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Yeshivat Ateret Yerushalayim

IN THE HEART OF THE OLD CITY OF JERUSALEM

On the Air with Ha-Rav Shlomo Aviner

Every Tuesday and Thursday night Rav Aviner answers questions of Jewish Law and faith on the radio in Israel. On the Air presents a sample of these answers each week.

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ARE LEVI'S KOSHER?

Q: Is it permissible to wear jeans or a jean skirt? I heard that some rabbis ruled that it is forbidden because jeans are not modest.

A: Quite simply, the material itself is not a problem. This material is durable, not easily ruined and, as is well-known, quite affordable. This material also does not stick to the body. A material which sticks to the body and outlines its contours is not modest for men and, all the more so, for women. My understanding is that the rabbis who say that it is forbidden to wear jeans do not do so because of immodesty, but because they represent a distorted culture. When you wear jeans, you identify with this culture. The whole problem of wearing clothing which represents the surrounding non-Jewish culture is called "chukat ha-goyim – following the non-Jewish practices." It is forbidden for us to wear the same clothing as non-Jews. This prohibition applies, however, if the non-Jews are the only ones who wear a particular type of clothing. If observant Jews also wear them, there is no problem of "chukat ha-goyim." This discussion is similar to one regarding the black suit worn today by many yeshiva students. Originally in Russia, yeshiva students did not wear suits, they wore all sorts of long coats. What happened? Rabbi Yisrael Salanter once visited Paris and he saw that university students were wearing suits. He said, "Those who are learning in yeshiva need to dress like those students. They are students of Torah and holiness." In Lithuania, the students therefore wore suits. When those students arrived in Jerusalem, the Sages of Jerusalem excommunicated them. They wrote harsh broadsides that wearing this type of clothing is a violation of "chukat ha-goyim." One needs a long coat.

There is a principle, however, that if people breach this prohibition and dress like non-Jews, they are in violation, but once this practice has spread, it is no longer forbidden since this dress is no longer worn solely by non-Jews. This is stated in the responsa of the Rashba (vol. 5 #121). It is possible that in the past someone who wore jeans was identifying with the distorted culture, but today all sorts of people wear clothing made with jean material, both men and women, including righteous, G-d-fearing individuals. It is therefore permissible to wear such clothing. Everything is dependent on the issue of modest. If the jeans or the jean skirt is modest, they are acceptable. If they are not modest, including having images and decoration which draw the attention of others, they are not acceptable. In short. It is not a question of the material, but the piece of clothing as in the case of all other clothing.

ELECTIONS AND LASHON HA-RA

Q: How is it possible for a candidate not to violate the laws of "lashon ha-ra" (speaking ill against others) during an election?

A: This is certainly complicated, but we can apply what Rabbi Yisrael Salanter said. "If you want to be chosen, do not dig a hole, build a mountain." If you want to be higher than others, you must build a mountain. This means – do not say that others have this deficiency or that deficiency, talk about yourself. "I want to do this and that, and I hope that I succeed." Do not speak negatively against others, speak positively about yourself. A person must think a thousand times before he speaks "lashon ha-ra." If someone has to go to the hospital on Shabbat, he thinks and doubts. "Maybe I do not need to." He asks rabbis. Even when a person is permitted to speak "lashon ha-ra" in order to help others, when the seven conditions of the Chafetz Chaim are met, he needs to think and doubt and ask rabbis. We see that King David did not speak "lashon ha-ra" against King Shaul. He knew a lot about King Shaul. He knew he had a bad spirit within him. He knew that he wanted to kill him. He knew that he was pursuing him and he had to hide. He knew that he threw a spear at him a few times. To expose this publically would have been a great electoral tool for King David. He did not say a word and, in the end, you see that he became the greatest king.

SLEEPING IN YOUR KIPPAH

Q: Is there an obligation to wear a kippah while sleeping?

A: No, there is no obligation. The Shelah – the book "Sheni Luchot Ha-Brit" by Rabbi Yeshayahu Horowitz – mentions this as a nice custom, but not as an obligation. The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 2:6) writes that we should not walk four amot (6 feet) without a kippah, so we do not even sit without a kippah. Sleeping with a kippah, however, is an act of piety mentioned by the Shelah.