

Do Looks Matter? – Vayikra Rabba 32 & Midrash Lekach Tov Devarim 26:5

רב הוֹנָא אָמַר בְּשֵׁם בַּר קַפְרָא בְּשִׁבִיל אַרְבַּעָה דְּבָרִים נִגְאָלוּ: יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם, שְׁלֹא שֵׁנוּ אֶת שְׁמֵם וְאֶת לְשׁוֹנָם וְלֹא אָמְרוּ לְשׁוֹן הָרַע, וְלֹא נִמְצָא בִּינֵיהֶם אֶחָד מֵהֵן פְּרוּץ בְּעֶרְוָה. לֹא שֵׁנוּ אֶת שְׁמֵן רְאוּבֵן וְשִׁמְעוֹן נְחֻתִין, רְאוּבֵן וְשִׁמְעוֹן סְלֻקִין, לֹא הָיוּ קוֹרִין לַיהוּדָה רוּפָא וְלֹא לְרְאוּבֵן לוּלִיאֲנִי וְלֹא לְיוֹסֵף לְיוֹסֵפִים וְלֹא לְבִנְיָמִין אֶלְכְּסַנְדָּרִי..

Rabbi Hun stated in the name of Bar Kappara: Israel were redeemed from Egypt on account of four things; because they did not change their names, they did not change their language, they did not speak lashon hara, and none of them was found to have been immoral. 'They did not change their name', having gone down as Reuben and Simeon, and having come up as Reuben and Simeon. They did not call Reuben 'Rufus' nor Judah 'Leon', nor Joseph 'Lestes', nor Benjamin 'Alexander'. (Vayikra Rabba – Section 32)

דבר אחר ויהי שם לגוי. מלמד שהיו ישראל מצויינים שם. שהיה מלבושם ומאכלם ולשונם משונים מן המצריים. מסומנין היו וידועין שהם גוי לבדם חלוק מן המצריים

Another interpretation: “And there they became a nation” – this teaches that the Israelites were distinct there, in that their clothing, food, and language was different from the Egyptians’. They were identified and known as a separate nation, apart from the Egyptians. (Midrash Lekach Tov – Devarim 26:5).

A discussion on Appearances based on Midrash

Some Textual Questions to ask Chanichim:

- What is the common theme running through the factors mentioned in both midrashim?
- Why did the Chatam Sofer specifically choose clothing, language and names?
- What is the significance of the non-Jewish names given as examples in the first midrash?
- The word clothing in Hebrew is “begged” which means betrayal. Thoughts?

Some General Questions to ask Chanichim:

- What is the difference between Midrash and Gemara? They were both by the same authors so what separates them?
- Is it really “what on the inside that counts”? Does clothing affect the way we view ourselves?
- The first time clothing appears in the Torah is in the garden of Eden – significance?
- Lots of ultraorthodox Jews dress in a certain way. Is having everyone dress the same restrictive? Or is it freeing? Perhaps it allows them to appreciate people for who they truly are and not how they look?
- Ask chanichim to define words like “casual” “fashion statement” or “beautiful.”

Some Personal Questions to ask Chanichim:

- Has clothing ever made you think a certain way about someone?
- What can we do to appreciate people for who they truly are?
- What is your clothing/hair style and what does it say about you?
- Are you in control of how you look or are your looks in control of you?
- How does wearing the Bnei Akiva Semel make you feel? What about other uniforms?
- Do you wear a kippa/tzitzit in central London? Why?
- What does your Jewish name mean? How does it make you feel?

Other sources and quotes to bring into discussion:

Ethical Will of the Chatam Sofer:

“The Jews were redeemed from Egypt because of their clothing, names and language” – this famous saying by the Chatam Sofer is actually a combination of the two Midrashim above.

Bava Kamma 22b:

With regard to one who cuts his hair in the fashion of *komi*, a certain haircut favoured by the Romans, this is considered one of the ways of the Amorites, i.e., a gentile practice prohibited by the Torah (Leviticus 18:3). Despite this, the Sages permitted Avtalmos bar Reuven to cut his hair in the fashion of *komi*, because he had close ties with the government.

Zohar, Naso, Idrabba 129a:

“From the hair of a person you can know who he is.”

Yerushalmi Brachot 63b:

Just as our faces look different, so too we think different.

Nechemiah 13:23-24:

Also at that time I saw that Jews had married Ashdodite, Ammonite and Moabite women and good number of their children spoke the language of Ashdod and the language of those various peoples and did not know how to speak Judean.

English Proverb: Be not deceived with the first appearance of things – for show is not substance.

Dr Seuss: “Why fit in when you were born to stand out?”

+ Stories at the top of Taanit 20b and Taanit 7a – how the sages valued ugliness

A Related Story: “Moshiach’s hat” - Rabbi Yitzchok Feigenbaum

T’was the night of the geulah, and in every single shteibel, sounds of Torah could be heard, coming from every kind of Yeidel.

This one in English, some in Hebrew, some in Yiddish, some saying pschat, and some saying chiddush.

And up in shomayim, the Aibishter decreed, “The time has come for My children to be freed.

Rouse the Mashiach from his heavenly berth, have him get in his chariot and head down to Earth.”

The Moshiach got dressed, and with a heart full of glee, went down to the Earth, and entered the first shteibel he did see.

“I’m the Moshiach, Hashem has heard your plea, your geulah has come, it is time to go free!”

They all stopped their learning, this was quite a surprise, And they looked at him carefully with piercing sharp eyes.

“He’s not the Mashiach!” said one with a grin, “Just look at his hat, at the pinches and brim!”

“That’s right!”, cried another with a grimace and a frown, “Whoever heard of Mashiach with a brim that is down?!”

“Well”, thought Mashiach, “If that is the rule, I’ll turn my brim up before I go to the next shule!”

So he walked on right over to the next shule in town, confident to be accepted since his brim was no longer down.

“I’m the Mashiach!”, he cried as he began to enter. But the Jews there wanted to know first, if he was left, right, or center.

“Your clothes are so black!” they cried out in a fright. “You can’t be Mashiach -- you’re much too far right!”

If you want to be Mashiach, you must be properly outfitted.” So they replaced his black hat with a kipa that was knitted.

Wearing his new kipa, Mashiach went out and he said, “No difference to me what I wear on my head.”

So he went to the next shule, for his mission was dear, But he was getting a bit frustrated with the Yidden down here.

“I’m the Mashiach!” he cried, and they all stopped to stare. And a complete eerie stillness filled up the air.

“You’re the Mashiach?! Just imagine that. Whoever heard of Mashiach without a black hat?!”

“But I do have a hat!” the Mashiach then said. So he pulled it right out and plunked it down on his head.

Then the Shule started laughing, and one said, “Where’s your kop? You can’t have Mashiach with a brim that is up!”

If you want to be Mashiach, and be accepted in this town, put some pinches in your hat, and turn that brim down!”

Mashiach walked out and said, “I guess my time hasn’t really come, I’ll just have to return to where I came from.

So he went to his chariot, but as he began to enter, all sorts of Jews appeared, from left, right, and center.

“Please wait, do not leave, it’s all THEIR fault!” they said, And they pointed to each other, and to what was on each other’s head.

Mashiach just looked sad, and said, “You don’t understand.” And then started up his chariot to get out of this land.

“Yes, it’s very wonderful, that all of you learn Torah, But you seem to have forgotten, a crucial part of our mesorah.”

“What does he mean? What’s he talking about?” And they all looked bewildered, and all began to shout.

Mashiach looked back and answered, “The first place to start, is to shut up your mouths, and open up your heart.

To each of you, certain Yidden seem too frum or too frei but ALL Yidden are beloved, in the Aibeshter’s eye.”

And on his way up he shouted, “If you want me to come, try working a little harder on some ahavas chinam.”

Some Interactive Resources:

Youtube – How much do people know about orthodox Jews – Jew in the City

Experiment – Homeless man vs business man falling over social experiment

Song – Carlebach – “the mikveh cowboy”

Poem – “Keeping up Appearances” – Sharon Donnelly

Graph – Pew Research Center – What different styles of head covering say about Israeli Jewish Men.

