DRESSING UP: THE PROHIBITION OF LO YILBASH

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

Question: Is it permitted for boys to dress up like girls and vice versa in celebration of Purim?

Discussion: Before we are able to answer this question we must first explore the laws of Lo yilbash that apply all year around, and then we will discuss if Purim is an exception.

It is biblically forbidden for a man to wear women's clothes or for a woman to wear men's garments. The Torah refers to this kind of conduct as an abomination since it can easily lead to promiscuity and immorality[1]. This prohibition, known as Lo yilbash, applies even if one cannot be seen by others and even in the privacy of one's home[2].

"Men's clothing" includes any garment which, in that locale, is worn strictly be men, and "women's clothing" means garments which are worn strictly by women. But an item which is not gender specific and is worn in that locale by both men and women is permitted to be worn by either gender[3]. While contemporary poskim debate whether or not women who wear pants which are specially designed for them are in violation of Lo yilbash[4], all poskim without exception agree that it is strictly forbidden for women to wear pants or slacks in public, since it is forbidden for them to wear in public any form-fitting garments which outline any part of their body.

Lo yilbash includes wearing even one garment that is specifically worn by the other gender[5]. It is forbidden, for instance, for a woman to wear a man's hat, belt, tie or shoes even if the rest of her clothing is clearly feminine and she is clearly identifiable as a woman. Similarly, it is forbidden for a man to wear a woman's shawl, tichel, jewelry or wig, even if that is the only feminine item that he is wearing.

Once a boy or a girl reaches the age of chinuch, parents are forbidden to dress them in the clothing of the opposite gender. The age of chinuch concerning this halachah is defined as the age when a child is old enough that his mother is particular not to dress a boy like a girl or vice versa, or when a boy or girl is old enough to be embarrassed to wear the clothing of the opposite gender[6].

Question: Are there any situations where the prohibition of Lo yilbash does not apply?

Discussion: Many poskim are of the opinion that the prohibition of Lo yilbash applies only if one's intention is to beautify, adorn or to call attention to oneself; if, however, the intention is for other reasons, e.g., to protect oneself from the sun or rain, it is permitted[7]. According to this opinion it is permitted for a man to wear his wife's sweater, scarf, socks or slippers if he is cold and needs to

warm himself, her rain coat or boots if it is raining, her slippers if he needs to protect his feet from cold or wetness, or her apron if he is cooking and needs protection from splatters. While a minority opinion disagrees with all of the above[8] and some poskim recommend being stringent[9], the basic halachah follows the more lenient view[10].

Based on the above, we may also permit a man to wear his wife's watch or ring for safekeeping[11], or her sunglasses if the purpose is to protect his eyes the sun's rays.

The poskim also agree that Lo yilbash does not apply to umbrellas, canes (when used as a walking aid) or handkerchiefs, even if a particular type or style is designed for use by men primarily or by women primarily[12]. It is also permitted for a man to wear a toupee[13], to use a hair-clip or bobby pin to fasten his kippah[14], to wear a ring on his finger in a locale where men wear rings[15], and to ride a woman's bicycle[16].

Question: May women wear pants when they are exercising in the privacy of their homes or in gyms which are for women only? Is it permitted for them to wear ski pants when they are sledding in an area where there are no men around?

Discussion: From a strict halachic perspective there are grounds for leniency, since many poskim maintain that Lo yilbash does not apply to pants or slacks which are designed specifically for women, and since the activity is taking place in a private area there is no breach of modesty. In addition, wearing pants for those activities is generally not for the purpose of adornment but for other reasons, e.g., for protection, as in the case of ski pants, or for ease of movement, as in the case of exercising, which is permitted according to most poskim mentioned earlier. Still, for a variety of reasons, some authorities are hesitant to permit women, even when there are no men around, to wear pants indiscriminately. Rav Y.S. Elyashiv is quoted as ruling that women may wear ski pants only if they wear a top that reaches the knees over the pants[17]. In actual practice, women should follow the ruling of their own rav who is in the best position to judge what the proper app roach is for his community.

Question: Is the prohibition of Lo yilbash less severe when dressing up in celebration of Purim?

Discussion: This topic has been hotly debated for generations. In some communities it was customary for men to dress up as women and vice versa on Purim, and the rabbonim did not object. They reasoned that the dressing up was being done only for the sake of simchas Purim and it does not violate Lo yilbash[18]. But in many other communities the rabbonim were strictly opposed to the practice and demanded that it be stopped[19], and this has become the prevalent custom nowadays[20]. Children below the age of chinuch, however, are permitted to dress like the opposite gender[21]. Even for adults, the poskim do not object to those who wear just one item that is usually worn by the opposite gender, as long as one's true identity is clearly recognizable (even though this is forbidden during the rest of the year)[22].

1. Rashi, Rashbam and Ibn Ezra, Devarim 22:5. See Rambam (Sefer ha-Mitzvos, lo saseh 39 and Moreh Nevuchim 3:37) and Chinuch 542 who connect this prohibition to idol worship as well.

2. Some poskim suggest that the prohibition of Lo yilbash in the privacy of one's home applies only to men but not to women. According to this opinion, women are permitted to wear men's garments as long as they don't mingle with men. But most poskim hold that mi-derbanan, this is forbidden for women as well; see Darchei Teshuvah, Y.D. 182:7, Minchas Yitzchak 2:108-3, B'tzeil ha-Chochmah 5:126-3 and Shevet ha-Kehasi 2:258 for the various views.

3. See Maharshah, Nedarim 49b.

4. See Avnei Tzedek, Y.D. 172, Minchas Yitzchak 2:108, Tzitz Eliezer 11:62, Shevet ha-levi 2:63; 6:118; Yabia Omer 6: Y.D. 14.

5. Rama, Y.D. 182:5, based on Rambam, Hilchos Avoda Zara 12:10.

6. Igros Moshe, E.H. 4:62-4. Some poskim maintain that the prohibition begins even earlier than that; see Minchas Yitzchak 2:108 and Yechaveh Da'as 5:50.

7. Bach, Taz and Shach, Y.D. 182:5.

8. Yad ha-Ketanah (pg. 279b); Chochmas Adam 90:1, Binas Adam, 74.

9. Maharsham 2:243; Rav C. Kanievsky (Halichos Chayim, pg. 120).

10. See Igros Moshe, Y.D. 2:61 and Yabia Omer 6 Y.D. 14-4.

11. Teshuvos Torah Lishmah 214. See also Avnei Yashfei 4:90-4.

12. Chochmas Adam 90:1, Binas Adam 74; Rav S.Z. Auerbach (Ve'oleihu Lo Yibol, vol. 2, pg. 72).

13. Levushei Mordechai, O.C. 1:108.

14. See Rivevos Ephraim 5:40 and Da'as Noteh, pg. 76.

15. See Ran, Shabbos 62a and Mishnah Berurah 161:19.

16. Be'er Sarim 6:61.

17. Yashiv Moshe, pg 170.

18. Rama, O.C. 692:8.

19. Bach and Shach, Y.D. 182:7, quoted by most of the latter poskim.

20. Aruch ha-Shulchan, O.C. 692:12. See Be'er Moshe 8:7-8.

21. Orchos Rabbeinu, vol. 3, pg. 60; Rav Y.S. Elyashiv, quoted in Yismach Yisrael 31, note 309.

22. Mishnah Berurah 692:30, quoting Peri Megadim.

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