

## Why We Wear Kippot

*By Wayne Buse & Joseph (Yosef) Logue*



**F**rom the days of Moshe, one of the distinguishing marks of

the Jewish people has been the head covering. Orthodox men are always seen wearing some kind of head covering, whether it is a kippah or a traditional hat. Conservative Jewish men wear a kippah for prayers and for home celebrations. Some Liberal (Reform) Jewish men wear a kippah only when they pray, if then. They follow the custom of the Jews of Biblical times who went bareheaded. Traditional Jewish women, even today, often have their heads covered with a scarf or a wig.

Over the last 300 years, traditional Jews have been well known for wearing hats or some other type of head covering. In some European communities, the hat was transformed into the smaller yarmulke (Yiddish)/ kippah (Hebrew). Yarmulke might be an acronym for the Hebrew expression, "Yirey m'Elohim (Be in Fear of God)." That means it was worn in respect or reverence for HaShem. Kippah is the Hebrew name for the head covering and it means "covering". Whatever forms the head covering may take, the lesson is clear. The Jewish people are to always walk in submission and humility before God who is always watching over them.

Where did this custom come from? Our answer is in the Torah. The concept of a head covering was actually formalized with the priestly garments of Israel. See Shemot (Exodus) 28:1-4. The sons of Aaron (the first Cohain HaGadol) and the Levi'im (tribe of Levi, Levites) were the ones appointed as the cohanim (priests). They were to represent God to the people, but also the people to God. Such a holy service was not to be taken lightly, and called for special garments. Among this holy attire was the turban. The Hebrew word mitznefet comes from the root "to wrap," implying that this was a turban-style of head covering.

What did this turban symbolize? The same chapter of Shemot (Exodus) states that the head covering of the Cohain HaGadol (High Priest) was to be embellished with the words "HOLY TO THE Lord," Shemot 28:36-38. Clearly, this mitznefet was to be a reminder that God is characterized by the attribute of moral perfection.

Although this custom was originally applicable only to the priesthood, later in history the Jewish community at large began to wear head coverings. The assumption was that if the priests were required to cover their heads, then it would be most appropriate for all men to wear this sign of submission.

After the Romans in 70 C.E. destroyed the Temple, synagogues, already in existence for hundreds of years as houses of study and community-gathering places, became the centers of worship. Rabbis, who were scholars and teachers, replaced priests, who had conducted ceremonial worship and maintained the Temple. Some rabbis felt the need to express an awareness of God throughout the day, so they began to wear a sign, a hat, as a mark of respect to God.

The words of Yeshayahu HaNavee (Isaiah the Prophet) contributed to the idea. The angels that Yeshayahu saw in his vision of heaven (Yeshayahu 6) were flying about and singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy is ADONAI TZ'VA-OT (The Lord of Hosts)! The whole earth is full of His Glory!" If the whole earth was full of God's glory, then God was everywhere, not only in a house of worship or in a Beit Midrash, a house of study. Rabbi Chuna, a native-born rabbi of the 4th century C.E, reflected this thought. He would not take even a few steps bareheaded, because "the Shechinah (HaShem's presence) is above the head."

The idea spread slowly. Some rabbis covered their heads at all times. Jewish scholars did so when they prayed and while they were engaged in religious studies. In the 1500's, the custom of wearing a hat as a sign became universal among Jews. Joseph Caro, the leading Jewish scholar of the day, decreed that men should not go bareheaded.

Later Jewish tradition regarded a man with an uncovered head as indecent or even pagan. So important was the head covering that some of the talmudic rabbis spoke of not walking even six steps without the proper head attire (Babylonian Talmud, (Kiddushin 31a). Another Talmudic discussion noted that a man should have his head covered to show "humility in prayer" (Babylonian Talmud, Yom Teruah 17b). Perhaps the best summary statement on the reasons for the head covering is so that "the fear of God will be upon you" (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 156b). The head covering is a reminder to Israel that there is someone watching over them.

Ever since, Orthodox Jewish men and boys have worn a kippah at all times. Why don't Orthodox women and girls? This explanation is sometimes given by Orthodox men: Men need a hat to remind them that HaShem is above them, but women are aware of the Shechinah, God's Presence, at all times and don't need a reminder.

By understanding some of the history of the kippah and head coverings, one can better discern the place of these traditions in their personal lives. For those who feel that this custom fits the context of their Messianic faith, there is complete freedom to wear the kippah. Considering Rav Sha'ul's philosophy of ministry, a Jewish or even a non-Jewish believer who mingles with the Jewish community has good reason to follow this custom. Rav Sha'ul said, "with Jews what I did was put myself in the position of a Jew, in order to win Jews" (1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 9:20).

From the biblical perspective, the more important question is not whether one wears the sign of submission, but whether one lives a life of submission. It does not benefit the believer to have a traditional outward expression coupled with a personal life that is out of God's order. Whatever one's practice, may all things be done for the sake of the love of Messiah. The kippah for men, or scarf for women, is a beautiful custom when properly understood. Believers in Yeshua need to ask themselves if they are walking in the truth that these customs are meant to communicate. <sup>1</sup>

## Christian Objections to wearing Kippot

Many Christians have problems with wearing "kippot" at worship based on Paul's teachings in (1st Corinthians 11:4). But does Paul really teach that men should not wear anything at all on their heads? On the surface, [1Cor.11:4](#) and [7](#), in some English translations, seem to indicate that a man should be bareheaded: "Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying, dishonors his head" and "a man ought not to have his head covered" (NASB). If we use these verses to rule out even men's hats and Kippot, we have two problems.

First, this view does not harmonize with what the Bible says about the subject elsewhere. For example, the garments Yahweh commanded priests to wear included turbans for the head ([Ex.28:40](#)), and two times the High Priest was told "do not uncover your head" ([Lev. 10:6](#); [21:10](#)). In addition, we see King David and his men all praying with covered heads, and the Lord answering their prayer ([2 Sam.15:30f](#); [17:14](#)). <sup>2</sup>

Secondly, the Greek *katakalupto* describes something that "hangs down over" the head, which does not sound at all like a kippah or man's hat. Paul is not condemning kippot or hats; he is saying that a man should not wear "a shawl hanging down over his head" (rs.4, Wuest trans.) like a woman. A male should not cover his head "in that manner," (rs.7, Wuest trans.), i.e., like a woman. Paul is simply reinforcing Deut. 22:5: "The woman shall not wear men's clothing, nor shall a man put on a woman's clothing: for whoever does these things is an abomination to Yahweh your God." <sup>3</sup>

Stern in his commentary writes; "Wearing something down over his head. This is the literal translation, and it is used here to show that Sha'ul is talking about wearing a veil, not a hat. The usual translation, "with his head covered," obscures this fact, and as a result an issue has arisen in Messianic Judaism that should never have come up at all, namely, whether it is proper for a Messianic Jewish man to wear a kippah ("skullcap" or, in Yiddish, yarmulke) in public worship. Of course it is proper, since objection to it is based only on a mis-translation of this verse." <sup>4</sup>

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## Notes

1. This part of article was written by Wayne Buse Joseph (Yosef) Logue and can be found at [www.kehilatdvarhashem.org/kippah.htm](http://www.kehilatdvarhashem.org/kippah.htm), used by permission

2.The Validity and Value of the Women's Headcovering by: Daniel Botkin [http://www.yourarmstoisrael.org/guest\\_contributors/headcoverings.htm](http://www.yourarmstoisrael.org/guest_contributors/headcoverings.htm)

3.The Validity and Value of the Women's Headcovering by: Daniel Botkin [http://www.yourarmstoisrael.org/guest\\_contributors/headcoverings.htm](http://www.yourarmstoisrael.org/guest_contributors/headcoverings.htm)

4.The Jewish New Testament Commentary, (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications) 1996.