

And do not rend your garments. (10:6)

In order not to interfere by casting a pall of grief on the joy of the inauguration, Hashem forbade the usual display of mourning, even to the brothers of Nadav and Avihu. The Sefer HaChinuch (149) says that the Kohanim are prohibited from entering the Sanctuary with disheveled, long hair - out of respect for the Bais Hamikdash and the service which they perform. This also applies to the clothing worn by the Kohanim that may not be torn. Obviously, since we no longer have the Bais Hamikdash, these laws transfer over to the Mikdash Me'at, miniature sanctuaries, the batei knesses and batei midrash, shuls and places of Torah study.

If we would appreciate the value of Tefillah, prayer, our esteem for the shul would rise. When we enter the sanctuary attired in clothing that we would never wear to a public office or to our place of business, we indicate our level of respect for the shul, the davening and the holiness in general. In order to appreciate our davening and our shuls and to hold them in their proper esteem, it is critical that we prepare ourselves externally through various measures, so that, when we enter the sanctuary, we are in complete awareness that we are entering a different world than our natural, mundane habitat.

The clothing we wear upon entering the Sanctuary is an indication of how we view the place where we pray to Hashem. While it goes without saying that one who represents the Torah must dress appropriately wherever he goes, the shul is undoubtedly a "tad" more elevated than the bakery, grocery store, or restaurant.

Horav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, zl, grew up amidst abject poverty. His father passed away when Rav Yosef Chaim was a lad of six years old. His mother supported the family with the revenue she earned from a little store that she managed. As a yeshivah student who subsisted on the good will of the individual community's lay families, Rav Yosef Chaim did not fare so well. Many a day passed on which he would retire at night on an empty stomach. While going to bed hungry did not have a negative effect on his learning, something else did. He required clean clothes, which cost seven kroitser for the laundress. It was a pithy sum, but when one does not have money, no sum is pithy. His chavrusa, study partner, who hailed from a well-to-do family, gladly offered to pay the woman. Rav Yosef Chaim refused to accept charity. Nonetheless, by some "miracle," every week on his walk to go to the bais hamedrash, Rav Yosef Chaim would "find" seven kroitser lying on the ground.

A tale is related that, over the years, has achieved legendary status concerning Rav Yosef Chaim and his personal penchant for clean clothes. One night he dreamt of three numbers which were the winning numbers for the lottery. He could have purchased a lottery ticket the very next day, but a ticket cost seven kroitser and that was all he possessed. He was not about to give up the certain opportunity of having clean clothes for the bais hamedrash on the outside chance that he might win the lottery. He felt that there was no substance to dreams. Thus, he had his clothes washed instead. By the way, those three numbers were the winning numbers! It never bothered him.

Everyone has his values in life. For Rav Yosef Chaim, entering the bais hamedrash improperly attired was a denigration of the sanctuary and an insult to Hashem.

The kedushas bais ha'knesses, sanctity of the synagogue, should weigh heavily on everyone. Proper decorum must be observed at all times. The laws of tznius, modesty, must be upheld, and those who hold forth to address the congregation must represent Torah dictate and speak only on such topics that are shul-appropriate. It, therefore, goes without saying that when the Torah is removed from the Ark and placed upon the bimah, lectern, to be read, proper respect mandates that mundane conversation is prohibited.

In a perfect world, that is the way things should be. Regrettably, our world is far from perfect. The Chief Rabbi of Panama, Horav Bentzion Levi, zl, was a Rav who demanded that his congregation strongly adhere to shul decorum. Talking during davening and krias haTorah was prohibited. This is especially true in Sephardic kehillos, congregations, whose constituents comprised the vast majority of Rav Levi's members. The yetzer hora, evil inclination, goes out of its way to prevent proper tefillah. To destroy the decorum in the shul is a great achievement. The yetzer hora targeted this shul and succeeded in motivating the congregants to ignore the rules and speak during davening and krias haTorah. One Shabbos, when Rav Levi saw that, regardless of his admonishment and pleading, the congregation continued to disturb the krias haTorah with their incessant speaking, he rose to the lectern and announced, "We are stopping the reading of the Torah at this point (shlishi). The continued talking during the reading of the Torah is disrespectful both to the shul and to the Torah. We may not continue with reading under such circumstances."

The congregation was in turmoil. This had never happened. To wrap up the Sefer Torah and return it to the Ark prematurely was unheard of. Rav Levi addressed those who were in a state of shock in their reaction to the Rav's definitive action: "We will conclude the reading of the Torah during the Minchah service." The fact that some members might not return was not his concern. He was making a statement. He would not subject the Sefer Torah to humiliation by a group of men who were disrespectful of it. The Rav had made his point. People would now think twice before they would act disrespectfully in the sanctuary.