

DRESSED FOR THE OCCASION

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

It was an ordinary Sunday afternoon in yeshivah, when I noticed Yaakov Werblowsky putting on a tie right before Minchah. I assumed that he had a date or some other important meeting afterwards. To my surprise, the tie came off right after Minchah.

This scenario repeated itself throughout the entire week, at the end of which my curiosity was piqued. I decided to confront Yaakov and ask him why he was putting on a tie for Minchah.

"When a person has a date or some other important appointment he puts on a tie," explained Yaakov. "Surely, an audience with Hashem is no less significant. Of course you have to wear a tie during tefillah!"

Afterwards, I discovered that Yaakov was echoing what had been said close to two thousand years before by Rabba, the great Talmudic sage. Rabba had a special pair of shoes that he would put on before tefillah. Dressing in this footwear during prayers helped him focus on his position - that he was standing before the King of kings.

Rava went to the opposite extreme. He wore prominent clothing throughout the week; however, he would change into simpler garments, and then with his hands on his chest, he'd begin his prayers. By standing humbly before his Creator, Rava expressed the lowliness he felt in the presence of Hashem's greatness.

The actions of Rabba and Rava represent two modes of preparation - dressing up and dressing down. The Gemara discusses the appropriateness of each practice and concludes that if the world is at peace, then it is proper to follow Rabba's example and dress honorably. However, when war is raging, or another major crisis is taking place, one should follow Rava and choose the path of humility (Shabbos 10a, Shulchan Aruch 91,6).

When reciting Shemoneh Esrei, we literally stand before the King of kings. The clothing that we choose to wear expresses our recognition of Hashem's majesty, which we display throughout our audience with Him. Let us try to understand the deeper significance of some of the special garments that are donned for prayer.

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