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Casual Saturday? Dressing Down For Shabbat

Dr. Wallace Greene

Dressing down usually means a severe scolding – in other words, an act or expression of criticism and censure. In contemporary parlance dressing down also refers to a situation characterized by informal or lackluster clothing (as opposed to dressing up). Our concern here is the former definition because of the latter definition, as it relates to how some individuals today garb themselves publicly on Shabbat.

As we navigate further into the twenty-first century, we are experiencing more and more of a relaxation of standards in all areas of societal comportment. One area of concern is how we should dress on Shabbat.

In general, there is a tendency for men and for women to adopt present-day fashion, even if inappropriate and immodest, in both formal and informal settings.¹ Not so long ago there were standards even in the general population of what was acceptable attire. Everyone “dressed up” when

1. Since proper attire, including a jacket and head covering are required for *davening* and men pray thrice daily, plus the recitation of *birkat hamazon* with a quorum of three or ten might also require proper dress, many are always dressed and ready for a *minyan*. See *Shuchan Aruch* O.C. 91:4-5; *Mishnah Berurah* ad loc; *Chayyei Adam* 22:8, *Aruch haShulchan* 91:5. See also *Berachot* 51a and *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 44:6. In addition there is the requirement that Torah scholars must always appear properly dressed as a symbol of *kevod haTorah*. See Rambam *M.T. Hilchot De'ot* 5:9.

Wallace Greene is the Managing Director at Adolph Schreiber Hebrew Academy of Rockland (ASHAR). He received his semicha and Ph.D. from Yeshiva University.

going to the theater, to the opera, to the movies, to a restaurant, even to the ballpark. Even the most non-observant Christian or Jew, male or female, followed the norms of how to dress when attending religious services, a wedding, a funeral, or any formal event.

Today, even at Orthodox Jewish functions, one finds people inappropriately attired. How one should dress in general and how one must dress during *davening* are subjects which have been addressed elsewhere at length. Our focus here is to concentrate on the special nature of appropriate Shabbat attire.

The sartorial laxity that has affected American society in general has seeped into our holy Shabbat as well. There were times when not everyone had a separate set of clothes for Shabbat. That is why the *Shulchan Aruch* ruled that at the very least one's everyday clothes – if that is all one has to wear – should be neat and clean (O.C. 262:2). Today, however, almost everyone has at least one good set of clothes for special occasions, and Shabbat is one of them.

We find a relationship between Shabbat attire, the priestly vestments, and clothes we wear for prayer.² The three experiences of Shabbat, prayer, and priestly service share in common that they all involve, on some level, designated clothing. In his *Mesillat Yesharim*, R. Moshe Chayyim Luzzato attributed this relationship between clothing and divine service to the fact that these are all experiences of greeting God's Divine Presence.³

The inner character of a person is of supreme religious significance. Nevertheless, outward appearance is also important, as Rambam writes:

A scholar must always wear clean dignified clothing.

2. See *Sefer HaChinuch*, Mitzvah #99; *Shulchan Aruch*, *Orach Chaim* 98:4 & 262:2 and *Mishnah Berurah* 262:5.

3. See *Mesillat Yesharim*, Chapter 19.

There should be no stain on his garments. He should not wear clothing associated with royalty, for this attracts attention to him. Nor should he wear garments worn by the poverty-stricken, for this will shame him. He should wear clean, moderately-priced garments. (*Hilchot De'ot* 5:9).⁴

As far as the priestly garments are concerned, the Talmud teaches that the priestly service is invalid if performed without the specified clothing (*Zevachim* 17b). The specific language used in the Talmud is critical. The wearing of the priestly vestments determines if the *kohen* is functioning as a real *kohen* or as an imposter. The Rambam (*MT Klei HaMikdash* 10:4, and more explicitly in his *Commentary to Mishnah, Sanhedrin* 19:2) stresses that a priest who performs his service without the priestly vestments is like a non-*kohen*, and is therefore subject to the same punishment as a *zar* (non-*kohen*) who performs the priestly service. A *kohen* without his garments is no more than a *Yisrael*. In light of these sources, the requirement of special clothes sounds almost like a prerequisite for being a priest than a prerequisite for priestly service.

Why is a priest without his vestments less of a priest? The Malbim explains that the physical body is clothed in garments, called *madim* (see *Vayikra* 6:3, "*mido bad*"), the modern Hebrew term for a soldier's uniform. Similarly the *nefesh* (spiritual self) is clothed in one's *middot* (personality and character). A person's *middot* reflect his strengths. The priest must clothe his body in physical garments, but that is not enough. The priest is commanded to transform himself while putting on his special clothing, just as wearing *madim* demands that one "wear" *middot* (Malbim to *Sh'mot* 28:2). The transcendent act of putting on the garments prepares the priest to approach the priestly service with the proper frame of mind. He is now ready for the priestly service, and only then is the priesthood thrust upon him. Otherwise, he is merely a *zar*, a non-*kohen*. The clothing's

4. See also *Shabbat* 145a.

influence on the priest reveals an additional dimension to the special clothing. The clothing's transformation of the priest serves as a powerful symbol of repentance.⁵ Their effect is not limited to the priest, but the entire priestly service is a different service.

The same is true of special Shabbat clothes. Our Shabbat attire does not merely reflect our reverence and appreciation of the sanctity of Shabbat, it also signifies that we are ready to be enveloped by the holiness of Shabbat.

Most people set aside special clothing for Shabbat.⁶ We have Shabbat dresses and Shabbat suits; we have Shabbat sheitels; we have Shabbat hats and coats. The question is – what is the actual halachic obligation? What was the obligation during the time of the Gemara? Does the obligation change based upon what people are doing?

The Talmud (*Shabbat* 113a) cites the verse from Isaiah 58:13: "...and you shall honor it [Shabbat] by not doing your daily ways," to teach us that our Shabbat clothing should not be like our clothing during the week. The *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Peah* 8:7) cites Rabbi Chanina that a person must have two *atifin* (suits/cloaks), one for the week and one for Shabbat, as it is written (*Ruth* 3:3) "And you shall wash and anoint and place your garments upon yourself." This refers to special Shabbat clothing.

All *Rishonim* concur and rule that special Shabbat clothing is mandatory,⁷ and it is codified by the *Shulchan Aruch* (O.C.

5. See *Zevachim* 88b; *Arachim* 16a and *Vayikra Rabbah* 10:6.

6. See *Responsa Radvaz* 1:12; and *Responsa Tzitz Eliezer* 14:34, concerning the need to have special Shabbat shoes.

7. See Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, H. *Shabbat* 30:3; *Machzor Vitry* 293; *Tur*, O.C. 242; *Bet Yosef* 242; Meiri and *Pisqei Or Zarua* to *Shabbat* 119a. See *Encyclopedia Talmudit* Vol. 27, s.v. *kevod Shabbat*, for a fuller listing. See also *Sefer Avudraham*, *Shacharit shel Shabbat*, where he derives this obligation from another source and compares it to the priestly garments which are for *kavod v'tiferet*, honor and splendor.

262:2-3). The Talmud and the *Shulchan Aruch* understood that not everyone has the luxury of having many changes of clothing. The key is that what you wear and how you dress on Shabbat needs to be different from the weekday attire. If one cannot afford different or special clothing, then Shabbat can be made special by either laundering and pressing one's clothing or, as the Ramo *ad loc.* suggests, rolling the sleeves and cuffs down, the assumption being that while working, the cuffs and sleeves are rolled up. Some later authorities have phrased the requirement as "have special clothing according to your ability," and in some cases people simply wore a special Shabbat caftan over their weekday clothing.⁸

Today most people do have dressy outfits/suits for weddings and other special occasions. Since Shabbat is the special occasion *par excellence* that is the standard to follow:

One should wear nice clothes and rejoice at the onset of Shabbat in the manner that one does on formal occasions [greeting a king] and at a wedding (S.A. O.C. 262:3).⁹

8. See *Shulchan Aruch HaRav* O.C. 262:3; *Chayyei Adam* 263:7; and *Ra'avayah*, *Shabbat* 197.

9. This parsing of the *Shulchan Aruch* is corroborated by Rav Herschel Schachter in a personal communication. The language comes from the *Tur* who states that one should wear nice clothing and then says that you put on those clothes and go out and rejoice. Rav Schachter quotes, in *MiPninei HaRav*, p. 68 that Rav Soloveitchik z"l was insistent that one wear "Shabbosdik" clothing whenever one is in public, to the extent that he chastised someone who left his jacket in shul during a heat wave. See also *Responsa HaRosh* 21:3 – "You have asked: In a private alleyway enclosed by an *eruv*, is it permissible to walk about without a hat or coat on Shabbat in the manner that one walks about during the week? Answer: This depends on the local custom since it is not prohibited as a matter of rabbinic law. Rather, the [Jewish] world is accustomed to honor the Shabbat by changing one's garments and one's way of walking about from what it does during the week. All of this is governed by custom, not legislation, but this custom must not be denigrated since the custom of our forefathers has the weight of Torah law even if the local custom is not the same as in another country." Thanks to Rabbi Josh Flug for this reference.

The issue of Shabbat robes or hostess gowns is a delicate one. There is a distinction between what one wears in the privacy of one's home and what one wears in public on Shabbat.¹⁰ On the one hand some robes are quite fancy and expensive, and worn with jewelry. Many women entertain wearing them. Some women will wear them outside the home on occasion. However, if they are not worn to weddings, or business meetings, despite their comfort and practicality, they may not meet the *Shulchan Aruch's* standard for Shabbat attire outside the home.

In Judaism, Shabbat and its attendant holiness commence on Friday night. Therefore it is incumbent to be appropriately dressed when Shabbat begins. Obviously this necessitates getting home early enough prior to Shabbat in order to change into Shabbat attire. The *Mishnah Berurah* (256:1) and the *Aruch HaShulchan* (262:4) praise those (especially women) who get home early enough from the marketplace in order to bathe and put on their Shabbat finery prior to candle lighting. He admonishes those who aren't careful about this, especially on short Fridays. The *Sefer Chasidim* castigates those who only "dress up" on Shabbat morning and compares them to Christians who go to services only on the morning of their Sabbath.¹¹ The sin of implying by our manner of dress that our Shabbat only begins during the day – because then people see how we are dressed – is quite serious. *Tosafot* (*Bava Kama* 37a *dibur hamatchil "harei"*), say that even animals recognized when people were dressed for Shabbat. Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg is concerned that if one is not wearing Shabbat attire he might forget it is Shabbat and recite the weekday prayers.¹²

The general tenor of how we approach Shabbat is that as

10. See *Biur Halacha* O.C. 262:3 who cites the *Magen Avraham*. See also previous footnote.

11. See *Sefer Chasidim* (Margoliot ed.) *Brit Olam V'Shomer HaBrit* #57. See also *Elyah Zuta* 262 who concurs.

12. *Responsa Tzitz Eliezer* 13:25.

much as possible we distinguish it from the regular weekday. "...and you shall honor it by not doing your daily ways." (Isaiah 58:13) Not only do we dress differently, we eat differently, we walk differently, we pray differently, we behave differently and everything we do is geared to honoring Shabbat. Many are accustomed to recite "*l'khvod Shabbat kodesh*" (in honor of the holy Sabbath) when eating special Shabbat delicacies. Everything that we do differently to make Shabbat a special day is considered *kevod Shabbat*.¹³

Aside from wearing nice clothes or clothing set aside for Shabbat, there is a tradition to have a special *tallit* for Shabbat.¹⁴ Furthermore, many are accustomed to wear a fancy embroidered or silver *atarah* or collar band on their Shabbat *tallit*.¹⁵

In general Chasidic circles, the long black wool or polyester frock (*rekel, bekishe, capote*) worn on weekdays is replaced with a colorful silk (*zaidene*) *capote*, and the hat is replaced with a round mink *shtreimel* or a tall sable *spodik*. In Chabad, suits are replaced with longer silk *capotes*. Ties are seen more often. Some are accustomed to wear a special *tisch bekishe* (*khalat*) during Shabbat *mincha* until after the *melaveh malka*. It has been suggested that the word *bekishe* is an inverted acronym for *Begeid Shabbos Kodesh*. The "Yeshivish" world, i.e., non-Chasidic, has a more subtle change. A different hat, a nicer tie, French-cuff shirts and other accessories are used to dress up Shabbat.

One need not look only to the ultra-Orthodox world for examples of special Shabbat attire. The concept of special clothes for special occasions is well entrenched in most societies. That is why tuxedos and formal wear were invented.

13. See *Mesillat Yesharim* Chap. 19.

14. See *Elyah Zuta*, 262 who cites this custom from the Maharil.

15. This is based on the *Magen Avraham*, O.C. 262-2, who writes that just as we wear nicer clothing on Shabbat, one should wear a special *tallit* on Shabbat as well. See *Shaar Haotiyot, Chullin* (p. 112a in the Amsterdam 1648 edition).

So, if Shabbat requires our best special clothing, then reason might dictate formal wear. Thus in many Orthodox synagogues in the New York area during the early and mid-twentieth century and even today in some places, the clergy and officers wore morning suits and in some cases top hats.¹⁶

The special sanctity of Shabbat exists from before the moment Shabbat actually begins, so that we can properly prepare to greet Shabbat, until after Shabbat ends with *Havdalah*. However, in some communities/homes it is common for children to change after shul or after lunch on Shabbat into play clothes. Similarly some men come casually attired to shul for *mincha* as if the Shabbat holiness is somehow lessened later in the day. There may be a source for this widespread custom of not wearing a tie (and other dress-down practices) when going to shul for *mincha* on Shabbat afternoons. Rashi and Ran on *Nedarim* 77a note a custom for women to remove their Shabbat jewelry on Shabbat afternoons towards the end of the day. Based on this, the *Responsa Gur Aryeh Yehuda* O.C. #13, argues that the requirement to wear Shabbat clothes is no longer in force from late afternoon onwards. In fact, there is a custom among certain Chasidim who generally wear flowery or colorful *bekeshes* on Shabbat to wear a plain black *bekeshe* from *mincha* time until the

16. The author remembers growing up in Inwood at the tip of Manhattan in the '50's. Every Shabbat the rabbi wore a formal morning suit – dark gray jacket and striped trousers. In many synagogues in the '50's, especially in the German communities, women without white gloves would never be seen on Shabbat any more than a man without a hat. It has also been observed that some European Jews come to the *sefer* in tuxedos and formal gowns. The Rav z"l (Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveichik) very often said that popular *minhag* was an accurate filter of the halacha. See R. Zvi Schechter, *Nefesh haRav*, pp. 24-26. It's what Haym Soloveitchik calls "mimetic." "Halakhah [sic] is a sweepingly comprehensive *regula* of daily life...it constitutes a way of life. And a way of life is not learned but rather absorbed. Its transmission is mimetic, imbibed from parents and friends, and patterned on conduct regularly observed in home and street, synagogue and school." See his "Rupture and Reconstruction: The Transformation of Contemporary Orthodoxy," *Tradition*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Summer 1994).

conclusion of Shabbat.¹⁷ The *Erech Shai* writes that the reason one is not required to wear Shabbat clothes at this time is to recall that Yosef, Moshe, and David died on Shabbat afternoon.¹⁸

However, even if it applies at all, the *Nedarim* citation applies only to jewelry and cannot be extended to include any other Shabbat clothing.¹⁹ Indeed, the *Magen Avraham* (O.C. 262:2) and *Mishnah Berurah* (262:8) rule very clearly that one should not remove one's Shabbat clothes until after *Havdalah*. We are taught that those who observe the *Seudat Melaveh Malka* – a meal after the formal conclusion of Shabbat – are to remain in their Shabbat finery until this ritual is concluded. The clear implication is that people should remain in special Shabbat clothing all Shabbat long.²⁰

Now that it has been clearly established that Shabbat requires a higher level of adherence to an objective dress code, we need to address the issue of Shabbat informality that exists in many communities nowadays. It is true that local customs play a part in determining acceptable attire.²¹ Rambam (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefillah* 5:5) writes that it depends on what people in that place consider respectful.²² For example,

17. See *Shalom Rav, Sha'ar HaHalacha*, 7:7.

18. See *Erech Shai*, O.H. 262.

19. See *Orchot Chayyim* O.C. 300:2.

20. See *Ra'avayah* 378, *Magen Avraham* 262:2; *Elyah Zuta* 262.

21. See *Responsa HaRosh* 21:3 cited above..

22. In subsequent literature, the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Orach Chaim* 91:4) adopts Rambam's language and later authorities generally accept it. *Magen Avraham* (91:5) quotes a responsum from R. Moshe Mintz (no. 38), who also ruled that people may not enter a synagogue while wearing sandals. However, on further examination it is clear that this meant that people must wear shoes rather than sandals. *Birkei Yosef* (*Orach Chaim* 91:5, 151:8) quotes Rashbash at length, as does *Kaf Ha-Chaim* (91:25). *Aruch Ha-Shulchan* (*Orach Chaim* 91:5, 151:9) insists that the entire discussion centers on wearing socks but not shoes. Everyone, he claims, requires one or the other because otherwise you appear to be following a Muslim practice. For many years the Jews of Djerba, Tunisia, prayed barefoot, and to this day, there are sand floor

the Gemara (*Megillah* 28a-b; *Berachot* 62b) lists disrespectful actions that are incompatible with the honor due a synagogue. Tosafot (*Shabbat* 10a sv. *rami*) rule unequivocally that one must wear shoes while praying, except for Yom Kippur and *Tisha B'Av*, when we are restricted regarding footwear.

The Rashbash (*Responsa* no. 285), writing in fifteenth-century Algiers, explains that there are two kinds of respect and disrespect. The ultimate, true type is entirely spiritual. However, even the apparent kind, which is subjective, must be maintained. The definitions of this kind of respect and disrespect are bound by time and geography. Proper behavior depends on contemporary attitudes, what people consider respectful and not. Therefore, Rashbash concludes, in Muslim countries (e.g. Egypt where the Rambam lived) one may not enter a synagogue while wearing shoes. Since people in those places consider entering a home while wearing shoes disrespectful, and certainly when appearing before a king, they must accord even greater respect to a synagogue. In Christian countries, however, one must wear shoes in a synagogue because, in those places, that is considered proper behavior. At one time Jews wore white on Shabbat.²³ In some places Jews wore turbans or other headgear to distinguish that special day.

In North America and in Europe, acceptable attire on Shabbat, especially in the synagogue, means a suit and tie, or at the very least a jacket and tie for men, and a dress for women, and shoes with socks. "One should wear nice clothes and rejoice at the onset of Shabbat in the manner that one does on formal occasions [greeting a king] and at a wedding." (S.A. O.C. 262:3).

synagogues in the Caribbean where worshippers remove their shoes.

23. See Commentary of R. Asher ben Yehiel and R. Shlomo Luria to *Bava Kamma* 82a. According to many kabbalistic sources, "clean" garments means white garments.

The sartorial laxity that has affected American society in general has seeped into our holy Shabbat as well, and at times belies the preponderance of halachic opinion as to appropriate attire. It's not just during the warmer months, or "in the mountains" or on vacation.

In Israel it is accepted in *dati-leumi* circles to wear white open collar shirts without a jacket or tie on Shabbat. According to the definition of the *Shulchan Aruch*, it would not seem appropriate, however, for Americans to follow this practice and come to *shul* without a jacket and tie. If the standard is dressing the way one dresses for a wedding or for an important meeting, the conclusion seems obvious.

Seasons should not matter, nor should location. Shabbat is still Shabbat regardless of the calendar or the location. Shabbat is still Shabbat at home, at a conference, or on vacation, at a bungalow, or in Israel. The *poskim* specify that you must wear your Shabbat clothing even when you are among non-Jews, or even if you are celebrating Shabbat alone.²⁴ In fact a number of *responsa* specify the wearing of nice Shabbat clothing even in inclement weather.²⁵ Similarly, the preponderance of opinions also rules that Shabbat clothing is worn on *Shabbat Hazon* prior to *Tisha B'Av*.²⁶

Many great rabbis have captured the essence of various aspects of Shabbat. Rav Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uzziel (1880-1953), former chief rabbi of Israel, sets forth the rationale for this essay, the importance of dressing in special clothes for Shabbat:

"A man should not go out [on Shabbat] as he does during the week unless he has something with him to show that it is Shabbat so he will not desecrate it." (*OC* 301:16). The Rabbis are teaching us a fundamental rule about fulfilling

24. See *Chayyei Adam*, *Hilchot Shabbat* 5:7; and his *Zichru Torat Moshe* #1.

25. See sources listed in *Responsa Siach Yitzchak* #133.

26. See *Mishnah Berurah* 551:6.

the sanctity of Shabbat. "You shall honor it by avoiding daily tasks, your Shabbat clothing shall not be your weekday clothing, your manner of walking on Shabbat shall not be as your walking during the week, and your speech on Shabbat shall be different from your manner of speaking during the week." (*Shabbat 113b*).

These fundamental precepts of Torah teach and emphasize that the goal of Shabbat's sanctity is to liberate Jews from the daily travail and angst of secular monotony which corrode body and soul. It generates anger, rage, jealousy, and defiles the mind and the spirit. [Shabbat] provides emancipation for the soul, spiritual elevation, and a clear balanced understanding which brings with it joy, pleasantness, spirituality and communion with The Holy One of Israel, Who sanctifies His people Israel with His Holiness. Suffused with this supernal holiness we cast off our workaday clothes and put on garments of the Holy Shabbat, through which we honor Shabbat by thus removing all secularity, foggy thinking, and despondency. We are now garbed with an additional soul [*neshamah yetera*] which is pleasing and pleasant to both body and soul. This is the miztvah of Shabbat. (*Responsa Mishpetei Uzziel 3, O.C.. 39*).

Letters

To the Editor:

In the Fall edition of this journal [LXIV], Rav Binyamin Cohen, *sh"lita*, comments on an earlier article about child molestation. There, the author had relied on the ruling of Ramo [CM 35:14], that it is permissible for *beit din* to accept the testimony of a minor if there is no other choice. Rav Cohen argues, however, that this ruling should not apply to a child's accusations about what was done to him, because he is a litigant in the matter, and the testimony of a litigant is not acceptable in a Jewish court. (On the other hand, if the child is testifying about something he saw being done to another person, Rav Cohen would allow Ramo's ruling to apply.)

However, I wish to point out what I think is a fundamental error in his objection: in these situations, our *batei din* are not sitting in judgment concerning punishment or payment. They are seeking to protect the members of the community, trying to determine whether the accused offender is to be dismissed from the position which gives him opportunity to molest. Their function is not to gather "evidence", but rather to make a finding according to *umdenah* (a logical or reasonable inference: even circumstantial evidence). Anyone's "testimony" can be used to establish an *umdenah*.

The problem of molestation in a community therefore does not go under the label of *nezikin* (damages) but rather under the rubric of *hilchot rotzeach ushemirat hanefesh* (laws of murder and protecting life), and the *batei din* are simply there to protect the victims. If it is necessary to incarcerate the offenders in order to protect the victims – so be it.

RAV DOVID COHEN
Brooklyn, NY

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