way to reach God is through spiritual warfare, and all we can hope for is to catch a glimpse of His existence. It is an ongoing event. As the Kotzker Rebbe once said, if you cannot win, you must win. Only a pioneer can be heir to a religious tradition. Faith is contingent on the courage of the believer. This is the task of halacha. To teach us how to confront ourselves when standing in the presence of God and never give up, even against all odds. To be worthy.

But for many observant Jews, religion means living in security and peace of mind. This is the "dullness of observance," a religious conditioning which turns genuine religiosity and the experience of God into a farce. People are more afraid of halacha than they are in love with God. Halacha is a challenge to the soul, not its tranquilizer.



Now I realize that one of the main reasons for my failure to be religious is my kippah. Let me explain. I want to put my kippah on, but I realize that to do so I need to take it off. I don't want to wear it. I want to put it on as a daring religious act, a declaration to God that I wish to live in His presence. Not as a spiritual condition but as an act of elevation and moral grandeur.

The problem is that my kippah no longer carries this message. Its main purpose is to disturb, but every morning when I get out of my bed and put it on, it then disappears into my subconscious. It is always on my head and therefore never there.

When I began to be interested in Judaism and considered sincerely "giving it a try," I started covering my head when I went to synagogue and when I ate. I even dared to sit with my kippah when having a snack with my non-Jewish friends from the Gymnasium, the high school I attended in Holland. There was no one else there of Jewish descent besides my dear brother and perhaps one more person. I was very conscious of my kippah. I needed to take it off so that whenever I'd put it on again, I'd feel it on my head. This was very exciting. It was a happening. It made me proud, and I was filled with awe. My kippah reminded me that there was Somebody above me. Yes, it existentially unsettled me. It made me wonderfully uneasy. What a magnificent and majestic feeling! Living in the presence of God! I think I was a bit afraid of it. My hands trembled when I put it on. Not because of what my non-Jewish friends would say (they were most sympathetic), but because of what I would feel. What a responsibility and privilege!

Now, 45 years later, I am so used to my kippah that I have developed a love-hate relationship with it. In fact, I realize that I lost my kippah many years ago, the moment I decided to wear it all the time. It is no longer on my head to remind me of Him. It just sits there, a meaningless object, having little to do with my attempt to be religious. It has simply disappeared from my life. So, I find myself in the midst of a "cover-up," a depressive situation. It is most painful, and no rabbi or psychologist is able to help me. Most do not even understand what I am talking about.

But deep down I know the remedy. I need to take it off, to stop wearing it and only occasionally put it on again. Only then would I recognize it again as my friend. I would feel inspired. It would remind me once more that Somebody is above me and it is a privilege to live in His presence. It would help me to be truly religious and not merely "observant," which is nothing but continuous boredom. If I would take off my kippah, it would once more come to life, as when I tried it in my youth. I would have a relationship with it and would begin loving it again. Oh, what a sweet thought!



But can I do it? Halachically, there is really no problem. There are enough opinions to allow me to walk around bareheaded without ever needing to put on a kippah. True, the great Rabbi Yosef Karo (1488-1575) rules in his famous Shulchan Aruch (1) that one should always wear a head covering, but none other than the Gaon of Vilna (1720-1797) takes issue with this ruling. (2) Basing his view on the Talmud in Kiddushin 31a, he informs us that there is no obligation ever to wear a head covering. Not even when I pray, say a blessing or study the Torah. In fact, the Talmud reminds us that wearing a head covering is “only” middath chassiduth, a pious act, but not an obligation. (3) It somehow needs to be spontaneous, out of reverence for God. What the Talmudic sages clearly had in mind was that when we don a kippah our souls should be greatly aroused. After all, that is genuine piety. But now that it has become an obligation, it has begun to lose this very quality. And while our forefathers, who were great soul people, may have been spiritual enough to gain inspiration from it even when it became an imperative, most of us no longer feel any such uplifting experience. Who among us can make the claim that a feeling of piety grows within us when we wear it all the time? Alas, instead of having the kippah assist us in being pious, it has now become an obstacle. It has become counter-productive. We need to dispose of it so that we can put it on again as a deeply religious act.

But what will my grandchildren say when their grandfather will have stopped wearing his kippah? What will happen to their religiosity? Will they, who have been raised in a deeply “observant” society in which removing one’s kippah is an act of heresy and a sign of blatant secularism, ever understand what their grandfather had in mind? Will they become more religious when they see me bareheaded, only occasionally covering my head? Or will they conclude that since their grandfather no longer takes Judaism so seriously, they can follow suit? It scares the life out of me to think of the consequences. They may see my act as one of rebellion against what I love most: Judaism. Will it help when I tell them my reasons? Will they ever understand? Becoming more religious by taking off my kippah? It gives me the shivers when I think of it.

But it is not only my grandchildren that I worry about. It is also my students and my friends who may not understand why I decided what I did, and as a result may begin to become lenient in their commitment to Judaism and wearing a kippah. Will they understand that when they want to take off their kippah, because it “bothers” them, or it’s more pleasant to walk bareheaded, or they don’t want to be known as too Jewish, for that very reason they should wear it all the time? Will they understand that the difference between them and me is that they want to take it off and I want to put it on?

The story does not end here. Today, a kippah is a powerful symbol of Jewish identity which cannot be underestimated. It is a statement of Jewish pride, courage, and commitment to living with a mission. And if there’s anything I want, it’s to be a proud Jew! So, shall I leave it on despite my objections?



How difficult is my choice, now that it has become customary for Israeli criminals to wear kippoth while standing trial, so as to make a good impression on the judge. Do I want to walk in the path of sinners and sit in sessions of scorners? (4) As Cervantes would say, "Tell me thy company and I will tell thee what thou art." I still recall, with affection, the days when those wearing kippoth were known to be upright people.

So what shall I do? I do not know. Perhaps the solution is to wear a kippah shkufa, a transparent kippah, which no one but the Lord of the Universe can see. But would that help me in my search for religiosity? I need to be bareheaded while wearing it all the time. Who would have thought that something even as simple as a kippah would become a religious problem of considerable magnitude? None other than Benedictus de Spinoza said that all noble things are as difficult as they are rare. (5) Was he speaking about his former kippah? A blessing on his head!

1. Orach Hayim 2:6

2. Biur HaGra, Orach Hayim 8:1.

3. It is well known that many orthodox rabbis of the past did not wear a head covering. In the famous orthodox school in Frankfurt am Main established by Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-88), the students sat bareheaded when they studied secular topics. The famous German halachic authority of international repute, Rabbi Dr. David Tzvi Hoffmann (1843-1921), told the following story. When he came, with his head covered, to visit Rabbi Hirsch, the latter told him to take it off since it would be seen as a sign of disrespect. (Interestingly the Gra was of the opinion that one should wear a head covering when visiting a gadol hador.) Some maintain that Rabbi Hirsch himself wore a wig and may not always have covered his head with a kippah. For an informative study: Yarmulke: A historic cover-up, by Dan Rabinowitz in Hakirah, the Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought, Volume 4, Winter 2007, pp. 221-235.

4. See Psalms, 1:1

5. Ethica: last sentence