

Aboriginal Yarmulkes, Ambivalent Attire, and Ironies of Contemporary Jewish Identity

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How should a Jew dress? The question is far from trivial.¹

Traditionally, Jews—mainly men—prayed in certain distinctive garments. Wearing a skullcap or yarmulke, draped in a prayer shawl [*tallit*], and, in the morning, enwrapped in *tefillin* or phylacteries, a devotional Jew looked unmistakably Jewish. He dressed for Judaism.

But what about on the streets? How should a Jew dress in public? In distinctively Jewish attire? Like everybody else? Should a Jew intentionally dress to stand apart—or to blend with the rest of society? Are there certain non-Jewish garments that must be avoided? How, in other words, should clothing reflect Jewish identity?

The classic rabbis spoke with an almost singular voice on the matter: Jews must dress distinctively. At the very least, Jews should never seek to emulate Gentiles. Any such garb was tantamount to apostasy. The classic rabbis of old thundered, century after century, against the donning of non-Jewish garb. The rabbis often enlarged on biblical edicts, thus creating a religious “fence” [*seyag*] that would protect Jews from inadvertently transgressing divine law. Clothing served as one such hedge. Dress, too, functioned as a crucial sign of Jewish difference that would thwart acculturation and the mirroring of Gentiles. Or so the rabbis hoped.

“Learn not,” declared the prophet Jeremiah (10:2), “the ways of the other nations.” The rabbis interpreted this and similar biblical passages to specify that Jews should dress in distinct attire. Indeed, Jews should suffer martyrdom, declared the Talmud (*b. Sanh.* 74a–74b), rather than renounce the slightest commandment or custom, even “changing the strap of one’s shoe.” One father was quite clear on this point in his fourteenth-century ethical will penned to his children: “you must not adopt non-Jewish fashions of dress. . . . Never change the fashions of your fathers.”²

Other rabbinic legal decisors, known as *poskim*, were more liberal. They objected only to non-Jewish clothing specifically tied to taboo behaviors, such as idolatry and immodesty.³ Some rabbis allowed Gentile garb so long as the intent was not to pass as a non-Jew,⁴ or, as the Talmud discussed (*b. B. Bat.* 83a), if a Jew wished simply to avoid embarrassment when interacting with non-Jewish officials. In the main, though, all rabbinic authorities until the

nineteenth century rise of Reform Judaism and the Haskalah or Jewish Enlightenment subscribed to the dictum that Jews should not “walk in the ways of the Gentiles,” a principle known as *chukat ha-goy*.⁵ Jews should dress like Jews, that is, in clothing that upholds the key social boundaries that separate men from women, the learned rabbinic elite from the common folk, and especially Jew from Gentile. How should a Jew dress? For his or her place in the divine order of society and the cosmos.

KOSHER KANGAROOS?

As a self-professed Australiaphile and an anthropologist with long-standing field-work experience in Papua New Guinea, a former Australian colony, my interests in Jews and Antipodean indigenes rarely correspond. So it is not difficult to imagine my delight upon espying a few years ago yarmulkes ornamented with Aboriginal designs [Figs. 1–3]. They are manufactured by Design Kippah in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. (Yarmulke is Yiddish; *kippah* is Hebrew.) The patterns are colorful, vibrant, and, most significantly, unmistakably Aboriginal. What do these non-Jewish motifs mean on these quintessentially Jewish garments?

In 2011, I conducted an impromptu e-mail query facilitated through the Australian Association of Jewish Studies.⁶ My interlocutors reported a range of sentiments in regard to these designs: a generic sense of Australian citizenship, national pride, a fashion statement, a bit of fun in the pews, solidarity with another oppressed



Figure 1. Australian yarmulke with kangaroos.



Figure 2. Yarmulke made from Julie Nabangardi Shedden's Aboriginal Australian “Bush Tucker” design.



Figure 3. Australian yarmulke with boomerang pattern.

people, and a moral commitment to social justice phrased as the Jewish value of *tikkun olam* [repairing the world]. These yarmulkes allow Jews to announce their affinity with another long-persecuted people whose very identity is threatened by the forces of assimilation. Ever since the British established a penal settlement in Botany Bay in the late eighteenth century, the clash between Euro-Australians and indigenous Australians has been one of unremitting tragedy. Why should Jews not “root,” as one person said, for the oldest, original Australians? Indeed, one could read these yarmulkes as a stylish comment on the often complex relationship between Jews and Aborigines.⁷

From a religious perspective, however, Aboriginal-themed yarmulkes potentially pose certain complications and impious innuendo. As one devout Jew said to me in an e-mail exchange, the depiction of animals on these yarmulkes might violate Jewish religious law, or *halacha*. For one, some of these yarmulkes depict decidedly non-kosher animals, such as kangaroos [Fig. 1] and honey ants [Fig. 2; the yarmulke was cut from a larger cloth that also depicted stylized lizards, snakes, and witchetty grubs]. For another, many of the patterns derive from the Aboriginal cosmological concept known in English as The Dreamtime. The Dreamtime or The Dreaming, called the “everywhen” by the noted anthropologist W. H. Stanner,⁸ “denies creative significance to history and human action” and “denies the erosions of time,” since The Dreaming “represents all that exists as deriving from a single, unchanging, timeless source.”⁹ We humans, like everything else in the cosmos, were created by anthropomorphic and theriomorphic ancestral spirit-beings. Facets of The Dreaming might evoke certain dimensions of the biblical deity. But there is no place for The Dreamtime in the Torah, Israelite religion, or the rabbinic worldview. Consequently, Aboriginal yarmulkes could be seen in a broad sense as violating the first commandment of the Decalogue and thus repudiating the most basic premise of monotheism. Last, religious Jews, as I noted earlier, normally should shun distinctively non-Jewish clothing. Not only are the Aboriginal patterns obviously Gentile, but they seemingly celebrate that very non-Jewishness.

The rabbis of old, however, did offer one possible resolution to the conundrum of the Aboriginal yarmulke. The rabbis, always fearful of idolatry, largely banned jewelry ornamented with heathenish images such as suns, moons, and dragons.¹⁰ Other rabbis barred only costly ornaments, assuming that worthless baubles were made simply for fashion, not ritual and worship. Still another opinion tolerated pagan gems but only after a non-Jew nullified the idolatrous intent or aura of the item, for example, by marring or spitting

upon the image. In fact, a recent set of Jewish girls' dolls dressed in modest clothing befitting a "Torah-observant lifestyle," called Mini Mishpacha,¹¹ addressed this very issue. If a local community sees these dolls as a form of *avodah zara* or idol worship, advised the website for Mini Mishpacha, "an adult can snip off a piece of the nose or a finger of each doll."¹² This mutilation signifies a Jew's commitment to never view or use the dolls impiously. One could conceivably perform a similar marring on an Aboriginal yarmulke or perhaps awkwardly ask an Aboriginal person to expectorate on the item.

Ancient rabbinic authorities forbid Jews from dressing in garments directly connected to pagan worship.¹³ Thus a cloak presented to an idol as a ritual offering is categorically taboo. It can never be worn by a Jew. But if an idolater wore the cloak for warmth and afterward slung it on the effigy for storage, then a Jew could rightly wear the garment. The rabbis were particularly concerned with censoring behavior that might appear, however unintentional, to signal Jewish respect for a heathen deity. Might one apply similar logic to Aboriginal yarmulkes? Perhaps. But surely no reasonable person would view these caps as ritual objects used in non-Jewish rites. Still, the patterns might nonetheless convey a degree of respect for a non-Jewish religious outlook. Worse, the motifs could imply the intent to introduce a non-Jewish ritual element, or deity, into Jewish worship. The Aboriginal yarmulke, I suggest, evokes a quality of taboo precisely because it blurs normative boundaries between sacred and profane, Jew and non-Jew.

There is more we need to consider in determining the religious status of Aboriginal yarmulkes. The pattern in Figure 2 is sewn from a copyrighted fabric titled "Bush Tucker," designed by the Northern Queensland Aboriginal artist Julie Nabangardi Shedden. On the Internet, one can readily find the very same pattern and variations on tablecloths, scarves, bandannas, tote bags, and coffee mugs. I applaud Design Kippah for using an authorized Aboriginal pattern, which ensures that the artist receives rightful remuneration. The unauthorized reproduction of Aboriginal designs, and the parroting of faux patterns, is a long-standing, degrading, and shameful form of cultural colonization.¹⁴ By donning an authorized Aboriginal-themed yarmulke, a Jew stands with other progressive citizens seeking to redress the continued exploitation and muting of Aborigines in the Australian nation-state.

Despite these non-Jewish meanings and political stances, what could possibly be more distinctively, obviously, and publicly Jewish than a yarmulke? What other garment so quintessentially proclaims a Jewish identity? How could one possibly walk in the footsteps of Gentiles while attired in this cap?

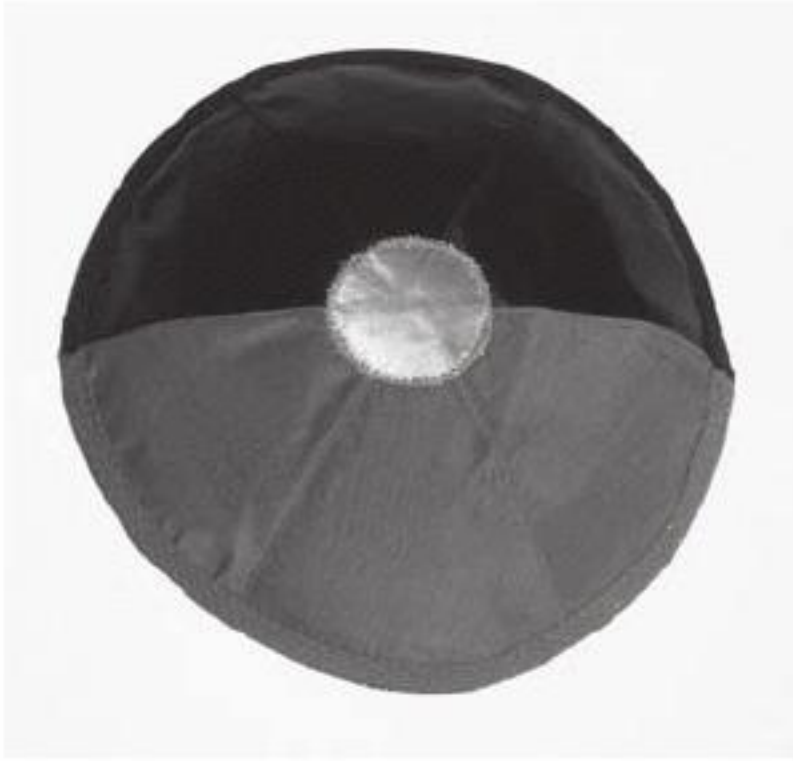


Figure 4. Yarmulke designed after the Aboriginal flag.

The Aboriginal yarmulke, then, blurs the very rabbinic “fence” it aims to uphold. In other words, this garment evidences the very acculturation the rabbis so strenuously opposed even as it announces an unmistakable Jewish identity. Indeed, Aboriginal yarmulkes vibrantly illustrate the long-standing tension in Jewish clothing between what I call ethnic or religious particularism and generic citizenship—between dressing like a Jew and dressing like others.

Another, similar-themed yarmulke displays the Aboriginal flag [Fig. 4]. This

banner was designed in 1971 by Harold Thomas, a descendent of the Luritja people of the Western Desert. The black represents Aboriginal people, the red signifies the earth, ochre, and the Aborigines’ spiritual affiliation with the land, and the yellow symbolizes the life-giving sun. These are hardly classic rabbinic or Jewish significations. This yarmulke, then, raises the same complexities as the previous caps I discussed. But this yarmulke also displays the friction between garbing Jewish identity in a Jewishness that resists colonization by European Christian cultural hegemony and affiliating Jewishness with the Aboriginal struggle against the very same colonization of which Jews are a part. After all, Jews arrived with the first convict fleet in 1788. Moreover, many Aborigines today assert intellectual ownership over the flag and wish non-Aborigines to cease its reproduction for commercial purposes. (In 1997, the Federal Court of Australia recognized Mr. Thomas, the sole designer of the flag, as protected by the Copyright Act of 1968.) It is, in many respects, a yarmulke fraught with tension about how a Jew should, or should not, dress to announce Jewishness. From any angle, Aboriginal yarmulkes represent the irreducible complexities of modern Jewish identity.

ANCIENT HEADBANDS AND FRINGES

But how modern are these complexities of Jewish identity as encoded in clothing? Judaism, of course, postdates the biblical era of hereditary priests, animal sacrifice, and the Jerusalem Temple. Indeed, the main practices of the religion, such as rabbis leading congregants in collective prayer inside local synagogues, did not emerge until after the destruction of the Second Jerusalem Temple in the first century CE. Nonetheless, Jewish religious authorities anchor Judaism

to the biblical era and the code of law enshrined in the Torah, or Five Books of Moses. In fact, the vestimentary tensions I identified in regard to Aboriginal yarmulkes go back as far as Ancient Israel. Let me offer several examples.

Exodus 13:9 alludes to an item of ancient ritual apparel: “And it shall serve as a sign on your hand and as a reminder between your eyes, that the teaching of the Lord shall be in your mouth; that with a strong hand the Lord freed you from Egypt.” Seven verses later, we learn “It shall be for a sign upon your hand and *totafot* between your eyes, for with a mighty hand the Lord freed us from Egypt.” Deuteronomy 6:8 and 11:18 repeat the edict with slight variation. The ancient authors of these decrees, as was their wont, failed to describe with any precision either the hand “sign” or the *totafot*.

Jews today associate these objects with *tefillin*, or phylacteries in Greek. But *tefillin*—biblical passages¹⁵ encased in black leather boxes and strapped to the forehead and arm for morning prayer—assuredly differ from the ancient amulets and the headband or pendant.¹⁶ The Hebrew Bible records many charms, ornaments, and bodily markings such as circumcision (Genesis 17) and Cain’s “mark” (Genesis 4:15). At the same time, the Israelite deity forbid many bodily insignia, including funerary gashing (Leviticus 19:28), idolatrous lacerations (1 Kings 18:28), and fraudulent prophetic stigmata (Zechariah 13:6). In this regard, Israelite bodies did and did not resemble their neighbors. And this is a crucial point. Although the exact nature of the biblical *totafot* and hand signs remain uncertain, these ritual items fit into a wider biblical and ancient pattern of marking and unmarking the Israelite body to designate exclusive membership in their society. The Israelites partly stood apart on account of their bodily adornment. Aboriginal yarmulkes now appear as a recent rendition of an ancient conundrum: how to dress the covenantal community.

In the book of Numbers (15:37–41), God tells the “sons” of Israel to attach “fringes” or “tassels” [*tzitzit*] to their garments. The deity also prescribes a thread or cord of blue, a color called *tekhelet*. “Look at it,” continues God, “and recall all the commandments of the Lord and observe them, so that you do not follow your heart and eyes in your lustful urge” or, more literally, “go whoring.” A similar command, albeit lacking mention of the blue cord, occurs in Deuteronomy 22:12.

Both passages require the Israelites to affix fringes to a feature, called the *kanaphayim*, of their garments—generic garments, I note, not particular items. The word *kanaph* variously refers to corners, wings, borders, skirts, extremities, and hems. Rabbinic authorities since the Talmudic era favored

“corners” and so required Jewish men to wear a fringed shawl for prayer, called a *tallit*, and a fringed undergarment [*tallit katan*] throughout the day. But these items, which now signify only Jews, are postbiblical. What, in the original context, did the fringes and blue cord mean? And did these fashion accessories tag only Israelites?

The fringes, like the *totafot* and hand sign, likely instance the cross-cultural utilization of knots as mnemonic devices for sealing vows.¹⁷ Indeed, the Numbers passage commands the Israelites specifically to recall the law when looking at the fringes. In Proverbs, the Israelites tied divine commandments to their necks (3:3), hearts (6:21), and fingers (7:3). Metaphoric knots appear throughout the Torah (e.g., Isaiah 8:16, Hosea 13:12, Job 14:17). I see the biblical fringes, the *totafot*, and the hand “sign” as memorial devices affixed, as in so many other cultures, to the body and clothing. To a large degree, these ritual fashion accessories were not exclusively Israelite.

Knots also figure prominently among the Iatmul people of the middle Sepik River in Papua New Guinea, among whom I have conducted anthropological fieldwork since the latter 1980s.¹⁸ To remember the date of a market, women traditionally untied knotted cords, one knot representing each passing day. Maternal uncles, even today, lash ensorcelled bands to the wrists, ankles, and necks of their nieces and nephews to promote health and fortune—to keep sisters’ children, we might say, intact. Mourners wear similar knotted twine to contain their souls lest they fatally lose themselves in grief. Throughout Iatmul culture, knots and ties represent memory, permanence, and security. The biblical fringes did likewise: bind the people to the law, their deity, and the community. But was this custom unique in the ancient world? The answer is, yes and no.

Many ancient peoples throughout the Mediterranean used tassels and ornamental cords as regal and ritual insignia.¹⁹ The hem was often the most ornate part of a garment, symbolizing rank and authority. Mesopotamian texts reveal that clay imprints of hems sometimes served as legal signatures and that people cut hems in exorcisms and divorces. The Babylonians seized the fringes of their deities in an act of supplication. They also grasped hems to gain “coercive power” during business negotiations.²⁰

Of course, as I repeatedly intimated, the biblical adornment of hems and fringes to communicate messages about identity was hardly unique in the ancient world. Yet why adorn the hems of *every* Israelite? Why not just the wealthy and powerful, as in other Near Eastern societies? Because the Israelites wished to dress the *entire* society as God’s elite, not just the privileged few.²¹

This message was unique in the ancient world. Even the poorest Israelite was symbolically attired as divinely chosen royalty.

Now we can explain the blue thread. The ancients paid dearly for their blue—really, deep indigo. A gram of blue, painstakingly extracted in miniscule amounts from a certain sea snail, was so exorbitant that only the wealthy and powerful dressed in blue and purple.²² It is precisely from the ancient value of this hue, especially during the Roman Empire, that we now speak of certain colors as “royal blue” and “imperial purple.” At any rate, the Torah implies that all Israelites could afford a few blue threads, and thus the entire Israelite community again symbolically dressed in regal garb to signify the divine election of Israel above all other peoples. Israelite tassels, then, swayed between ethnic distinctiveness and acculturation or blending—just like Aboriginal yarmulkes.

BLENDS AND BOUNDARIES

The central motif in the book of Leviticus, a long register of ritual laws, is holiness. In Hebrew, the linguistic root of “holy” means “keep apart.” Israelite religion enshrined myriad rules concerning the separation of distinct categories. Mixtures were ordinarily polluting. Leviticus 19, for example, forbids the Israelites from crossbreeding domestic animals and sowing different seeds in their fields. The same chapter, further defined by Deuteronomy 22:11, bars wool and linen blends, called *sha’atnez*. Why?

Rules governing everyday life in Ancient Israel, to repeat, stressed boundaries and separations. The sacred Temple, however, represented divine unity, and thus priests encountered mixtures largely forbidden to other Israelites.²³ Since natural dyes adhere poorly to plant cellulose, such as flax, the ancients could dye only wool, not linen.²⁴ The *sha’atnez* rule thus barred colorful blends from most Israelite wardrobes. But the High Priest’s robe, as well as regular priestly sashes and certain Tabernacle curtains, all conspicuously violated this edict. These textiles paralleled cosmic creation by symbolizing the formation of worldly order from primal disorder. These fabrics, too, I suggest, inverted the everyday dress code of commoners to visualize the prominence of the law. Of course, the commandment to wear a blue thread necessarily dressed all Israelites in the taboo blend, thus tying the entire community to the priesthood. But regular folk were permitted no further garments spun from the sacred mixture. This way, the *sha’atnez* prohibition symbolized social order, cosmic creation, and the distinction between sacred and profane. But the law, too, likely attired the Israelites apart from other ancient peoples.

The Torah also commands “There shall not be a man’s gear on woman, and a man shall not wear a woman’s garment” (Deuteronomy 22:5). Much later, the rabbis understood this rule plainly to prohibit cross-dressing. But the original meaning was rather different and fine-grained.²⁵ The rule prevents, first, any woman from taking up the emblem or military armor of an elite man called a *geber*. Second, the law prevents a *geber* from dressing like women. Other men could seemingly dress as they pleased—even in women’s garb. No passage in the Torah expressly forbids gendered cross-dressing. Many scholars also suggest that this rule censured ritual transvestism, commonly practiced in the ancient world. This rule, then, originally served to protect the privileges and manhood of an elite group of men while separating, yet again, the Israelites from their neighbors.

In the early seventh century, the prophet Zephaniah (1:8) thundered against Israelites who, among other indiscretions, “don a foreign garment.” This rebuke was perhaps narrowly directed at vestments worn for the worship of Baal (see also 2 Kings 10:22). But Zephaniah’s rant might also suggest the presence of certain vestimentary boundaries between the Israelites and their neighbors. Nowhere does the Torah outright specify a national dress code. But I have argued that many, albeit not all, biblical laws nonetheless hint at an effort to dress the Israelites apart from their neighbors. Israelite dress thus sustained and blurred the communal boundary.

CAPS, BADGES, AND EMANCIPATION

There is no textual evidence in all the writings of late antiquity that Jews dressed distinctively.²⁶ In the Maccabean literature, for example, we read about the brutal occupation of Palestine by the Seleucid Greeks and the triumphant Jewish revolt celebrated annually on Chanukah. Less well known is that the Maccabees also slaughtered Jews who embraced Hellenistic culture by, among other things, wearing a Greek hat (2 Maccabees 4:12). But the tale never refers to Jewish caps or any other item of national attire. In fact, the evidence suggests that Jews did not, despite several laws and prophetic exhortations recorded in the Hebrew Bible, dress distinctively.

Flavius Josephus, writing in the first century, often remarked on clothing. But he, too, fails to comment on any sort of universal Jewish dress code. In the New Testament, neither the Gospels nor Jesus spoke about Jewish attire. New Testament Jews, like all Roman citizens, dressed in standard Greek garb (e.g., Mark 13:16, Matthew 5:4). Archaeological excavations and ancient mosaics reveal that Jew and non-Jew both favored the same tunics and adornments.²⁷

Interestingly, second-century Jews living at the Dead Sea, unlike the Greeks and Romans, dressed in two-piece tunics.²⁸ But no other author comments on this feature. It was a difference that did not make a difference. In sum, any effort by the Torah or Israelite authorities to institutionalize an ethnic dress code failed. Perhaps the best evidence for this assertion derives from the Letters of Paul, composed in the second half of the first century, which lambasted nearly all public affirmations of Judaism, such as circumcision, the dietary code, and the Sabbath rest. But Paul said nothing about Jewish clothing. Jews were clearly distinctive—but there was no distinctively Jewish style of dress.

Indeed, the central texts of the classic rabbis, such as the Talmud, also offer no concrete evidence for distinctive Jewish attire. Rabbinic garb was plucked entirely from the standard Greco-Roman lexicon and wardrobe.²⁹ Nonetheless, the classic rabbis consistently demanded that Jews dress apart. They even specified a particular method for tying shoes.³⁰ But few Jews heeded these calls. The folk largely lived and dressed apart from their rabbinic leaders.

In the early High Middle Ages, Rashi typified a male Jew's outfit as consisting of an undershirt, robe attached to stockings, garters, coat secured at the waist by chords, and a variety of shoes.³¹ Women dressed in midriff garments to enforce chastity and various head-coverings such as woolen caps and kerchiefs. None of these articles were uniquely Jewish. Illustrated medieval manuscripts inked by Jews likewise show little evidence for any distinctively Jewish sleeves, necklines, patterns, colors, headgear, buttons, and so forth.³² These manuscripts do portray Jewish ritual practices. Jews thus remained distinct. But everyday Jewishness was not reflected in clothing. Jews, with the exception of the rabbinic elite, dressed as much as possible in local, non-Jewish styles.

Additionally, we need to consider the role of the Church. Beginning with the Fourth Lateran Council, summoned by Pope Innocent III in the early twelfth century, church and state in Europe imposed a seemingly endless series of derisive dress codes on Jews. These decrees essentially aimed to prevent any intercourse, sexual and otherwise, between God-fearing Christians and the despised race, forever besmirched by the betrayal of Christ.³³ These regulations included the infamous patch, in various shapes and hues, and an assortment of distinctive hats as well as, in parts of Italy, earrings. For centuries, in fact, Europe remained committed to marking Jews as disdainfully Otherly.³⁴ Only when Jews submitted to the purifying waters of baptism could they dress, at least legally, like everybody else.

What is quite remarkable about these anti-Jewish dress codes, which endured for almost seven centuries across Europe, is the regularity with which

they were renewed. By implication, I suggest, many Jews ignored these laws, at least whenever possible. Most Jews dressed, as I stated earlier, in local rather than legislated fashions. Wealthy Jews, too, could in some regions of Europe endeavor to purchase dispensations. Enforcement also varied in accordance with local economic conditions and the political concerns of ruling elites. The idea of branding Jews with peculiar clothing remained an important part of European culture until the eve of modernity. But the translation of this idea into practice was hardly uniform.

Jews, too, like all other European communities, regulated consumption and display in order to protect the privileges of their own communal elites and to regulate social life more generally. Such sumptuary legislation, too, aimed to stem non-Jewish envy.³⁵ For most of European history, then, Jewish clothing was stitched from several competing forces: biblical law, rabbinic rulings, local political and economic exigencies, the church and widespread anti-Judaism, and sumptuary legislation. Jewish clothing, then, symbolized a wide-ranging conversation about the role of the Jew in society—a role that pivoted between distinctiveness and acculturation.

The vestimentary apartheid imposed on Jews by their own religious leaders as well as church and state lasted well into the eighteenth century in some European countries. One outcome of these edicts was that Jews generally dressed in attire that seemed anachronistic. They appeared old-fashioned. Jews represented the past, as befitting a people beholden to the old covenant. For centuries, this “look” of the Jew was not only tolerated but actively encouraged as a way to recognize the execrable race. But on the eve of modernity, Europe switched ideological suit: Jews were now encouraged, and outright ordered in Russia and the Polish territories, to dress like ordinary citizens. That is, Jews were finally admitted into European society—but only on condition that they cease to appear Jewish.³⁶ Many Jews profoundly bemoaned these changes, seeing the new dress code as an outright assault on Judaism. Yet Jews swept up in the democratic promises of the era, especially adherents of the Haskalah or Jewish Enlightenment and the emergent Reform movement, enthusiastically donned modern garb in the second half of the nineteenth century. Most Jews now dressed for the ideals of citizenship, social mobility, individual morality, and modernity.

In America, most Jewish immigrants during the classic period of immigration from the 1880s to 1924 were thrilled to shed their Old World garb and dress in mass-produced, off-the-rack clothing that materialized the promises of wealth, equality, consumerism, and free choice.³⁷ Jews thrillingly

dressed like all other citizens. In her 1912 novel *The Promised Land*, Mary Antin recalls journeying:

to a wonderful country called “uptown,” where, in a dazzlingly beautiful palace called a “department store”, we exchanged our hateful homemade European costumes, which pointed us out as “greenhorns” to the children on the street, for real American machine-made garments, and issued forth glorified in each other’s eyes. (p. 187)

Abraham Cahan penned similar sentiments in his autobiographical novel, *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917). “The well-dressed crowds of lower Broadway,” tells the narrator, “impressed me as a multitude of counts, barons, and princes” (p. 91). Despite the wrenching poverty of the Lower East Side in New York City, “these people were better dressed than the inhabitants of my town” in Lithuania (p. 93). In 1833, congregants in the Crosby Street Synagogue, New York City, draped their prayer shawls “over modern broadcloth coats, and fashionable pantaloons with straps.”³⁸ They prayed not simply as Jews but as stylish Americans. And therein these Jews, seeking to dress both for Judaism and acculturation into the wider society, enacted a time-honored ideal and dress code throughout Jewish history. My task in the rest of this essay is to trace this tension in two recent genres of Jewish garb: yarmulkes and T-shirts.

POP CULTURE RELIGIOUS CHIC

I want now to illustrate the continuing tension between Jewish distinctiveness and acculturation by exploring a particular genre of contemporary yarmulkes.³⁹ These caps, which I dub pop culture yarmulkes, vividly illustrate the predicament of most Jews who aspire to fuse their Jewish identity with a commitment to full participation in the modern nation-state. Despite the unmistakable Jewishness of this small cap, contemporary yarmulkes often display images and phrases far removed from traditional identity and theology. Yarmulkes now express personal preferences for sports teams, cartoon characters, rock-and-roll bands, hobbies, consumer goods, and wry humor. The yarmulke, in other words, wonderfully illustrates the ongoing tension between Judaism as a distinct religion, set apart from the wider society, and Judaism as just another ethnic group, defined by the very same individualism embraced by everybody else, and so hardly distinct at all.

In the 1940s, a unique yarmulke style emerged in the United States that would eventually dominate synagogue celebrations as a quasi-religious souvenir. These yarmulkes are purchased by the hosts of major ritual occasions, such as weddings and the bar or bat mitzvah coming-of-age rite. The caps are

made from glossy satin or plush velvet, often lined with cotton, and frequently bordered by faux silver or gold filigree. Guests wear these yarmulkes during the religious service, then bring them home as keepsakes. The distinguishing feature of these yarmulkes, which has changed little over the past sixty years, is the machine-stamped autograph on the lining that generally records the names of the honorees, the date and type of event, and the location.

These souvenirs first appeared through caterers as part of the overall wedding and bar mitzvah package.⁴⁰ This novelty represented the tensions as well as the successes of American Jewry at mid-century. Both the yarmulke and the ritual occasion it commemorated symbolized the retention of Jewish tradition—even if that tradition was only recently invented, as in the case of the bat mitzvah. Even the yarmulke itself emerged as a universal signifier of Jewishness only in the 1930s and 1940s. Before then, Jews donned all manner of caps, including bowlers, top hats, fedoras, berets, turbans, pillbox hats, and peaked caps. There was no particular headcovering that unmistakably communicated Jewish identity. Moreover, the public norm was for all men to wear hats in public. A Jew covered his head like everybody else. Only when secular fashion doffed hats, and religious Jews retained their caps as a “fence” against further acculturation or assimilation, did the yarmulke become a vestimentary token of Jewishness. Indeed, the smallish yarmulke appeared as an acceptable compromise between the Orthodox mandate of headcovering and the secular custom of bareheadedness. Although the yarmulke today seems unequivocally Jewish, it is, I have suggested, as much a creation of secular fashion as it is of Jewish theology.

Still, both the yarmulke and the occasion it represented signified that American Jews remained Jewish. Nonetheless, the stamping on the now-classic American yarmulke exemplified the transformation of tradition and community into a special celebration of unique lives and fortunes, that is to say, the classic American values of social mobility and individualism. Personalized yarmulkes, too, celebrated the material and consumerist successes of American Jews as they ascended into the middle class *en masse* during the post-World War II era. Actually, the commercialization of American bar mitzvah and wedding celebrations began as early as the 1920s with the rise of lavish menus, ornate ice sculptures, calligraphic place settings, and other expressions of bourgeois opulence.⁴¹ By the mid-1970s, personalized yarmulkes had become so much a part of mainstream or non-Orthodox American Judaism that they became almost obligatory for any large celebration. The personalized yarmulke weaves together consumer capitalism, conspicuous consumption, the individualiza-

tion of ritual, and Jewish identity. These yarmulkes communicate the inescapable conclusion that most American Jews are as thoroughly acculturated into the premises of modernity as they are Jewish.

Today, Jews can select from a wide range of yarmulke fabrics, including silk, denim, terylene, chino, and seersucker. To accessorize, one can order various trims, buttons, metallic embossing, photographs, and all manner of colors, patterns, images, logos, and phrases. Until fairly recently, four manufacturers, all based in Brooklyn, all managed by Orthodox Jews, dominated the yarmulke market in the United States: A1 Skullcap (www.skullcap.com), Weinfeld Skullcap Manufacturing (<http://yarmulkes.com>), Mazel Skullcap (www.kippah.com), and Brucha Yarmulke (now, Yofah Religious Articles, www.yarmulka.com). The website for A1 Yarmulke lists the typical array of styles available today: satin, deluxe satin, moiré, brocade, velvet, velour, knit, design suede, suede, leather, custom, and sport. A click on satin brings up twenty-six colors: aqua, black, brown, burgundy, dark grey, dusty rose, forest green, gold, hot pink, ivory, kelly green, lavender, light blue, light grey, light pink, lime green, navy blue, orange, peach, purple, red, royal blue, teal, turquoise, white, and yellow. Each yarmulke can also receive one of eleven different trims: ivory, black, navy, royal blue, white, gold, silver, silver/white, gold/white, silver/black, and gold/black. In total, A1 Yarmulke offers an astounding 241 possible combinations, not including variations for trimming and personalized stamping. One wears such a yarmulke to convey one's Jewishness. But one shops for a yarmulke amid a bewildering variety of choices that bespeaks the American values of consumerist free choice and variety. American Jews now shop for yarmulkes much as they do for any other commodity.

For Conservative and Reform Jews, yarmulkes no longer merely convey a commitment to religious tradition. Rather, yarmulkes now express the thoroughly modern values of individualism, taste, and sometimes mere amusement—the precise qualities associated with secular fashion. As A1 Yarmulke advises on its website, “choose a color to suit your taste, or your décor.” For my own wedding in 1996, my fiancée and I asked a non-Jewish seamstress to make yarmulkes from fabric we purchased from an Asian store in Hawaii that displayed a Polynesian *tapa* cloth pattern [Fig. 5]. To see our yarmulkes as merely Jewish is to ignore the thoroughly multicultural dimensions of these garments, never mind a certain level of affluence that allowed for a trip to Hawaii—a state that many native Hawaiians view, not unlike Australian Aborigines, as part of an ongoing and illicit colonization. In fact, it was my own experiences as an anthropologist in the Pacific Islands that gave rise to



Figure 5. Yarmulkes made from fabric displaying Polynesian tapa cloth pattern—from the author's wedding.

my desire to have our wedding yarmulkes loosely evoke both the exotic and romantic allure of Hawaii and a diffuse sense of non-Jewish indigeneity.

The smorgasbord of yarmulke styles now available suggests the transformation of Jewishness into an ethnic identity that matches, like one's wallpaper or iPod, wider societal tastes, trends, and lifestyle options. No longer does the yarmulke appear solely to push against assimilation. Rather, contemporary yarmulkes represent the contrary relationship between Judaism and modern society, a suggestion nowhere more in evidence than on the pop culture yarmulke.

Yarmulkes today appear cute, playful, witty, and sometimes transgressive. They display almost every icon, insignia, slogan, and pop culture character imaginable. No longer is the market dominated by a few unassuming retailers in Brooklyn. Jews today can point their web browsers to Kippah King, Kool Kipah, Design Kippot, Best Kippah, Kippa Connection, Kippah Corner, Kippot World, Mazel Tops, Ego Kippot, and Lids for Yids, among others. A quick perusal of online yarmulke retailers reveals an almost limitless variety of painted, printed, embossed, and crocheted patterns. Today, yarmulkes express Jewishness through the quintessential traits of modernity: self-expression, consumerism, and popular culture. Contemporary designs include:

- Sports team logos and mascots [Fig. 6] from mainly American baseball, basketball, football, and ice hockey, but also the occasional British soccer team such Manchester United. There is probably no professional team, in any sport, that lacks representation in the pews.

- Comic book and television superheroes: Batman, Superman, Spiderman, Green Lantern, and so forth.
- Movie characters: Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi (*Star Wars*), Buzz Lightyear and Woody (*Toy Story*), *Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella*, James Bond's 007, and so forth.
- Beloved figures from Disney and various children's television programs: Mickey Mouse, Big Bird, Cookie Monster, Bart Simpson, Blue's Clues, Pikachu, the Wiggles, Snoopy, Charlie Brown, SpongeBob SquarePants [Fig. 7], Avatar, Tinkerbell, Bob the Builder, Telletubbies, and others.
- Rock and roll iconography: The Beatles crossing Abbey Road, Phish's logo, the symbols from Led Zeppelin IV, the Rolling Stones tongue, the iconic image from Pink Floyd's album *Dark Side of the Moon*, AC/DC, The Who, Metallica, Black Sabbath, and the dancing bears from the Grateful Dead.

Yarmulkes display the national emblems of military branches, consumer preferences for Hershey kisses and Apple computers, Harry Potter on his broomstick, the Cat in the Hat, Winnie the Pooh, Hello Kitty, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Shrek, Clifford the Big Red Dog, Curious George, Garfield, Thomas the Tank Engine, Bart Simpson, poker hands, Scooby Doo, Super Mario, bagpipes, drum sets, electric guitars, bowling pins, golf clubs, paw prints, national flags, dolphins, Godzilla, NASCAR, chess pieces, smiley faces, Yin and Yang, hearts, sailboats, fishing rods, construction machines, Harley Davidson motorcycles, tie-dyed patterns, karate kicks, shamrocks, flowers, fish, and even the occasional



Figure 6. Sports yarmulkes.



Figure 7. *SpongeBob SquarePants* yarmulke.

Jewish motif such as stars of David, menorahs, and matzah patterns. Seemingly no aspect of secular culture is barred at the sanctuary doors. Contemporary yarmulkes all but dissolve the boundary between sacred and profane.

The L.E.D. Kippah (<http://ledkippah.com>) flashes a personalized message on a programmable display. A search for “yarmulke” on eBay today yields 1,242 results. Krazy Keepas (www.krazykeepas.com) makes yarmulkes from corduroy, men’s suit fabrics, fleece, argyle, flannel, and sports mesh. They also offer plastic “krok *kippas*” to match popular Croc footwear. Kids Kippot (www.kidskippot.com) sells patterns of dreidels and Hebrew letters as well as camouflage, airplanes, butterflies, soccer balls, flames, safari animals, dogs, hippos, sea life, and dragonflies. At UncommonYarmulke.com, you can download the book *Yarmulke-gami: E-Z Paper Fold Jewish Art Hats*.

You can even buy “kosher *kippot*” certified sweatshop-free by the Progressive Jewish Alliance (www.pjalliance.com). Three sources supply kosher *kippot*: Justice Clothing (www.justiceclothing.com), a unionized apparel cooperative in the United States and Canada; Maya Works, dedicated “to the economic development of women and girls” in Guatemala (www.mayaworks.com); and Global Goods Partners, a nonprofit “alleviating poverty and promoting social justice by strengthening women-led development initiatives for marginalized communities in Asia, Africa, and the Americas” (www.globalgoodspartners.org). In the United Kingdom, the Jewish Social Action Forum offers “fair trade *kippot*” woven from “cotton yarn which has been ethically sourced and made by cooperatives in India,” specifically, the Godavari Delta Women Lace Artisans Co-operative in Tamil Nadu (www.fairtradekippot.org). You can also find colorful, fair trade yarmulkes, woven by Mayan women, at A.M Stein Art Imports in Utah (www.amsteinart.com) and Mayan Hands (www.mayanhands.org).

African Home (www.africanhome.co.za), based in Cape Town, offers under the category of “township art” tin yarmulkes made from discarded soft drink cans. A similar sense of liberal environmentalism recently fueled the rise of yarmulkes made from recycled cardboard, also called “eco-suede,” which Zara Mart (www.a-zara.com) calls “The eco-friendly vegan alternative to suede-leather *kippot*.” And kosher *kippot* are not the only form of political Jewish headgear. American Jews often cast symbolic votes for presidential elections on their yarmulkes. In the 2008 season, Jewish voters could pray in the “Obama-kah” or the “McCippah.”

One day in 2003, a high school student named Dan Torres in upstate New York asked his friends to wear yarmulkes in school as a humorous response

to the Santa hats allowed by the teachers who for Christmas waived the normal ban on caps. A few years later, this “joke” expanded into an annual Yarmulke Day that celebrates difference and tolerance.⁴² In this context, the yarmulke shifted from a local symbol of youthful quasi-rebellion to a global emblem of pluralism. Yarmulke Day even has its own line of T-shirts and messenger bags, which celebrate Judaism through one of the most ubiquitous contemporary American slogans, “I ♥ Yarmulke Day” (<http://yarmulkeday.spreadshirt.com/>). It is hard for me to imagine the classic rabbis of old ♥’ing anything! This, as much as any other dimension of contemporary American Jewry, attests to the full incorporation of Jews and yarmulkes into modern society.

Several years ago, I purchased for my daughter a yarmulke displaying Dora the Explorer [Fig. 8], the popular Latina girl, and her decidedly non-kosher pet monkey, Boots. For my son, I selected a picture of Goku from the anime series Dragon Ball Z [Fig. 9]. These yarmulkes comment wonderfully on the prominence of globalization, ethnic fluidity, and multiculturalism in contemporary Jewish culture. They also, at least in regard to my daughter, evidence the impact of feminism on religious practices for many, if not most, American Jews. Above all else, these two yarmulkes show that the vestimentary boundary between the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds, a boundary so important to the classic rabbis and even certain edicts in the Torah, remains porous for many acculturated Jews. We don yarmulkes to signal our affiliations with Judaism—but also our affiliation with the rest of society.

OUTFITTING THE NEW JEW COOL

About a decade ago, groups of young American Jews—known variously as Hipster Jews, Generation-J, Heebsters, Cool Jewz, and New Jews—embarked on a far-reaching program to reinvent Jewish identity and to challenge the



Figure 8. *Dora the Explorer* yarmulke.



Figure 9. *Dragon Ball Z* yarmulke.

hegemony of mainstream Jewish institutions. New Jews yearn to push Jewishness to the cutting-edge of contemporary culture by making Jewishness relevant to the wider society. In this effort, New Jews wear their Jewishness on their sleeves.⁴³

The New Jew Cool, to borrow one journalist's moniker,⁴⁴ is drawn to "entertaining, playful, ironic [and] generationally distinctive" expressions of Jewishness.⁴⁵ New Jews aspire to un-assimilate.⁴⁶ But they anchor their Jewishness not to religious practices, but to an ethnic identity that stresses what the theorist James Clifford calls "cultural hybridity" and "inventive impurity."⁴⁷ Specifically, we will see, New Jews ironically dress their Jewishness in T-shirts that display the same racy, swaggering tones that characterize contemporary pop culture—much as I argued in the previous section with regard to recent yarmulkes.

For example, one can purchase a T-shirt that shows a gun-toting chasid who taunts, after a famous wisecrack uttered by Clint Eastwood's character Dirty Harry in the 1983 film *Sudden Impact*, "Go Ahead, Make My Shabbos." You can readily find shirts, thongs, panties, and other undergarments that declare Jewcy, Jewlicious, Jewtastic, and "Jews Kick Ass." The latter shirt, voicing a classic expression of American bravado, features six heterodox Jewish figures: Henry Winkler, better known as "The Fonz" on the television sit-com *Happy Days*; Albert Einstein; Sammy Davis, Jr.; William Shatner, famous as Captain Kirk on *Star Trek*; Bob Dylan; and Jesus Christ. This shirt vividly illustrates the irreverent, sardonic fashion of the New Jew Cool.

A central venue of the New Jew Cool is *Heeb* magazine, "brewed in Brooklyn in 2001 as a take-no-prisoners zine for the plugged-in and preached-out." The title, which *Heeb* also prints on T-shirts, attempts to refashion an ethnic slur into an emblem of pride. The term thus resembles the provocative and pervasive use of "nigga" by younger African Americans today and the wider hip-hop community. *Heeb* and many other T-shirt vendors also offer shirts stating "Jesus Saves, Moses Invests." This phrase transforms the old canard of Jewish wealth, dating to the New Testament and Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (Matthew 26), into a comical expression of ethnic bluster. Indeed, many garments in the New Jew Cool play with the very stereotypes that earlier generations of Jews found degrading and unsettling. Instead of hiding stereotypical traits of Jewishness to "pass," the New Jew Cool emblazons those clichés on their garments in order *not* to pass.

The "Jesus Saves, Moses Invests" shirt also defines Judaism not from within, as Jews traditionally defined their identity, but in terms of Christianity. We are, the shirt says, what they are not. That said, many contemporary Jew-

ish T-shirts respond brusquely to Christianity in ways that surely would have made earlier generations shudder. YidGear printed “I didn’t kill your God; get off my back” (<http://yidgear.com>). In the 1990s, American evangelicals often displayed WWJD on their garments and jewelry, an acronym for “What Would Jesus Do?” To this, Rotem Gear responds with “What Would Maimonides Do?” (www.rotemgear.com). *Heeb* printed a shirt with the likeness of Barbara Streisand and “WWBD” or “What Would Barbara Do?”

Many shirts merge Jewishness with a generic American identity. PopJudaica.com, also called ChosenCouture.com, sells a “Yo Semite” shirt that symbolically maps Jewishness onto the classic American landscape. This shirt thus adds a new voice, in a sense, to the long-standing dialogue between Jewish distinctiveness and generic citizenship. Another PopJudaica garment proclaims “No Limit Texas Dreidel.” LuckyJew.com offers a similar comedic repertoire, such as “I Prefer Kosher,” “Jews for bacon,” and “Jews for cheeses” (a play on messianic “Jews for Jesus”). The “chosen shirts” at Everything’s Jewish include “You had me at shalom” (www.cafepress.com/oygevalt). This garment is a variant of “You had me at hello,” a famous line uttered by Renée Zellweger to Tom Cruise in the 1996 film *Jerry Maguire*. Everything’s Jewish also promotes a “Schmutz Happens” shirt that puns with the crude witticism “shit happens.” Judaism thus appears as a variant of the wider cultural cadence, not a language all of its own.

Cool Jewish T Shirts sell a “Just Jew It” slogan [Fig. 10] with a ram’s horn [shofar] that resembles the Nike swoosh logo (www.cooljewishtshirts.com). This amusing shirt dresses Jews in the very same footwear worn by the rest of society while allowing Jews to stand apart. The shirt simultaneously assimilates and unassimilates. It offers a humorous comment on the same historical tension that has shaped Jewish dress over centuries.

Designs by the oxymoronic clothing company KoshersHam (www.koshersham.com) include “Winnie the JooH” (with a yarmulke atop the famous bear) and, beside a jar of gefilte fish, a Dr. Seuss-like rhyme, “One fish, two fish, red fish, Jew fish” [Figs. 11–12]. Jtshirt.com offers a “Shofar Hero” motif that visually recalls the



Figure 10. “Just Jew It” T-shirt design. Courtesy of Oron Berkowitz, Israeli-T, www.israeli-t.com.



Figure 11. "Winnie the JooH" T-shirt design. Courtesy of Jeremy Bloom, www.kosherham.com.

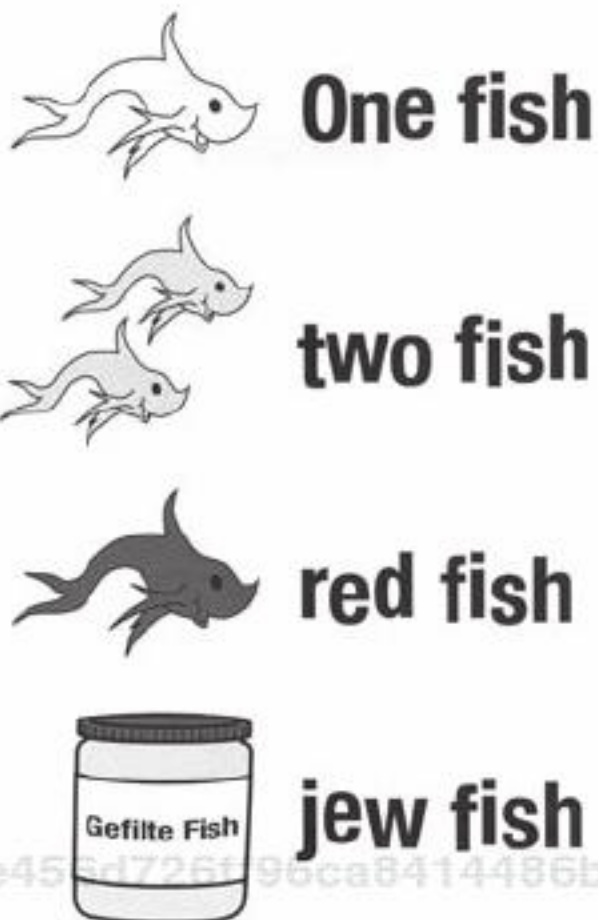


Figure 12. "One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Jew Fish" T-shirt design. Courtesy of Jeremy Bloom, www.kosherham.com.

mock the only group that dwelled beneath themselves in the urban social hierarchy.⁴⁸ By turning black in theater and film, Jews "passed" in everyday life. Ironically, this racist burlesque also gave rise to Jewish empathy with the plight of blacks during the civil rights era unmatched by other ethnic groups. Thus Jews marched in solidarity with African Americans in the 1960s; the Irish and Italians, for example, did not. I see contemporary Jewish T-shirts that draw on hip-hop as the latest voice in the ongoing dialogue between Jews and blacks over their kinship, differences, and roles in American society.

Nintendo Wii game *Guitar Hero*. Shalom Shirts (www.shalomshirts.com) sells "Do the Jew," which resembles the logo for the soft drink Mountain Dew, and a dancing Hasid listening to an MP3 player accompanied by the phrase "ח Pod." The latter, pronounced *chai* pod, refers to the talismanic Hebrew word for "life." Shalom Shirts also parodies rock-and-roll bands. Instead of Guns N' Roses, they offer "Guns N' Moses," complete with a skull sporting a beard, long earlocks or *payess*, and a black hat.

Many vestimentary proclamations of new Jewish identity playfully blur ethnic boundaries. These garments celebrate Judaism both as ethnically distinct as well as multicultural. Judaism thus again appears as a variant of American culture, not as a distinctive tradition defined on its own terms. Several T-shirt designs, for example, allude to hip-hop and African Americans. Of course, Jews and blacks in America have long shaped their respective identities in contrast to each other. Indeed, in the racial hierarchy of America, Jews partly achieved their status as legitimate "white" people, rather than besmirched ungodly Jews, by darkening their faces with burnt cork in the popular amusement of blackface. This "racial cross-dressing" allowed Jews to

For example, YidGear offers a shirt with the catchphrase “Strictly Ghetto.” This design depicts not the rapper King Sun, who released a *Strictly Ghetto* album in 1994, but the silhouette of Chasidic Jews with long fringes. The slippery semantics of this T-shirt allows Jews, as in blackface, to borrow the cultural capital normally associated with African Americans. Yet the design also reclaims the ghetto for Judaism—a word first used in reference to the Jewish quarter of sixteenth-century Venice. This shirt, then, portrays Jewishness in a fluid relationship with another ethnic identity.

Similarly, the “Too Cool For Shul” design by Jtshirt.com depicts a young man dressed in hip-hop garb, including Star of David “bling.” (*Shul* is Yiddish for synagogue.) They also offer a shirt with the phrase “True Jew!” tattooed, prison-style, on a man’s knuckles. Cool Jewish Shirts sells “Jewboyz” and “Jewgirlz” (www.cooljewishtshirts.com). At KoshersHam, one can purchase “Jew-Tang,” which plays with the rap group Wu-Tang Clan, “Jew



Figure 13. “Jew Jitsu” T-shirt design. Courtesy of Jeremy Bloom, www.kosherham.com.



Figure 14. “Gin and Jews” T-shirt design. Courtesy of Jeremy Bloom, www.kosherham.com.

Jitsu” [Fig 13], and “Gin and Jews” [Fig. 14]. The latter, which includes the silhouette of two Chasids holding a bottle, mimics Snoop Doggy Dogg’s 1995 hit, “Gin and Juice.” Shalom Shirts offers “Ninjew” and “Fu Man Jew” (www.shalomshirts.com). YidGear puns with ethnic distinctions through its “The Notorious Y.I.D.” shirt. This design features a photo of the late Lubavitcher rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, to spoof The Notorious B.I.G., the stage name of Christopher George Latore Wallace, a rapper murdered in a drive-by shooting in Los Angeles in 1997. And Rotem Gear, with a witty nod to the famous African American coiffure that also characterized many young Jewish men, offers “Gotta love that Jewfro hairdo” [Fig. 15].

Many shirts express Jewishness through ribald messages. Most Jews will undoubtedly recognize the OU as the imprimatur of the Orthodox Union



Figure 15. “Gotta Love that Jewfro hairdo” T-shirt design. Courtesy of Jean Roth, www.rotmgear.com.

that certifies foods as strictly kosher (www.oukosher.org). This emblem stands for the scrupulous adherence to religious tradition. However, the icon briefly appeared on a YidGear T-shirt accompanied by the ribald phrase “Eat me—I’m kosher.” YidGear promotes itself as “the shirts your rabbi warned you about.” Alas, those very same rabbis strenuously objected to the provocation and especially the unauthorized reproduction of their copyrighted logo. YidGear pulled the design. YidGear also offers a drawing of *tefillin* with the naughty phrase “Get Laid.” This design presumes

knowledge of the very Orthodoxy it offends, for only someone familiar with traditional Judaism would know that one “lays,” or wraps, *tefillin*.

Tough Jew Clothes (www.cafepress.com/toughjew) and LuckyJew.com offer a similar sexualized repertoire on men’s boxers, including “Temple Mount,” “Spin My Dreidel,” “Blow Me” (accompanied by a drawing of a ram’s horn or *shofar*), and “Let’s Get ן [chai].” ShalomShirts sells an image of a man in a yarmulke holding a large pistol, taunting “Jew Talkin’ to Me?” KosherShirts.com proclaimed “I have a Kosher Salami,” “I hit a home run at Rachel’s Bat Mitzvah,” “Once you go Jew, nothing else will do,” “I put the syn in synagogue,” and, next to the face of Ron Jeremy, the Jewish porn star, “Ultimate Role Model.”

Many expressions of the New Jew Cool offer rejoinders to the passive stereotype of Jewish women, specifically, the Jewish American mother and Jewish American princess clichés. For example, Rotem Gear sells a “Jewtilicious” shirt that encourages women to express their “Jewish bootiliciousness!” Likewise, a brand of clothing called Jew.Lo, which took its cue from J.Lo, or Jennefer Lopez, the fabulously successful Latina entertainer, promoted:

. . . the new Jewish female, bold, strong, invincible, and available. Jew.lo sees that Jew and cool are not incompatible . . . that the Jewish female has been underrepresented in the world of pop culture, or worse, hidden, and seeks to change that.

These garments mobilized humor to critique the absence or neglect of Jewish women in hip-hop, multiculturalism, and normative Judaism. Similarly, Rabbi’s Daughters, another line of clothing and accessories, offers slogans such

as “Goy Toy” [non-Jewish plaything], “Shiksa” [non-Jewish woman], and, on their panties, “Tush” and “Kish Mir In Tuchas,” the Yiddish equivalent of “Kiss My Ass.” Jewish Fashion Conspiracy (“putting the racy back into conspiracy”) sold “Sexxy men’s briefs and hot ladies’ low rise panties . . . sweatshop free and positively smokin!” One panty punned with the dreidel game played at Chanukah and printed “a great miracle happened here!” atop the crotch. These garments acknowledge Jewish tradition while communicating the classic American values of unrestrained individualism and hypersexuality. They dress Jews apart, as a distinct people, even as they allow Jews to “pass” as just another ethnic group posing in the latest fashions on the great American, multicultural catwalk.

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CONCLUSION

I argued in this chapter that Jewish clothing throughout history often served as a commentary on the great warp and waft of Jewish identity, namely, the desire for ethnic particularism and the yearning for acculturation. This was true for clothing endorsed by the rabbis, imposed by an anti-Jewish church and state, and simply donned by the Jewish folk as a matter of local preference and availability. I also showed that the most recent voices in this ongoing dialogue include pop-culture yarmulkes and T-shirts promoted by the New Jew Cool.

Surely the most ribald use of the yarmulke today is the yarmulkebra—a brassiere fabricated from a pair of actual yarmulkes. This garment, such as it is, derives from a lyric by MC Paul Barman, a witty Jewish hip-hop rapper, “I couldn’t stay calm because/she revealed a bra made of two yarmulkes” (www.yarmulkebra.com). The yarmulkebra comes in several sizes, including *Bat-mitzvah* and *Boobooshka*. A parallel item was the bramulke, a yarmulke fashioned from a bra.⁴⁹ More tame is the Mazel Tov Curly Teddy, complete with yarmulke and prayer shawl, available from the popular Build-A-Bear chain of shops (www.buildabear.com).

I sometimes wonder what the rabbis of the talmudic era would have said about the yarmulkebra, Dora the Explorer, Yarmulke Day, the iKippa app for your iPhone (for when you need a yarmulke and don’t have one; alas, no longer available), and the unorthodox canine ceremony practiced by some American Jews, complete with a pet-yarmulke, the “bark mitzvah.” Surely the rabbis would be appalled. Or maybe not. For however much yarmulkes and T-shirts today display the quintessential signs of modern identity, they also allow Jews to resist, even as they embrace, acculturation, a process, I have shown, that is as traditional to Jewish life as any ritual precept. Indeed, pop

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culture yarmulkes and New Jew Cool T-shirts are recent renditions of a time-honored predicament: how to dress for Judaism as much as for integration into the wider society. The phrasing of this predicament might appear new on these recent garments. Ironically, the message is not, namely, that Jews continue to dress their Jewishness as an ongoing, irresolvable conversation between particularism and generic citizenship.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES

¹ For a more comprehensive exploration of this topic, from which this essay derives, see Eric Silverman, *A Cultural History of Jewish Dress* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

² Israel Abrahams, “Jewish Ethical Wills,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 3:3 (1891): 463.

³ Sacha Stern, *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 191–92.

⁴ See, for example, Jeffrey R. Woolf, “Between Law and Society: Mahariq’s Responsum on the ‘Ways of the Gentiles’ (Huqqot Ha-’Akkum),” *AJS Review* 25:1 (2000–2001):45–69.

⁵ Biblical sources for this principle include Leviticus 18:3, 20:23, and Deuteronomy 21:30.

⁶ I owe a debt in this regard to Marianne Dacy of the University of Sydney and Secretary of the Australian Association of Jewish Studies.

⁷ On Jews and Aborigines see, for example, Tatz Colin, “An Essay in Disappointment: The Aboriginal-Jewish Relationship,” *Aboriginal History* 28 (2004): 100–21. See also Suzanne D. Rutland, *The Jews in Australia* (Port Melbourne: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005).

⁸ W. E. H. Stanner, "The Dreaming," in *Australian Signpost: An Anthropology Edited for the Canberra Fellowship of Australia Writers* (ed. T. Hunderford; Melbourne, 1956), 51–65.

⁹ Fred R. Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place, and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 52.

¹⁰ Tziona Grossmark, "Laws Regarding Idolatry in Jewelry as a Mirror Image of Jewish-Gentile Relations in the Land of Israel during Mishnaic and Talmudic Times," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 12:3 (2005): 213–26.

¹¹ In Hebrew, *mishpacha* means "family."

¹² The website, www.minimishpacha.com, is now off-line, but it was up and running for several years prior to July 2012.

¹³ Grossmark, "Laws Regarding Idolatry."

¹⁴ See Vivien Johnson, *Copyrites: Aboriginal Art in the Age of Reproductive Technologies* (Sydney: National Indigenous Arts Academy Association and Macquarie University, 1996).

¹⁵ Exodus 13:1–10, 11–16, and Deuteronomy 6:4–9, 11:13–21.

¹⁶ For a recent, rather comprehensive review of the voluminous literature on ancient *tefillin*, see Yehuda Cohn, *Tangled Up In Text: Tefillin and the Ancient World* (Providence: Brown University Press, 2008).

¹⁷ See Solomon Gandz, "The Knot in Hebrew Literature, or from the Knot to the Alphabet," *Isis* 14:1 (1930): 189–214.

¹⁸ See, for example, Eric Kline Silverman, *Masculinity, Motherhood, and Mockery: Psychoanalyzing Culture and the Iatmul Naven Rite in New Guinea* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001).

¹⁹ See Jacob Milgrom, "Of Hems and Tassels," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 9:3 (1983): 61–65; Paul A. Kruger, "The Hem of the Garment in Marriage: The Meaning of the Symbolic Gesture in Ruth 3:9 and Ezek 16:8," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 12 (1984): 79–86.

²⁰ Ferris Stephens, "The Ancient Significance of *sisith*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 50:2 (1931): 59–70. King Saul botched a similar gesture after unsuccessfully begging forgiveness from Samuel for violating a divine decree (1 Sam 15). As the prophet turned to leave, Saul grabbed Samuel's hem, tearing the garment. The significance of this insult was not lost on Samuel. "The Lord has this day," he responded to Saul, "torn the kingship over Israel away from you." Much later, David also offered a retort by stealthily snipping Saul's hem while the king defecated in a cave (1 Sam 24).

²¹ Milgrom, "Of Hems and Tassels."

²² Most researchers on this topic attribute the ancient blue dye to the colorless mucus secreted from the hypobranchial gland of the banded-dye murex snail, or *Murex trunculus*. For the process of obtaining the dye, see Milgrom, "Of Hems and Tassels," and Irving Zideman, "The Biblical Dye Tekhelet and its Use in Jewish Textiles," *Dyes in History and Archaeology* 21 (2008): 36–44.

²³ Gildas Hamel, "Sacred and Profane Clothing in Ancient Israel: *Sha'atnez*," in *The World of Religions: Essays on Historical and Contemporary Issues in Honour of Professor Noel Quinton King for His Eightieth Birthday* (ed. G. W. Trompf and G. Hamel; Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), 29–42.

²⁴ Milgrom, "Of Hems and Tassels."

²⁵ Harold Torger Vedeler, "Reconstructing Meaning in Deuteronomy 22:5: Gender, Society, and Transvestitism in Israel and the Ancient Near East," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127:3 (2008): 459–76.

²⁶ See Shaye Cohen, "'Those Who Say They Are Jews And Are Not': How Do You Know A Jew In Antiquity When You See One?," in *Diasporas in Antiquity* (ed. S. J. D. Cohen and E. S. Frerichs; Atlanta, Scholars Press), 1–45.

²⁷ For example, John W. Welch and Claire Foley, "Gammadia on Early Jewish and Christian Garments," *BYU Studies* 36:3 (1996): 252–58; Michael P. Knowles, "What Was the Victim Wearing? Literary, Economic, and Social Contexts for the Parable of the Good Samaritan," *Biblical Interpretation* 12:2 (2004): 158–59.

²⁸ Lucille A. Roussin, "Costume in Roman Palestine: Archaeological Remains and the Evidence of the Mishnah," in *The World of Roman Costume* (ed. J. L. Sebesta and L. Bonfante; Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), 183–84.

²⁹ See *b. Shabbath* 120a; Alfred Rubens, *A History of Jewish Costume* (New York: Crown, 1967), 21–22; Roussin, "Costume in Roman Palestine," 183.

³⁰ *b. Shabbat* 61a; Howard Jacobson, "Shoes and Jews," *Revue des Etudes juives* 161:1–2 (2002): 233.

³¹ Ezra Shereshevsky, "Some Aspects of Life in Rashi's Times," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 65:2 (1974): 98–114.

³² Thérèse Metzger and Mendel Metzger, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages: Illuminated Hebrew Manuscripts of the Thirteenth to the Sixteenth Centuries* (New York: Alpine Fine Arts, 1982).

³³ Sources include Nicholas Vincent, "Two Papal Letters on the Wearing of the Jewish Badge, 1221 and 1229," *Jewish Historical Studies: Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 34 (1994/96): 209–24; and Rubens, *History of Jewish Costume*, 82–88. For earlier derisive garb imposed on Jews and other non-Muslims in the Islamic world, see Mark R. Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Bat Ye'or, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians under Islam* (trans. D. Maisel, P. Fenton, and D. Littman; Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985).

³⁴ The literature of Jewish patches and hats is vast. Select sources include Guido Kisch, "The Yellow Badge in History," *Historia Judaica* 4:2 (1942): 95–127; Raphael Straus, "The 'Jewish Hat' as an Aspect of Social History," *Jewish Social Studies* 4:1 (1942): 59–72; Diane Owen Hughes, "Distinguishing Signs: Ear-Rings, Jews and Franciscan Rhetoric in the Italian Renaissance City," *Past and Present* 111 (1986): 3–59; Benjamin Ravid, "From Yellow to Red: On the Distinguishing Head-covering of the Jews of Venice," *Journal Jewish History* 6:1–2 (1992): 179–210; Ruth Mellinkoff, *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages*, Volumes 1, 2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Barbara Wisch, "Vested Interest: Redressing Jews on Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling," *Artibus et Historiae* 24:48 (2003): 143–72; and Flora Cassen's article in this volume.

³⁵ For examples of Jewish sumptuary legislation, see Cecil Roth, "Sumptuary Laws of the Community of Carpentras," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 28:4 (1928): 357–83, and Rubens, *History of Jewish Costume*, 184–99.

³⁶ See Simon M. Dubnow, *History of the Jews in Poland and Russia* (trans. I. Friedlaender; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1918); David W. Edwards, "Nicholas I and Jewish Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 22:1 (1982): 45–53; Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: The Transformation of Jewish Society in Russia, 1825–1855* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1983); and Eugene M. Avrutin, "The Politics of Jewish Legibility: Documentation Practices and Reform During the Reign of Nicholas I," *Jewish Social Studies* 11:2 (2005): 136–69.

³⁷ See Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880–1950* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), and Andrew R. Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

³⁸ Lee M. Friedman, "Mrs. Child's Visit to a New York Synagogue in 1841," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 38:1–4 (1948–49): 178.

³⁹ For the history of yarmulkes, see Gunther Plaut, "The Origin of the Word 'Yarmulke,'" *Hebrew Union College Annual* 26 (1955): 567–70; Samuel Krauss, "The Jewish Rite of Covering the Head," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 19 (1945–46): 121–68; David L. Gold, "The Etymology of the English Noun *yarmulke* 'Jewish skullcap' and the Obsolescent Hebrew Noun *yarmulka* 'idem' (With An Addendum on Judezmo Words for 'Jewish Skullcap')," *Jewish Language Review* 7 (1987): 180–99; Suzanne Baizerman, "The Jewish *Kippa Sruga* and the Social Construction of Gender in Israel," in *Dress and Gender: Making and Meaning in Cultural Contexts* (ed. R. Barnes and J. B. Eicher, Oxford: Berg, 1992), 93–105; Eric Zimmer, "Men's Headcovering: The Metamorphosis of This Practice," in *Reverence, Righteousness, and Rahamanut: Essays in Memory of Rabbi Dr. Leo Jung* (ed. J. J. Schacter; Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1992), 325–52; and Dan Rabinowitz, "Yarmulke: A Historical Cover-up?," *Hakira: The Flatbush Journal of Jewish Law and Thought* 4 (2007): 221–38.

⁴⁰ Abraham G. Duker, "Emerging Culture Patterns in American Jewish Life," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 39:104 (1949–50): 379.

⁴¹ Joselit, *Wonders of America*, 98.

⁴² See <http://www.myspace.com/yarmulkeday>; and Alice Hunt, "Yarmulke Day Stresses Tolerance; Student Started Tradition As a 'Joke,'" *Poughkeepsie Journal*, (19 December 2006).

⁴³ For contemporary Jewish ethnicity, Walter Zenner, "Jewishness in America: Ascription and Choice," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 8:1 (1985): 117–33; Caryn Aviv and David Shneer, *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora* (New York: NYU Press, 2005); Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "The 'New Jews': Reflections on Emerging Cultural Practices," Paper delivered at Re-thinking Jewish Communities and Networks in an Age of Looser Connections, Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University, and Institute for Advanced Studies, Hebrew University (New York: 6–7 December 2005, online at <http://www.nyu.edu/classes/bkg/web/yeshiva.pdf>); and Vivian Klaff, "Defining American Jewry From Religious and Ethnic Perspectives: The Transitions to Greater Heterogeneity," *Sociology of Religion* 67:4 (2006): 415–38.

⁴⁴ Sue Fishkoff, "New Jew Cool," *Reform Judaism* 33: Fall (2004): 20–27, 32.

⁴⁵ Steven M. Cohen and Ari. Y. Kelman, "Cultural Events and Jewish Identities: Young Adult Jews in New York," 2005. New York: The National Foundation for Jewish Culture,

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⁴⁶ Joanna Smith Rakoff, "The New Super Jew," *Time Out New York*, 427 (4–11 December): 13–14, 16, 18.

⁴⁷ James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 176.

⁴⁸ Here, I draw on Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁴⁹ The website for the *bramulke* is no longer active (www.bramulke.com). But information about the item is available at http://www.dailyjews.com/articles/69_wear_a_bra_on_your_h.htm.