

# Torah Observant

## “SHOMER MITZVOT”

שׁוֹמֵר מִצְוֹת

A Series on Practical Messianic Living and Apologetics (halakhah)  
By Torah Teacher Ariel ben-Lyman HaNaviy

### *Kippah and Tallit (pt. 1)*

(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

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*"If the New Testament commands men not to pray with their head covered, why do Jewish men wear yarmulkes? In fact, I've even seen them cover their heads with their prayer shawl as well. How do you explain this?"*

This is such a common question of non-Jewish believers to Messianic Jews, that I felt it deserved some attention here. The verses that many Christians are referring to are found in 1 Corinthians chapter 11. The verse taken at face value seems to prohibit head coverings for men, while at the same time, admonishes women to cover theirs. By the way, before we get into the answer posed above, if today's average believer would use a little logic here, we should have women in churches all over covering their heads. But the fact that we don't goes to show that the verse cannot be taken at face value alone. It demands a deeper interpretation, else, we Jews are not the only ones violating Scripture, many believers are as well.

First of all, what exactly does the Torah say about the yarmulke, which I'll call a "kippah" from here on out (the name "kippah" comes from the Hebrew word for "covering")?

- A Jewish man is not commanded in Torah to wear a kippah
- A Jewish man is not compelled by halachah (Jewish law) to wear a kippah
- It is customary for Jewish men to wear kipp'ot in synagogue services
- It is not customary for Jewish women to wear kipp'ot
- What the kippah signifies in the Diaspora (outside of Isra'el) is different than what it signifies in the Land
- It is no more unscriptural for a Jewish man to wear a kippah, than it is for a Jewish man to wear a necktie

- The literal Greek of the text in question speaks about "veiling the head and/or face". A kippah hardly veils the head or face

Now I must admit that, in my opinion, using the tallit to "shield the face during public prayer" could be questionable. I've heard from my other rabbi associates that this is a "prayer closet", which creates privacy. It is true; it does create a sense of privacy, during those public prayer times when personal privacy with HaShem is desired. But in my opinion two important aspects need to be examined.

1. Was the teaching of Rav Sha'ul addressing a specific issue regarding the tallit?
2. Should modern Messianic Rabbis be open to the sensitivities of non-Jewish believers, in messianic congregations, during public prayer?

The first answer, according to most scholars, is "no". The issue was in regards to a first century custom (one that we are apparently no longer familiar with) that involved crossing and confusing the roles between men and women in social Messianic gatherings (examine the entire context of the chapter and verse in question). Judaism has never confused the tallit with a veil. It (the tallit) simply does not function that way. In fact, to exercise a lesson in logic, when Moshe veiled his face in the TaNaKH period (Exodus 34:29-35), the Scriptures don't record the people confusing his veil with a tallit! Perhaps the different functions of the two separate articles of clothing were rather obvious to them. Why do we confuse the issue today?

The second answer is a very big "yes". If our personal use of the prayer shawl during public prayer meetings causes a "little one" to stumble, then shame on us rabbis (or other Jewish men)! It would be better if we would just bow our head and close our eyes like everyone else, than to interrupt someone's focus by our strange behavior. I don't mean foregoing Gentile education of Jewish sancta, what I mean is, we should not be so wrapped up (pardon the pun) in our (Jewish or Christian, for that matter) traditions that we miss one of the main points of prayer—communion with the Almighty!

Let's take a more complete look at this subject through the lens of both Messianic and Traditional Jewry. First Messianic:

### **Messianic approach:**

From 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 Isra'el. 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 Cohen HaGadol (High Priest) was to be embellished with the words "HOLY TO THE LORD," Shemot 28:36-38. Clearly, this mitznefet (hat) 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, Rosh Hashanah 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" (1st 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.

### **Traditional non-Messianic approach:**

Wearing of a head covering (yarmulka, skullcaps, kippah [pl. *kippot*]) for men was only instituted in Talmudic times (approximately the second century CE). The first mention of it is in *Tractate Shabbat*, which discusses respect and fear of God. Some sources likened it to the High Priest who wore a hat (*Mitznefet*) to remind him something was always between him and God. Thus, wearing a kippah makes us all like the high priest and turns us into a "holy nation." The head covering is also a sign of humility for men, acknowledging what's "above" us (God).

Many Ashkenazi rabbis acknowledge that wearing a head covering at all times was once considered an optional *midat chasidut* (pious act), but, today, full-time head covering is the norm except under extenuating circumstances. Sephardic communities generally did not have the custom of wearing a kippah all the time.

Some diaspora Jews leave off the kippah at school, work, or when testifying in court, because of real danger or uneasiness in appearing in the secular world with an obvious symbol of Jewishness.

In Isra'el wearing a kippah also has a social significance. While wearing a kippah shows that you are somewhat religious, not-wearing one is like stating, "I'm not religious." The style of kippah in Isra'el can also indicate political and religious affiliations. Classical orthodoxy uses a large, smooth, black one shaped like a bowl. Many Hasidim use large black felt or satin, and a "rebellious son" may wear a slightly smaller black kippah to show his independence while remaining in the Classicist camp. Another play on this rebellion is to wear a knitted black kippah. This is also usually used to confuse people as to where you stand.

In Bukhara and the Caucasian Mountains the use of a large brightly woven kippah is common. It is similar in shape to a cantor's kippah without the peak. This custom can also be found in other Sephardic communities.

Knitted kippot typically signify that you are part of the Nationalist Zionist camp. A larger full headed knitted kippah would signify the Mercaz Harav branch of the movement that produces many of the leading rabbis within the Religious Zionist section, although many rabbis who teach at these institutions wear the traditional large black kippot.

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