

Librarian's Lobby

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The Yarmulke Part 2

Head Gear in General

Most Jewish laws and customs developed from ancient sources usually traceable to the Bible or Talmud. This article¹ will attempt to trace the historical origins and concept of head gear and not describe a legal requirement or sociological norm. When it comes to matters of Jewish law, we have exacting requirements and the variations of observance and expression of the observance fulfill the law. Generally actions that are required by Jewish law or connected to a mitzvah are associated with a *brakha*, a blessing beginning with the formula *barukh ata*. For example, everyone has black *tephillan* with leather straps and hand written Biblical selections in the boxes. Even though, the customs slightly differ in the order of the selections and the binding of the straps on the arm, the color, the leather material, and shape of the *tephillan* do not vary. No one has white or multicolored boxes. The Torah gives the basis of *tephillan* as *totaphot* (signs on the head and arm) and the rest is considered as a law dating from the time of Moshe and Mt. Sinai. There are *brakhot* associated with the wearing of *tephillan*.

For *tzitzit* (fringes) we have exact laws as to how they are supposed to be tied on four cornered garments. There is a *brakha* on wearing *tzitzit* but not on the garment. The source is in the Torah and we recite it twice a day as the third paragraph of the *Shema*.

The tradition has no exact written sources for covering the head, no associated *brakha* (blessing), no associated ancient custom, and no regulation in ancient Jewish law². However, wearing of a head covering is a strongly established practice that not only identifies one as a Jew, but also indicates a level of practice, belief or politics. No religiously observant Jew would enter a synagogue or say a prayer with an uncovered head. However, the practice varies as to wearing a covering during daily activities. The color and nature of the head covering is sometimes a matter of strong emotional attachment.

The only pictures of how people dressed in ancient times are from paintings and carvings. The head coverings or lack of head covering are sometimes hard to interpret. Descriptions are rather rare. Dura-Europos was an ancient city on the Euphrates River in what is now Syria established about 300 BCE and lasted until its destruction in 256 CE. The Dura-Europos synagogue was discovered in 1932 in a remarkable state of preservation. The Jews lived as an isolated group rather than as a part of the large Jewish community of Babylonia. The walls were covered with paintings.



In the picture below Aaron the Priest has high hat and a long robe. Only Aaron is wearing head gear.

Figure 1 From Dura-Europos Synagogue. West wall Panel 8; Priesthood of Aaron. Greek word is Aron. Color version is from ArtStor. B&W version in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971), v. 6 col. 277-278.

¹ This article, while it is self-published, is vetted and reviewed for accuracy. I would like to thank Dr. Jordan Pollack, Rabbi Barry Robinson, Rabbi Ari Small, my children, my Shabbat guests, and any others within earshot who heard me talk about the topic in part or whole and made comments that helped me.

² Before you get excited, the earliest reference in Jewish codes for head coverings is in the Medieval Jewish law codes.



Figure 2 From Dura-Europos Synagogue. West wall panel 17. Samuel anointing David in the presence of his brothers. Color version is from ArtStor. B&W version in *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1971), v. 6 col. 285.

In this picture no one has a covered head.

In another panel a man is reading a scroll without a head covering³. The caption in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* says that the picture may be Moshe or Ezra reading from

a Torah scroll. The scroll without wooden rollers looks too small to be a whole Torah. Rollers are a requirement from *halakhah* and from practical considerations. While it is possible that a scroll existed for a single book of the Torah, it would not be read in the synagogue that way. It is probably another scroll. Perhaps it was a scroll from one the prophets.

Figure 3 Title page from a book printed in Rotterdam, Netherlands, 1787. Moses on the left has no head covering; Aaron on the right has a high hat and is holding a tablet. Notice the breast plate and long robe.



There is no possibility that the Rotterdam book was influenced by the pictures of the Dura-Europos Synagogue because Dura-Europos was not known in the 18th century. Because it does seem that Moshe is frequently depicted without a head covering, going without a covering seems to be a norm.

The tradition of Aaron and the priests having covered head may be traced to Exodus 28:4, 40

ד. וְאֵלֶּה הַבְּגָדִים אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּ, חֹשֶׁן וְאַפֻּד וּמְעִיל, וְכֹתֶנֶת תְּשֻׁבֵץ, מִצְנֶפֶת וְאַבְנֵיט; וְעָשׂוּ בְּגָדֵי-קָדֵשׁ לְאַהֲרֹן אֶחָיִךְ, וּלְבָנָיו--לְכַהֵנוּ-לִי. מ. וּלְבָנֵי אַהֲרֹן תַּעֲשֶׂה כְתָנֹת, וְעָשִׂיתָ לָהֶם אַבְנֵיטִים; וּמִגְבְּעוֹת תַּעֲשֶׂה לָהֶם, לְכָבוֹד וּלְתִפְאֶרֶת.

4. These are the garments which they shall make: a breast plate, an ephod, a robe, a fringed tunic, a miter (head dress), and a sash; and they shall make

these garments of Aaron and his sons ...

40. For Aaron's sons you shall make tunics and make sashes for them and turbans for them, for dignity and beauty.

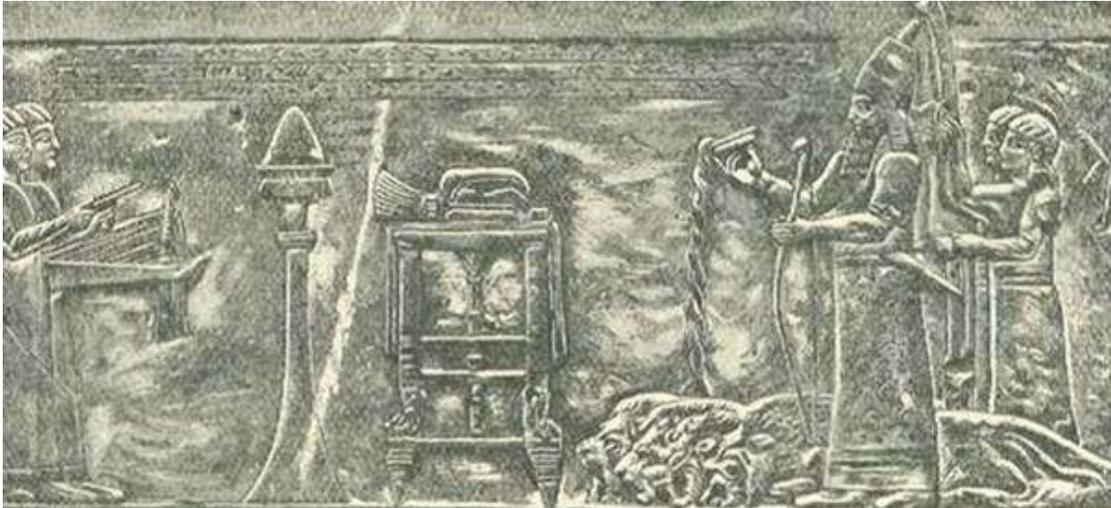
The priest's head dress and other garments were worn by the priests when officiating at the altar or performing a priestly task.

In many places Jewish observance is purposely the exact against the actions of the pagans. The usual reason for not mixing mother's milk with the meat on a child is because Canaanites made

³ I couldn't get a reproduction good enough to print here.

this a ritual. It is not clear if wearing a hat is imitative or the opposite of what the surrounding people did. There are sources that show both. In the Epistle of Jeremiah⁴ (which is chapter 6 of the Apocrypha Book of Baruch) verse 31 says: "And the priests sit in their temples, having their clothes rent, and their heads and beards shaven, and nothing upon their heads." This is referring to the pagan Babylonia priests.

In *The Ancient Near East: an anthology of text and pictures*, edited by James B. Pritchard⁵ appear a number of pictures with and without head coverings. The picture below is picture number 156. It is a carving found in Nineveh (Babylonia) clearly showing a libation. The priest is pouring water over a lion. The priest has a high, fancy head covering. It is not clear if the others in the picture are wearing head coverings, wigs, or braided hair.



Austen Henry Layard uncovered a black basalt obelisk in Nimrud (Calah) in 1845.⁶ One frame of the picture depicts head covered King Jehu of Israel paying tribute and bowing to the dust before king Shalmaneser. The text identifies the name. Refer to: 2 Kings 10:31: But Jehu was not careful to follow the teaching of the LORD, God of Israel with all his heart; for he did not depart from the sins of Jeroboam, who had made Israel, sin.

These pictures are hundreds of years apart and do not prove that pagan priests wore or didn't wear head coverings. When priests do wear hats, they are high and important looking.

Head covering for respect

⁴ The Epistle of Jeremiah also called the Letter of Jeremy is written as if it were from the hand of the prophet Jeremiah, however it was most likely written by a Greek Jew living in Alexandria hundreds of years later. A Greek version was found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, but no Hebrew original exists. The date is uncertain. It is possible that 2 Maccabees may be referring to this letter in chapter 2:1-3. "It is also found in the records that the prophet Jeremiah ordered those who were carried away to take some of the fire, as has been described ..." (Translation from Edgar Goodspeed.)

⁵ This book was published in several editions. The one I used was paperback ed. published by Princeton University Press in 1958. The picture I have is from: www.gutenberg.org/files/17326/17326-h/v6b.htm an e-book version of: *History Of Egypt Chaldea, Syria, Babylonia, And Assyria*, by G. Maspero. London : Grolier Society, 1903. Vol. 4. p. 182.

⁶ See the web site: Archaeology of Ancient Assyria - Archaeological Discoveries, http://www.bible-history.com/assyria_archaeology/archaeology_of_ancient_assyria_archaeological_discoveries.html for this picture and others of this black basalt obelisk. One frame of the picture depicts head covered King Jehu of Israel paying tribute and bowing to the dust before king Shalmaneser. The cuneiform text identifies the name. With seeing the original object it is hard to determine the head covering, if any, is one the head of the others in the sculpture.

The action demonstrating of respect and honor are diametrically different in Europe (the Occident) and in the Middle East and Asia (the Orient). The meanings of covered heads and bare heads have different meanings in the Orient and Occident. Part of reason could be explained by the history of warfare and slavery. Europe did not have as many slaves and conquering entities as the Middle East. Slavery of subjugated people was common. Slaves covered their heads and faces in the presence of their masters. In Europe, a colder climate, coverings were removed in the presence of a master or royalty.

In Ancient Rome commoners often went almost naked with a bare loin cloth or tunic (shirt). Clothing in Rome was very much dictated by class. Togas were reserved for royalty or other important people. In the presence of an important person one would cover his head. People would be deprived of their dignity by removing their head covering. In Europe removing one's hat is the descendent of this humiliation. The European is showing respect to their host. This custom was extended to the church where everyone was considered as a servant to the deity. In the Orient one removes his shoes in the presence of God. God tells Moshe to remove his shoes at the burning bush. One covers his head in presence of God or a ruler so that one does not gaze at the ruler. Thus we have the same reason – respect and veneration given for both the covering and uncovering of the head.

The religious tradition of the Orient in both the Jewish and non-Jewish was based on older form of religious training and social order than in the Occident. The Jew is not afraid of God or authority, but has a deeper form of respect, honor, and awe than the European. Jews are considered as a nation of priests while the Europeans put the priests on a level to intercede with the deity and create holiness. Europeans derived its religious and social norms from the priests. The Orientals covered their faces and heads because they feel unworthy or modest in the presence of God or royalty. The Biblical allegory for this behavior is the story of Adam and Eve. They start out naked and after eating from the tree of knowledge they realize they are naked and need to cover up. (Genesis 3:10) Moshe is commanded to remove his shoes in Exodus 3:5 "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground." Mishnah 9:5 of *Berakhot* says that one may not enter the Temple mount with shoes or dirty feet. The custom of removing shoes before entering a synagogue or home never developed. I am dismissing the connection between bare feet and covered heads because bare feet are connected to holiness. The Temple was holy and other grounds were holy places. The covering of the head was connected to time.

In the Orient the time honored custom was to cover the head and bare the feet out of respect. Before one's master, you did not walk erect or with a bare head. Since the *shekinah* (God's presence) was considered part of everyone and every place, the head should always be covered. The really pious people covered their face with a veil, face mask, or *talit* (prayer shawl) over the head and face. At other times they bowed down with the face toward the ground. Jews only bow for briefly for *Barkhu*, *Shemonah esrei* and *Aleinu* prayers. The body returns to upright before saying God's name. Moslems bow down with their face almost touching the floor as part of daily prayer. However, the use of a head covering was not universal in Ancient Israel. During the Babylonian exile the Israelites were considered slaves. It is likely the Babylonian authorities forced them to cover their heads at all times. When they returned to Israel, covering the head was part of the Jewish customs.

If a head covering was universally recognized as a custom, one would think the Talmud would have a discussion. In *mesekhet Berakhot* we read on daf 54a (also quoted as *mishnah* 9:5) : לא יקל אדם את ראשו בנגד שער המזרח, שהוא מכון בית קדשי הקדשים. Maurice Fluegel⁷ interprets this

⁷ *The Messianic Idea* p. 31-33. Fluegel says that Talmudic "scholars" who read his manuscript before publication did not object. One of his "scholars", Rabbi B. Felsenthal of Chicago is well-known for his "reform" views and practices and turning his back on tradition. In his congregation the main day of worship was Sunday morning and they prayed bare-headed.

section to mean no one should enter the Temple gate bareheaded. The translation given by Marcus Jastrow in his dictionary where he quotes this line in the definition of קלל is: "man (a pilgrim coming to Jerusalem) must not behave irreverently in the sight of the eastern gate &c." Jastrow and Lauterbach⁸ agree with Rashi's comment on the phrase. The root קלל is defined as "to be light, slender, [or] unimportant." גלוי ראש is the expression for a bare head.

It is interesting that today removing of one's shoes and bowing to the ground has almost been lost. When the *kohanim* deliver the priestly blessing on holidays they remove their shoes in imitation of what the priests did in the Temple. On the fast days of Yom Kippur and *Tisha b'Av* we wear non-leather shoes but this is for a reason other than holiness or modesty. Some people during the high holidays bow and let their face touch the ground during the *Aleinu* prayer and a way of being humble before God. The covering of one's head became a very important religious and sociological practice and custom starting in Medieval times.

While archeologists have found remains of ancient *tephillan.*, no one has found remains of ancient head coverings. Leather survives much better than cloth. There are few examples of ancient Jewish art with pictures of people. There are very few examples of verbal descriptions of head coverings in ancient times. The covering of the head seems to be a non-issue in Biblical and Talmudic times. The discussion of head covering increased as Christians insisted on bare heads and Jews wanted to avoid anything that imitated them. This is a topic for another part of this series.

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⁸ Lauterbach discusses this mishnah on page 589.