Preface Covering One's Head

Day 28

The Talmud teaches (*Kiddushin* 31a) that Rav Huna son of Rav Yehoshua always kept his head covered, explaining, "The Shekhina hovers above my head." He also said (*Shabbat* 118b), "I deserve a reward since I never walked even four cubits bareheaded."

The Talmud relates (ibid. 156b) that the astrologers told the mother of Rav Nahman bar Yitzhak, "Your infant son is destined to become a thief." Because of this warning, she never allowed him to go about bareheaded. She told him, "Keep your head covered so that you will be endowed with the fear of Heaven." At the same time, she prayed to God for mercy that the *yetzer hara* should not gain control over her son.

The child did not understand what this was all about. One day, while he was seated underneath a date tree [that belonged to someone else] reviewing the Mishna, his hood fell off his head. He looked upward and saw the tree's fruits, and suddenly he was overtaken by his *yetzer hara*. He clambered up the tree and, using his teeth, broke a cluster of dates off the trunk!

The holy *Zohar* (*parashat Balak* page 187a) teaches that one must not go the distance of four cubits while bareheaded since the light of the Shekhina hovers above one's head and it gives one the power of life. This is alluded to in the verse (*Kohelet* 9:8), "וְשֶׁמֶן עַל רֹאשְׁךָ אַל יֶחְסָר – Oil will not be lacking on your head."

In another passage (*parashat Pinehas* page 245b), the holy *Zohar* states: "It is forbidden for a Torah scholar to walk four cubits while bareheaded, since the verse states, 'His honor fills the entire world.' It is certainly forbidden to recite a blessing or to pronounce God's Name while bareheaded."

Rambam wrote (*More Nevuchim* 3:52): "Our greatest Sages took care at all times not to bare their heads since the Shekhina hovers over them."

An Obligation Or an Act of Piety

Rabbeinu Meir of Rothenberg, cited by the *Orhot Hayim* (*Hilkhot Tefilla* #48) and by the *Kol Bo* (#11), ruled that there is no prohibition against going bareheaded. Although Rav Huna son of Rav Yehoshua stated that he

would be rewarded for the fact that he never went bareheaded, that was his personal act of piety. This is the opinion of the *Zohar* (in *parashat Pineḥas*) and Rambam, as cited above. Maran cited the *Kol Bo* in his *Bet Yosef* (*Siman* 91) as the halakha in practice.

Maran seems to contradict this in *Siman* 46, however. He explains there that we recite the blessing of עוֹטֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּתִפְאָרָה – Who crowns [the people of] Yisrael with glory since *it is forbidden to go bareheaded*. He added, "Even those who ruled that it is not forbidden agree that the way of the devout is never to go bareheaded. Since this applies only to the people of Yisrael, who are commanded to cultivate the trait of fearing Heaven, this blessing is therefore appropriate, thanking God for this crown." The trend of his words show that he leans toward the opinion that it is actually forbidden to go about bareheaded.

Despite this contradiction, Maran the Rishon Letziyon (responsa *Yeḥave Da'at* Vol. IV, #1) judged that the passage in *Siman* 91 shows Maran's true opinion that it is a matter of piety not to go bareheaded but that it is not forbidden. This is because it appears to be the correct interpretation of the Talmud. In the *Shulḥan Arukh* (2:6), Maran ruled, "It is forbidden to walk about totally upright, and one should not go the distance of four cubits while bareheaded." Apparently, the term forbidden applies to the first halakha but not to the second one.

Harav Shelomo Luria proved in a responsum (#72) that covering one's head is no more than an act of piety, citing the Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 27): Ribbi Berekhya said, "When a mortal king issues a written decree, what does everyone do [while reading the document]? They all stand at attention and bare their heads. They read the document with dread and trembling. But the Blessed Holy One tells the people of Yisrael, 'My children! Recite the *Shema*. I do not demand that you stand up to read it or that you bare your heads.'"Apparently, this Midrash is telling us that there would be nothing wrong with reciting the *Shema* while bareheaded. Nevertheless, God chose not to demand that we recite it that way.

The responsa *Shevut Yaakov* (Vol. III, #5) refuted this proof, citing the continuation of the Midrash: The Blessed Holy One said, "I did not demand that you climb the mountains to offer Me sacrifices of wild animals that are difficult to obtain. I asked only for domestic animals." We cannot deduce from here that it is permissible to offer wild animals as sacrifices just because the Midrash states that God does not demand them. In the same way, we cannot deduce that it is permissible to recite the *Shema* while bareheaded just because it states that God did not demand that we do so.

Harav ḤIDA (*Birke Yosef*; *Maḥazik Berakha*) interpreted the words of Maran likewise, that covering one's head is only a matter of piety. He pointed out that Maran seems to contradict this in several places, but nevertheless he

concluded that the halakha does not forbid going bareheaded. He noted that Harav Yehuda Ayash (*Matte Yehuda*) ruled that it is forbidden, but he disagreed with him. The *Tevu'ot Shemesh* (Messas) interpreted the *Bet Yosef* ruling that it is forbidden to go bareheaded, concurring with the *Matte Yehuda*. Maran the Rishon Letziyon disagreed, insisting that Harav HIDA had interpreted Maran correctly.

Emulating the Ways of Non-Jews

The *Ture Zahav* (8:3) ruled that although it was not forbidden to go bareheaded in the Talmudic era, it is forbidden nowadays and in fact it is a Torah prohibition. This is because in Christian societies etiquette demands that people bare their heads as a sign of respect to a superior. Therefore, it has become forbidden for Jews, based on the Torah's prohibition of "וּבְחֻקֹּתֵיכֶם לֹא תֵלֵכוּ – You must not go in their ways."

Maran the Rishon Letziyon pointed out that even if the *Ture Zahav* is correct, it would be forbidden only if one's intentions were to go bareheaded as a matter of etiquette. If someone chooses to bare his head because he is hot or tired, however, he is not guilty of emulating the ways of non-Jews. This argument is based on the rules set forth by Harav Yosef Kolon, cited by Maran in the *Bet Yosef* (*Y.D.* 178).

In Contemporary Times

Despite the above discussion, Maran the Rishon Letziyon concluded that in our times there is more of a halakhic basis to always go about with one's head covered. This is because there are many Jews nowadays who have rejected the Torah and mitzvot, and the symbol of their rebellion is that they go bareheaded. By wearing a yarmulke, a Jew identifies himself as someone still loyal to the Torah, as someone who possesses the fear of Heaven. If someone goes bareheaded, he gives the impression that he does not observe the mitzvot and that he has rejected the Torah.

It is true that there are observant Jews who have immigrated to the Land of Yisrael and they continue to go bareheaded as they did in their countries of origin. They make up a very small minority, however. It is important for everyone to avoid giving the impression that he might be nonobservant, as the Torah states, "You must be innocent in both God's Eyes and in the eyes of the people of Yisrael." Although no one has the power to invent new prohibitions, nevertheless it is clear that covering one's head is more than just an act of piety. By wearing a yarmulke, one avoids the possible prohibition of appearing to be a sinner.

While Praying

It is even more important to cover one's head when reciting the *Shema* and when praying, since these acts constitute one's acceptance of the yoke of Heaven. A yarmulke should be large enough to cover the majority of one's head area. This is an aspect of the mitzvah of, "Prepare yourself to address your God, Yisrael" (*Amos* 4:12).

Rabbenu Menahem Hame'iri, cited by the *Magen Gibborim* (91:3), stated: "Some people take off their hats upon entering the synagogue, remaining with only a small yarmulke on their heads, which is how they go about in their homes. They recite the *Shema* and pray dressed in that manner. Without a doubt, this is considered terribly disrespectful to God. This is not the way one presents oneself when appearing before dignitaries."

The *Mishna Berura* (91:9) ruled likewise, and it is advisable to heed these words. It is just as important to wear one's hat when reciting *Birkat Hamazon*, but one must at least wear a yarmulke large enough to cover the majority of one's head.