

THE TENTH MAN: A GORILLA

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

It was Purim, and nine of us were standing in shul waiting for a tzenter (tenth man) to complete the minyan for Minchah. It was late in the afternoon and most people were well underway with their Purim seudah. The nine of us had gotten caught up with the mitzvos of the day, and we hadn't had the opportunity to recite Minchah.

Suddenly the door was flung open and a gorilla barged in. He jumped around the shul for a little while and eventually found a seat. When we realized that our "ape" was really sober, a debate was launched as to whether someone dressed up like a monkey was permitted to recite Shemoneh Esrei.

Some argued that on Purim "anything goes," and therefore one could pray in a gorilla outfit. Others claimed that reciting Shemoneh Esrei in a monkey costume was disrespectful. In the end, our ape took off his costume and reverted to his status quo as a Homo sapien, and we had a minyan of ten men.

During the year one should not pray while wearing a costume. However, on Purim we dress up to remember two miracles that Hashem performed: Vashti grew a tail (Raavan, Megillah 12b) and Mordechai dressed in royalty was led throughout the streets of Shushan by his archenemy Haman (Elya Rabbah 696,15). Since we are wearing these costumes for exalted reasons, as long as they are dignified and one's body is properly covered, one may continue wearing them for tefillah (Responsa of Shevet HaLevi 10,18,1).

However, everything has its limits. To stand in front of Hashem dressed up like an ape is considered extremely disrespectful. Therefore, it is forbidden to recite Shemoneh Esrei dressed up like a gorilla or in any other undignified costume (heard from Rav Moshe Sternbuch and many other authorities).

In the previous sections we discussed a number of special garments worn during prayer. In addition to the mitzvah to don a special uniform, there is a prohibition against wearing undignified clothing, and a mitzvah to be clothed in the kind of distinguished garments that one wears when visiting an important person. Let us try to understand how we should dress in order to afford Hashem the honor befitting Him.

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