



ST ALBANS MASORTI SYNAGOGUE

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SAMS STANDARD – Policy on Dress

Introduction

I want to share some discussions from the Religious Committee and Council. Some have felt it important that we develop a clearer policy on clothing for those coming to SAMS services; others have felt such a move unnecessary and potentially divisive. Of course, from a religious perspective, the question of what clothes to wear to services has to be important – the clothing worn by the High Priest when he went 'to services' occupies almost an entire weekly parashah, but how to apply the frameworks of Bible and rabbinics to our modern community is complex.

There are three halachic issues that are raised and I share them here. As you will see, none is entirely clear in its application to life at our services.

I. *Begeg Ish* [clothing of man]

According to the Halachah, it is not permissible for a man to wear women's clothing or vice versa. But the issue of what constitutes men's or women's clothing in this day is complex. Is a kilt women's clothing; are trousers men's clothing? How do societal norms shape answers to these types of questions?

II. *Tzniut* [modesty]

The value, and halachic imperative, of modesty applies to all parts of a person's life: the use of language, behaviour and also dress. In the past I have led and been a member of communities with minimal standards of 'some kind of sleeve' and communities where a certain length of leg covering was expected and enforced, sometimes gently, sometimes more strictly. Do such standards work? What is lost when we become focused on these issues at the expense of a more holistic sense of seeking decent behaviour? In our contemporary society the issue of modesty can most often arise with girls/women around the time of bat mitzvah. This brings its own set of complicated gender and age issues.

III. *Kibud* [honour]

The Talmud recognises that a person wearing tattered clothes should not act as the prayer leader for reasons of *kavod hatzibur* [honour of the community] (rather the community has an obligation to give that person smarter clothes). There is also a notion of *kavod Shabbat* [honour of the Sabbath], which should lead a person to wear their finest clothes and eat their finest foods off their finest plates in honour of our finest day. Can trousers on a woman be considered *mchubad* [honourable]? Must a man always wear a tie to be *mchubad*? These are again questions that do not have easy answers.

And there are other issues regarding ritually prescribed items of clothing: head coverings, *tallitot* (for men and women), hats for married women ... There is a huge amount to standardise if we choose to go the route of creating clear standards of dress for our community. Moreover, placed alongside these unclear issues is the one thing that we all, at SAMS, feel committed to – namely retaining the warm and welcoming atmosphere that is the hallmark of our community. So, a fudge it has to be.

A Standard

As a community we have compromised on the gentle notion of asking members and their guests to 'dress modestly and appropriately', but there will be no signs put up and no tapping visitors on the shoulder. It is, in true rabbinic fashion, an uneasy truce between two strongly held beliefs, and though not perfect I hope this standard will continue to have everyone's support.

Rabbi Jeremy Gordon
St Albans Masorti Synagogue
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