



# ERETZ HEMDAH

## ASK THE RABBI SERVICE

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## Kittel at the Seder

**Question:** I am a recent *ba'al teshuva*. One of the practices I have not set my *minhag* for is whether to wear a *kittel* at the *Seder*. Can you help me understand the *minhag* and decide whether to adopt it?

**Answer:** Wearing a *kittel* is associated, for Ashkenazim, with four very different events.

Historically, the first is burial (the details of overlap between shrouds and one's own *kittel* differ according to communal *minhag*). In this context, part of the *minhag* relates to it being inexpensive material (Moed Katan 27b). The cleanliness/purity element of pure white and its connection to the *kohanim's* service may also be involved (see Gesher Hachaim I:10).

Next, conceptually and historically, is Yom Kippur. The Rama (Orach Chayim 610:4) reports the *minhag* of wearing a *kittel* and attributes it to being reminiscent of angels and because its association with burial encourages feeling the need to "humble one's heart."

From these solemn moments, we pivot to joyous settings. Ashkenazi *chatanim* wear a *kittel* at the *chupa*. Some connect this to

cognizance of one's death and the need for *teshuva* at this crucial/serious, albeit joyous, moment (see *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* 147:4). Others connect it to Yom Kippur's optimistic side, as they are both days of forgiveness; some mention the hope that the couple are being joined until death (see *Nitei Gavriel*, *Nisuin* 15).

The *Seder-kittel* connection is not found in classical *Rishonim* and *Shulchan Aruch/Rama*, but early *Acharonim* were familiar with it. The *Magen Avraham* (472:2) and *Taz* (472:3, who implies that some but not all followed the *minhag*) disagree whether a mourner should wear a *kittel* at the *Seder*. The *Magen Avraham* assumes that the reason is to rein in a possibly over-joyous *Seder* participant and reasons that the mourner does not require further dampening of the spirit. The *Taz* considers the possibility that the *kittel* is to enhance the festive atmosphere, which would be reason for a mourner to avoid increasing already sufficient festivity. However, the *Taz* prefers the approach that it is to dampen festivity but adopts the opposite philosophical approach from the *Magen Avraham*. He suggests that it is proper for the mourner to indeed wear the *kittel* and thereby ensure appropriate somberness.

Rav Soloveitchik is cited (*Batei Yosef*, *Hag-gada* p. 90) as giving two additional reasons to wear a *kittel* at the *Seder*, both supplying positives. One (invoking the *Netziv*) focuses on a special element of the *Seder*. We put ourselves in the mind frame of those who

are eating the *Korban Pesach* as a central part of the celebration, and a white cloak was the type of honorable clothes worn while eating a *korban*. Another reason, in his father's name, is that it is one more surprising thing to stimulate a child's curiosity.

The different approaches to the *minhag* have advantages and disadvantages. It is surprising that with the many mandated Talmudic practices to increase festivity (e.g., four cups of wine, reclining), a late *minhag* would come to subdue festivity! We do have a concept of the fast of Behab, after Pesach and Sukkot, out of concern that festiveness might have led to sin (Shulchan Aruch, OC 272:1; Mishna Berura ad loc. 1). However, we wait until after Nisan and Tishrei, respectively. On the other hand, the Magen Avraham's reason connects the *minhag* more naturally to the other usages of the *kittel*. Those who do not follow the *minhag* can be comforted if they find the reasons for this relatively late and not critical *minhag* not along lines they relate to.

In your case, if you follow Ashkenazi

*minhag*, you may feel free to choose your preference on whether to wear a *kittel* at the *Seder*, or experiment with how you like it (with a stipulation that it is *bli ned-er*). There are also various *minhagim* as to whether it is done only by the one who leads the *Seder*, or by all married males, which is also a matter with little compelling logic either way. Technical, psychological, philosophical, and sociological (e.g., your peer group's practice) factors may play a role in your decision. ■

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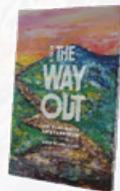
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