

Beauty Practices as Sacred: Secular Culture and Denominations of Judaism

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Introduction to Beauty Practices as Sacred and the Denominations of Judaism

We are defined by what matters to us; every action is motivated by an opinion, mainly how we present ourselves to the world. How one wants to be perceived directly reacts to one's identity. Beauty practices are a series of daily choices; the amount of effort one puts into clothing, accessories, facial hair, and more are all deliberate actions one takes that influence how others perceive them. This essay addresses how beauty practices are sacred in secular society using David Chidester's model of what makes something that is not inherently religious "sacred" (Chidester, 2011) and how beauty rituals are also sacred and essential to the practice of Judaism.

Chidester argues that anything can be made sacred when developed through intense interpretation and repeated ritualization and must be owned and operated for financial gain (Chidester, 2011). When society collectively cares about a topic, such as beauty practices, it manifests in the deep study of the subject, replication that standardizes the practice, and will be used for capital gain. Following Chidester's criteria for identifying a sacred subject, this essay will prove how beauty practices are sacred, using clothing, headwear, and hair as examples. It will also address how they are holy in Judaism, regardless of the sect, based on biblical interpretation and social influence in forming religious denominations.

In Judaism, beauty rituals are an inseparable historical aspect of the religion, but how one uses appearance in their devotion differs by their interpretation of the Torah and social influence. Many denominations of Judaism have formed over the religion's long history; the main three today are Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative Judaism. As the legal emancipation of Jewish people throughout Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries began, Jewish people were still violently targeted, and their physical appearance was negatively stereotyped, even as mandatory dress codes for Jewish people were slowly repealed. Many different reactions to assimilating

ethnically as newly “equal” citizens in European societies emerged based on how much Jewish people wanted to conform to be socially accepted by their communities and individual religious beliefs (Fishman, 2000).

The Jewish people who would become the Orthodox sect held onto their identifying beauty practices, even though it separated them, they were not willing to break Halakha (Jewish law for how to live as interpreted by the Talmud) by imitating a gentile (non-Jew) (Silverman, 2013). At the same time, in other regions of Europe, revolution brought radical ideologies such as egalitarianism to the forefront of social change. Many Jewish people fought to be considered equal citizens; whether for safety through assimilation or out of a desire to be included, the Jews who valued individuality and opposed traditional orthodoxy eventually developed into the Reform sect of Judaism in Germany in the mid to late-19th century (Silverman, 2013). The third sect, Conservative Judaism, is somewhat of an amalgamation between the values of the previous two. It strives to balance following Halakhic traditions and adapting Jewish practices to contemporary beliefs. The conservative community prioritizes the conservation of the Jewish religion above all else; however, the expression of the traditions they choose to preserve reflects modern values. Such as gender equality: like Reform Judaism, women can be rabbis in Conservative congregations (Fishman, 2000), though opposing Reform practices, the prayer will be in Hebrew, like in Orthodoxy (Milligan, 2014). This essay will prove that beauty practices are sacred to these sects and why, based on their formation due to differing interpretations of the Torah and social context, which influenced behaviors and beliefs about the practice of Judaism.

Clothing

Regardless of social status and wealth, clothing has always been an expressive outlet to present one's values to the world; fashion is a way of putting power in one's hands and is a vital aspect of why beauty practices are so sacred to society.

The influence fashion has on culture is studied intensely to understand history through a social lens, with many internationally recognized museums dedicated to understanding fashion's influence on history (Lee, 2019). Clothing has a significant impact on the media as well. For example, radical civil rights activists like the Black Panther Party developed an easily reconstructable uniform representing their revolutionary ideals of all-black clothing except for a powder blue shirt. They publicized it in the media as a call to arms for anyone who wanted to join them, as they could easily dress similarly to support the party (Lee, 2019). Between social change and self-expression, the fashion industry is a booming market. The revenue in the United States Apparel market amounts to 358.7 billion USD in 2024, projected to grow annually by 1.86%. This industry is filled with competition between brands and suppliers that keep it growing (Statista Market Forecast Apparel - United States, 2024). With this impressive industry just in the United States and an even larger global market, clothing is one of the most compelling examples that can be used to prove that beauty practices are sacred in secular society. Clothing meets all of Chidester's criteria; it is intensely interpreted in accredited museums worldwide, ritualized for social change, repeated by those who align with that social change, and has an ever-growing market filled with competition to keep it booming as proof of its societal influence.

Clothing is a powerful form of self-expression and directly reflects the core values of every denomination of Judaism. The Orthodox Jewish community has always drawn strength from its traditions. When deciding whether to assimilate into the cultures of the countries where they gained legal equality during the Jewish emancipation period in Europe, they chose to

maintain their Jewish customs, including their distinctive clothing, rather than trying to fit in. This is because Orthodox Jews believe that deviating from the traditional lifestyle through modernity is the antithesis of the Torah, so they were willing to sacrifice acceptance from the majority to hold on to their way of life (Fishman, 2000). Orthodox Jews use their physical appearance as a method of expressing their connection to God and practicing Judaism in the way they believe God would want based on their interpretation of the Torah; their clothing is another example of this. In Orthodoxy, the clothing style must be modest and humble, like a Jewish person's personality; immodesty would insult God and blur the line between Jew and gentile, which is against Halakhah. This is why, for both Orthodox men and women, clothing will often look formal, such as a full black suit with a white dress shirt, even on casual occasions, and cover the whole body, like women covering their collar bones, elbows, and knees to remain modest and avoid being sexualized (Silverman, 2013).

Other Jews decided it was safer to assimilate and wanted to integrate into societies where they were social outcasts. These became the Reform Jews who decided they could remain Jewish privately without publicly showing it (Fishman, 2000). Reform Judaism does not constrain itself with Halakhah; it prioritizes progress over tradition (Robinson, 2016). Because Reform Judaism was the solution to including individuality in clothing into the religion following a long period where Jewish people were forced to dress in identifiable clothing to oppress them systemically, free expression became a core value in the Reform community. Today, Reform Judaism still holds this belief, as shown in their lack of a set dress code.

Conservative Judaism is the alternative mix of both; it adjusts with the times while remaining true to the primary ideals of Judaism. Conservative Jews combine modernity with traditional practices; for example, they will pray by wrapping themselves with tallit (a devotional

shawl) like the Orthodox. However, they often invest in special personalized ones to modernize and individualize the practice (Silverman, 2013). Also, while praying with a tallit is an available option to anyone in a Reform synagogue, in Conservative congregations, it is a mandatory piece of the religious dress code for men but optional for women (Silverman, 2013). This way, they modernize the practices in Judaism by opening all rituals to all members while remaining true to the purpose, which is prayer and devotion to God.

Headwear

The head is often the first thing noticed when looking at others, so what one chooses to place at the top of the highest points on one's body is not trivial. From music one loves to teams one supports, in religious observation, or just for comfort and convenience, the decision to accessorize is deliberate and tells the world about you without words.

Baseball caps have a long history, from 1840s New York baseball club uniforms to becoming the most popular sports headpiece ever invented (Chico, 2013). The Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, is a museum dedicated to actively recording and preserving baseball's history. There, you will find an enormous collection of caps on display simply because iconic players wore them; wearing their uniform while being legendary is enough to consider the hat admissible as a historical artifact (Buckley & Kelley, 2010). While invented to be a functional part of a uniform, today, they are used by and for everyone. Baseball caps are "the game's most important contribution to fashion" (Buckley & Kelley, 2010, p. 20). They can be seen in practically every other sport in the world now and used to represent organizations, clubs, schools, etc. Because they are easily customizable, but the design never changes, baseball caps can adjust to fashion trends while remaining the same. Following this logic, the simple one-size-fits-all baseball cap design benefits the manufacturing chain and the consumer (Chico, 2013).

Baseball caps are a prevalent medium for branding worldwide; there are whole stores dedicated to selling only official team sports caps, which, despite their cheap production costs, sell for hundreds of dollars based solely on the fact that they have the team's physical seal of approval. This disparity between the cost of making the hats and their selling price proves how holy these branded caps are to fans of the teams since they will pay any price for their hats.

According to Chidester, the means, modes, and forces of production are integral to determining the sacred (Chidester, 2011). The extensive collection of baseball caps with intricate record-keeping, how standard it is for media to use baseball caps as a tool for advertising, and their massive production capacity all support Chidester's claim that anything can be made sacred. While baseball caps are an example of secular headwear being treated as holy in most of contemporary society, in Judaism, headpieces are a standard tool of worship and a compelling example of beauty practices being sacred in the religion.

Head coverings were common practice in ancient Near Eastern cultures as they were considered respectful. Judaism followed this custom, which has since developed into a significant aspect of the religion (Robinson, 2001). Today, there are various headpieces, the most common being the kippah (p. kippot), a small, flat, round cap. Orthodox men wear it during all waking hours. It serves as a reminder that God is always watching them from above, and they should act as they would if he were visible (Davidson, 2007). For women, there are different rituals regarding covering their heads for the everyday worship of God, particularly surrounding marriage. A married Orthodox woman must cover her hair; this tradition has persisted since biblical times and, much like the men's head coverings, has changed with fashion trends. There are various options for married Orthodox women to cover their hair, from scarves to turban-like "snoods" and even wigs (Robinson, 2001). While the designs have certainly changed since the

religion's conception, covering one's head daily is a sacred practice of Orthodox Judaism.

However, some in Judaism do not agree that a head covering must be worn at all times of the day to practice worship.

As a sect of Judaism that strives for progress and rejects traditional religious practices, and as previously touched on in this paper, separated from open expression of their Judaism to integrate and be viewed as equal citizens, the Reform community believes in worshipping God however the practitioner sees fit (Silverman, 2013). This is why there is so much diversity in Reform congregations; men may or may not choose to wear a kippah daily, at services, or at all. In their effort to move the religion forward, some Reform synagogues even prohibit wearing kippot in services, while many still offer free ones as worshippers enter (Robinson, 2001). Women may also choose to cover their heads in Reform Judaism; in some Reform synagogues, women are offered "chapel caps," which are small, flat, lace equivalents of the kippah that many traditional congregations use during services (Robinson, 2001). The variety and opportunity in the Reform community regarding headwear reflects their core value of prioritizing the individual's connection to God, not how they show it. So, in having control over how one practices their religion, they actively worship God according to how they believe Judaism should be practiced through their understanding of the Torah, not Halakhic interpretations of the Torah.

A bin of cheaply made kippot can be found when entering a Conservative or Reform synagogue; anyone who did not come with a kippah will take one for the service and usually discard it afterward. Often for ceremonies in Conservative Jewish communities, such as a wedding or Bnei Mitzvah (coming-of-age ceremony where 12 and 13-year-old Jewish children read from the Torah for the first time), customized kippot will also be available, these are often higher quality and kept as mementos of the occasion (Silverman, 2013). The casual relationship

Conservative communities have regarding kippot is another example of how they mix modernity and individuality with traditional principles as a means of worship since this is how they interpret the Torah and, therefore, how they believe Judaism should be practiced.

Hair

Hair is a common method of self-expression; styles, cuts, and colors can often reveal significant details about an individual's personality. How one actively exerts time and resources or consciously decides to put less effort into their hair is a statement they make about themselves to anyone who sees them. As described earlier in this paper, Chidester claims anything can be made sacred through intense study, regular ritualization, and contestation over the means, modes, and forces of production (Chidester, 2011). Following this method for identifying the sacred, one example of secular modern society treating something not inherently religious as holy is the cultural and social norms surrounding hairstyles.

Popular hairstyles of that age can define entire historical periods. During the Vietnam War, American men grew their hair long as an act of rebellion and a political statement against the draft since, in the military, they were required to keep a short haircut (Burney, 2019). This is a crucial moment in political history and an example of popular hairstyles influencing the media. Media also has an impact on popular hairstyles. Celebrities have always guided popular culture, even today, as Sabrina Carpenter's voluminous, fluffy blonde locks take over women's hair; the trend is only re-entering society, as it was inspired by Bridget Bardot's iconic beehive that dominated the 1960s (Coates, 2023) (Sloane, 2024). The influence media has on hairstyles is evident through trends, of which the ever-changing nature has resulted in a massive market for hairstyling products valued at USD 27.4 Billion in 2023 with a CAGR (compound annual growth

rate) of 5.7% predicted between 2024 and 2032. “The growing influence of social media among teenagers and millennials drives the progression of the industry” (Singh & Singh, 2024, para. 1).

According to Chidester's definition, the interpretation of hairstyles and their impact on historical events, the repeated influence of celebrities on hair culture, and the constant growth in the global hairstyling market, hairstyles meet all the requirements of being considered sacred (Chidester, 2011). But how we style the hair on our heads is not the only way body hair has been treated as sacred; in Judaism, there are clear rules outlined in Halakhah for how one should groom their body hair, the degree to which the sects adhere to Halakhah is what varies in how hair is used for worship.

Members of the Orthodox Jewish community can be easily identified in public for several physical customs they abide by as a means of worship, none so commonly recognized as their rituals for grooming body hair. Men are expected to not shave their beards or sideburns due to rabbinic restrictions based on Lev 19:27, “Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.” (Eisenberg, 2004). Conversely, women have an opposite approach to worship regarding body hair. According to Halakah, Orthodox women must fully submerge every part of their bodies into the purifying waters of the Mikveh (a ritual bath to remove impurity and allow for full engagement in Jewish customs) seven full days after the end of their menstrual cycle. Due to this requirement, many Orthodox women shave their heads before marriage to make the monthly process of every inch of their bodies touching the mikveh's water easier (Cohn-Sherbok, 2010). And since they all cover their heads after marriage anyway, as addressed in the previous section, they often wear wigs instead (Cohn-Sherbok, 2010). The Orthodox community takes great care to follow Halakhah strictly as they believe the best way to worship God is by living their lives in direct accordance with his word. By men actively not

shaving specific parts of their faces and women going so far as to remove all bodily hair, the Orthodox community recommits to their beliefs every day using beauty practices to worship.

Since the Reform community is so rooted in egalitarianism, it is no surprise that it would be rare to find a Reform Jew adjusting their hair for worship based on Halakhah. At the heart of Reform Judaism is the drive to practice Judaism equally; any Jew has the right to practice in any way they see fit (Robinson, 2001). So, Reform congregations follow their version of Judaism through their connection to the spirituality of the religion, not the physical displays of their appearance. This is why it would be uncommon for Reform practitioners to manipulate their hair for religious purposes, as the movement was founded on assimilation to the local community and rejects orthodox traditions (Silverman, 2013).

As far as the Conservative Jewish community defines laws for body hair, they follow much of Halakhah but vary in which rituals they abide by as they incorporate individuality and modernity into their observance. For example, in 2009, some Conservative Jewish soldiers serving in the Israeli Defense Forces' Nachal Brigade requested to grow out their beards (during military service, beard growth must be approved for religious or medical reasons and is otherwise to be kept cleanly shaven) during the Sfirah (the 49 days between Passover and Shavuot). In this case, the soldiers were willing to shave throughout the rest of the year, but specifically during this period of Sfirah insisted they may not shave (Spira, 2009). Conservative Judaism is about preserving the religion; while individual congregations determine which rituals are obligatory, repeated commitment is necessary for proper worship. By demanding a beard-shaving exemption for the 49 days of Sfirah, these soldiers are worshipping God through the grooming of their body hair and proving how vital it is in their religion.

Conclusion

Physical appearance is the display of personal values one projects to the world. This paper's exploration of clothing, accessories, and hair as proof of beauty practices being sacred to secular society and the three main denominations of Judaism today are just a few examples of beauty practices influencing culture and how culture, in return, made beauty practices sacred. Chidester argues that anything can be made sacred, and I agree (Chidester, 2011). Beauty practices are sacred, and all the evidence provided in this paper is just a symptom of that fact. The concentrated study, recurring observance, and inevitable debate over proprietorship for manufacturing the sacred that Chidester argues identify what is sacred to society are accurate variables for recognizing the sacred as they provide tangible evidence of a collective understanding of what is holy to entire cultures.

In its ancient history, Judaism has been through many more belief systems than the Orthodox, Reform, and Conservative sects that dominate modern practice. However, throughout its development into how it is observed today, beauty rituals have always coincided with the religion's values and expression. It is inseparable from how rabbis have always interpreted the Torah and determined Halakhah. The adherence to these customs varies by sect, based on differing interpretations of the Torah and, therefore, divergent opinions on how much or how little to obey Halakhah. These decisions on how to incorporate Halakhic regulations into the sects of Judaism define the sects, which is proof of how beauty practices define Jewish observance and are, therefore, sacred to the religion, regardless of denomination.

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