
THE ATTIRE OF THE JEWISH DOCTOR IN MEDIEVAL AND MODERN EUROPE IDENTITY, STATUS AND RELIGION

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Abstract

Clothing expresses cultural world, beliefs, and plays a role in gender, social and identity. The current study focuses on the attire of Jewish physicians in Europe in the Middle Ages and Modern Era. The clothes of Jewish physicians reflected the tension inherent in their status. They were supposed to reflect on one hand their dignified status and affiliation with an elite professional group, and on the other their belonging to an inferior group. In Christian Europe with its practice of discrimination against Jews, physicians normally had to bear a mark of ignominy on their clothes similar to all other Jews. Some historical sources attest to physicians who were exempt from wearing the pointed Jews' hat or a badge. However, these were rare individual cases of physicians who were permitted to treat non-Jews and operated with much success among general society or physicians who treated rulers and key figures and were granted special dispensations. Some halakhic authorities from the fifteenth century until recent generations discuss the question of whether Jewish physicians are permitted to dress as their non-Jewish colleagues or whether this transgresses the prohibition against following non-Jewish laws. Over time, Maharik's fundamental permit became a legal precedent utilized by various halakhic decisors in Jewish communities in Italy, Poland, and Germany. Several modern halakhic decisors claimed that there is no prohibition against wearing the modern doctor's coat although it was designed in the general secular world, as it is used only for professional purposes.

Keywords: doctor, white, coat, cape, hat

1. Introduction

People's clothing changes from place to place and from time to time and expresses their cultural world, beliefs and aesthetic tastes. It also plays a role in their gender, social and communal affiliation [1]. In the Middle Ages one of the garment's main functions was social categorization. Each social class had typical clothes and the members of one class would not wear the habit of another.

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Garments defined one's nationality, country, origin within that country, professional affiliation and rank, religious identity, and also specific denomination or group within the religion [2].

Studies on Jewish dress show that over the history Jewish clothes were shaped by the encounter between the Jewish world (intra-cultural elements) and their surrounding societies (external elements). Moreover, though non-Jewish society marked and excluded the Jews by means of dress codes, the Jews themselves were also interested in segregating themselves from non-Jewish society in order to maintain their religious character [3, 4].

2. Purpose of the study

In this article I will focus on the attire of Jewish physicians in Europe in the Middle Ages and Modern Era, from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries. I shall discuss several historical events and halakhic debates regarding clothing items worn by Jewish physicians. In addition to realistic presentation of the garments described in historical sources, I shall reveal the tension between these physicians' identification and affiliation with Jewish society and its values and the legitimate need to wear vestments customary among expert physicians in general society.

3. Discussion

3.1. 'Red clothes and a ring' - the habits of fourteenth century physicians in Provence

Kalonymus ben Kalonymus (1278-1343), rabbi, translator, and poet from the city of Arles in Provence, presents in his book 'Even Bohan', published in 1323, cutting satirical criticism of contemporary Jewish society, including its physicians. Kalonymus describes the physicians as greedy charlatans who rob the families of the sick. Physicians portray themselves as proficient in the wisdom of remedies, healers of various ills, and miracle makers. They charge exorbitant sums for their medical care and the patient's family is willing to pay whatever they ask to save their loved ones. The ridicule of doctors was a common motif in Jewish literature and poetry in medieval Europe [5].

Kalonymus describes the fancy clothes of the physician as serving his avarice and lucre. He writes: "And the masses of fools who see the ring on his hand and his red attire believe him to be an expert and loyal physician and the destitute relatives of the patient who desire his cure give no consideration to money and want no gold. They follow his instructions." [6] The physician's desire to wear nice clothes that suit his status was noted in various sources [7, 8]. The physician described by Kalonymus wears a crimson cape and a valuable ring, two articles of clothing that arouse the public's respect, forming an impression of authority and knowledge. In the Middle Ages, red or purple clothes were a status symbol of higher society. Exclusive red pigments were produced from the

crimson worm (*tola'at shani*) or marine snails, which were extremely costly because it was so hard to obtain them and produce the pigment, and were therefore affordable only by the rich, nobility and royalty [2, p. 71]. Regarding the ring, it seems to have been made of a precious metal, perhaps a personalized signet ring.

The physician's costume was indeed intended to portray his occupation and dignified status, but according to Kalonymus the charlatan physician uses it to deceive and rob the masses. The attempts of physicians to leave a positive impression on the patients' families is described in contemporary literature in other contexts as well. For example, when demonstrating to the public their knowledge and proficiency in the intricacies of medicine, physicians would mention the names of famous doctors, Hippocrates and Galen, as their knowledge sources [9]. Ram Ben Shalom notes that alongside the many learned physicians in Provence there were also shady characters who gave the medical profession a bad reputation. These did not follow the profession's rules of ethics, rather took advantage of their position to garner money and prestige [10]. It seems that this type of physician used the costume to create a misleading impression of knowledge and authority and to take advantage of the masses, who were truly incapable of verifying their medical skills.

3.2. Were Jewish physicians in medieval Europe required to wear a 'badge of shame' or a 'Jews' hat'?

The Fourth Lateran Council that convened in Rome in 1215 at the initiative of Pope Innocent III decided that Jews would bear a special badge on their clothes to prevent undesirable relations between Jews and Christian women [11, 12]. Since the council did not clarify the exact form of this badge, different badges were used at first in each country. In 1229 a round badge was introduced in France, while in northern and central Italy a yellow circle was initiated in 1257 [13, 14]. Edward I, King of England (1239-1307), in contrast, decreed that all Jews, men and women from the age of seven, must wear a badge in the shape of the two Tablets of Stone [15]. Notably, the rulers of several countries in Christian Europe, primarily Spain and Portugal, released their Jewish subjects from the obligation of wearing a badge of shame.

Jewish physicians were required to wear a badge of shame on their clothing like other members of their community, although it is known that some managed to evade this obligation, usually famous Jewish physicians valued for their medical activity among Christian society. For example, on October 17, 1482 Judah Marchiano, a Jewish physician born in the district of La Marche and active in Padua, received from the Venetian authorities an exemption from the obligation to bear the 'mark of the Jews' on his clothes [Government Archives in Venice (A.S.V. = Archivio di Stato di Venezia), Cons. X, Miste, Reg. 20, f. 171]. The same exemption also applied to Jewish physician R. Benjamin, whose place of residence is not noted. Daniel Carpi suggested that this was a privilege conferred on the two well-known contemporary scholars, R. Judah Messer Leon and R.

Benjamin son of R. Mordechai of Sha'ar Aryeh, although he admits that he has no source for this suggestion [16].

As noted by Simonsohn, most of the special permits granted in the past by dukes to Jewish associates, particularly physicians, and exempting them from wearing a badge of shame, were cancelled in the seventeenth century. In Venice in 1699, Ferdinando Carlo Gonzaga (1652-1708), Duke of Mantua and Montferrat, ordered the community to find ways of ensuring that Jews bear a badge of shame, but also exempted his associates, Haim Salem and Abraham Haim of Fano, as well as the three Jewish physicians of Mantua, from wearing one. This event reflects the inclination to exclude Jewish physicians from Jewish society and to grant them rights accruing from their status and their contribution to aristocracy [17].

Another mark of ignominy involving the dress of European Jews was the 'Jews' hat' (Judenhut, pillem cornutus), which served as a badge of shame discerning them from the non-Jewish population. This was normally a pointed-conical shaped yellow hat and it was enforced mainly on Jewish men in Germany, Austria, Poland and other countries [13, 14]. In several cases, reputable Jewish physicians were granted an exemption and released from the obligation to wear a 'Jews' hat'. For example, in 1528 the Council of Ten, Consiglio dei Dieci of the Venetian Republic, exempted the famous Jewish physician Jacob ben Samuel Mantino from wearing the 'Jews' hat' and he was allowed to wear the regular black physicians' hat for two months. This privilege was granted him at the recommendation of the ambassadors of England and France, the papal legate and other dignitaries who were among his patients.

When the time allotted passed another of his patients, Teodoro Trivulzio (1458-1531), who served as marshal of France and governor of Genoa, intervened on his behalf and after many efforts the council transformed the temporary exemption from wearing the 'Jews' hat' into a permanent exemption. Notably, in 1534 Mantino was appointed the physician of Pope Paul III and in 1539 he was appointed a lecturer of Medicine at the University of Rome, showing the great appreciation accorded him despite being a Jew [18].

In medieval Christian Europe Jews who were interested in reading Medicine suffered from exclusion and from various restrictions. From the eleventh to seventeenth centuries Jews were not allowed to study Medicine at European universities. A small number managed to do so nonetheless following the request of Christian notables, but they were not allowed to take the finals and were not certified as medical doctors [19-21]. In this respect, the University of Padua was an exception. At first Jews were not allowed to take the public certification exams at the university, but beginning from the early fourteenth century a change was evident and the university's policy became more tolerant and open, where eighty Jewish students were certified during 1557-1619. In fact, the University of Padua was the first to open its doors to Jews and only subsequently were Jews admitted to the University of Rome and other Italian universities and then in the Netherlands and Germany [22, 23].

One manifestation of the liberal and tolerant attitude of the University of Padua is related to the norm of setting Jews apart by wearing a different coloured hat. In other universities Jews were required to wear a yellow beret while their Christian peers wore a black hat. (Cassen documented five different types of Jewish hats in Italy in the 16th century [24]. Ravid has shown that in the 17th century there is evidence of both yellow and red hats among the Jews of Venice [25].) In contrast, at the University of Padua Jews were allowed to wear a black beret like their classmates. Furthermore, in the certificates granted them upon graduation the heading was changed from 'In Christi Nomine, Amen' (in the name of Jesus Christ) to 'In Dei Aeterni Monime, Amen' (in the name of Omnipotent God) and the signatories were usually Jewish graduates from previous classes [26].

3.3. Are Jewish physicians permitted to wear garments customary among physicians in non-Jewish society?

Some indication of clothing items worn by Jewish physicians is given in halakhic debates from the fifteenth century until recent generations on the question of whether Jewish physicians are permitted to dress as their non-Jewish colleagues or whether this transgresses the prohibition against following non-Jewish laws. The earliest debate on this matter appears in a letter of inquiry sent to R. Joseph Ben Solomon Colon (Maharik, c. 1420-1480), who served as a rabbi in several major communities in northern Italy [27], on wearing a cloak-cape (in Italian: 'Cappa') worn by scholars or physicians.

The question was asked by R. Judah Messer Leon, son of R. Jehiel who was a physician, and R. Samuel the son of Moses de Medina, one of his prominent disciples who as far as known lived in Padua [27, p. 192-193]. Messer Leon was a prominent figure among fifteenth century Italian Jewry. He served as head of *yeshiva* in Mantua and Naples and also earned a medical degree in Medicine (Magister) [28]. As noted by Daniel Carpi, Messer Leon was strongly admired by the Italian authorities. In 1455 he was knighted and in 1469 the king granted him the privilege of teach Medicine and even to confer medical degrees on Jewish students. Also stressed was his lengthy activity in the field of Medicine and his success in treating both Jewish and Christian patients, notwithstanding the restrictions imposed on Jewish physicians against treating Christians [16].

It is hard to know precisely when the letter was sent to Maharik. Moreover, the original wording of the question is not brought and R. Colon summarizes its gist and also describes the features of the *Cappa*. He writes: "The *Cappa* that you mentioned is long, reaching the ground, covers back and front, and is open on the sides [...] and you say that some people expressed doubts and said that it constitutes a transgression of [the prohibition against] following non-Jewish laws". The body of the question and the response portray the *Cappa* as the attire of 'wise men', although not specifically physicians. R. Colon describes the *Cappa* as a long cape that reaches the ground. It covers the front of the wearer's body as well as the back and is open on both sides. Jeffrey Wolf identified the *Cappa* with

the current-day academic cape, called ‘cappa manicata’, worn extensively at Italian universities and particularly in Bologna [27, p. 193]. McAllister said that medieval university clothing was taken from the Church, as medical schools developed from within the Church [29].

Moreover, some claimed that even in countries such as Italy where scholars were not necessarily perceived as clerics they were compelled to wear apparel inspired by religious habits [30]. This explains why Judah Messer Leon asked R. Colon about the *Cappa*. While it reflected his academic status as one who was entitled to teach Medicine and as an active physician in general society, it also originated from the Church.

R. Colon permitted use of the *Cappa* for two reasons:

A. Clothing customary in general society should be prohibited when it ‘breaches the boundaries of modesty and humility’ (Jewish law requires one to be modest, meaning both not exposing certain parts of the body and not behaving pompously) [4]. A physician who wears the *Cappa*, however, does not do so as a sign of pride rather due to the benefit produced from it - the honour accorded the physician or the financial gain, as this garment indicates that he is a certified physician. Namely, the cape reflects recognition of the physician as a certified and respected professional and not wearing it will harm his status and livelihood.

B. Wearing the *Cappa* by scholars is not to be considered part of ‘non-Jewish laws’ because in practice it is not related to any religious-ritual activity. The assumption is that Jews came into contact with the habits worn by clerics during public parades or when receiving pledges for loans [27, p. 193]. Hence, Maharik was certainly familiar with the habits of clerics and his permit is based on knowledge of current reality. It seems that although clerics and scholars wore similar capes, Maharik distinguishes between the cape worn by priests, which reflects their religious world, and that of scholars, intended to display their academic authority. Finally, R. Colon brings another argument for allowing physicians to wear a cape. He writes: “But this *Cappa* is not a unique feature of their entire nation [=of non-Jews] but rather only of the wise by reason of their wisdom and no non-Jew may wear it unless he is a wise man and it is not worn by all the wise of their faith, as attested by R. Messer Leon, may God keep him, and I have also heard that in France it is not worn even by the wise, so it is clear. And it is clear that this is not a garment that distinguishes them [=the non-Jews] as it is intended only for the wise.” [31]

According to Maharik, the *Cappa* is not a distinctly religious garment, since not all Christian clerics wear it. Moreover, in some places, such as France, even the scholars do not wear it. Namely, this is a local Italian garment intended to mark the status of a ‘defined elite group’ (‘the wise by reason of their wisdom’) and not every person is entitled to wear it.

Maharik’s ruling served as the basis for several halakhic rulings in subsequent generations regarding the attire of physicians. R. Moses Isserles, who lived in sixteenth century Kraków, embraced Maharik’s ruling and stated that physicians may wear the garment typical of their profession. He writes: “Something that is of benefit, such as that expert physicians are accustomed to

wearing a special garment indicating that they are specialists, can be worn, and it is also permitted if this is done for reasons of respect or some other reason” [32]. Namely, unique items of clothing worn by physicians reflect their status as ‘expert physicians’ or ‘specialists’, meaning officially certified medical practitioners. He too thinks that the garment only reflects the dignified status of the physician and is therefore permitted.

R. Yitzhak Lampronti (1679-1756), who lived and operated in Italy, determined that a physician is permitted not only to wear clothing customary among his non-Jewish colleagues but rather also to shave his beard as customary in Christian society. He writes: “A Jew shall not wear clothes typical of non-Jews [...] and anyone who is an associate of royalty is permitted, and also a specialist physician is permitted to wear a special garment [...] as well as to shave his face” [33]. Over the generations, growing a beard was a distinct external characteristic of Jewish men and a mark of their group affiliation. As shown by the researchers, the practice of shaving began to spread among European Jewry from the Middle Ages and on, influenced by Christian society [34-36]. It is evident from R. Lampronti’s words that in eighteenth century Italy a shaven face was common among physicians, which is why he permits Jewish physicians to shave their beard.

Permission for physicians to dress as customary in non-Jewish society appears in a proclamation from January 15, 1767, signed by R. Isaac Halevi Horowitz (1715-1767), known as Itzikel Hamburger, who served as Chief Rabbi of Altona in Germany. The proclamation calls for the excommunication of Jews who change the traditional-Jewish style of dress and wear non-Jewish clothing. As shown by Shmuel Feiner, one of the manifestations of European Jewry’s secularization in the eighteenth century involves the change in the external appearance of women and men, as well as the breach of traditional conventions and modesty restrictions. Contemporary Jews followed the fashion practices of the general culture and the high purchasing capacity of the rich. Men were clean shaven, wore fashionable clothing and stylized wigs, and women featured hoop skirts, cleavages, gaudy jewellery, gold accessories and fancy shoes. Men and women appeared in town in clothes that reflected their status and good taste, showing that they follow the cultural conventions of general society [37].

The proclamation, originally written in German, said: “We have also found out something new, that some from the house of Israel wear garments that our fathers [and mothers] never wore and never permitted, braids! Clothes with gold and silver! That are fictitious opulence [...] Therefore, from now on, under order of the Chief Rabbi together with several sages, those who shall wear such attire shall be excommunicated, and we hope that they will heed us and that these bad ways shall not become rooted and they will be avoided. An exception are the physicians (doctors) who are permitted to wear these garments due to their studies.” [38]

R. Horowitz objected to opulent clothing that includes gold and silver colours, for two reasons. One is the attempt to resemble norms customary in non-Jewish society and the other is because this contravenes the boundaries of

modesty that are an important foundation of Judaism. Nonetheless, the proclamation allows physicians to wear opulent clothes because this reflects their dignified status and scholarship.

Another figure involved in the historical debate concerning the dress of Jewish physicians is Dr. Haim David Bernhard (circa 1775-1858), designated 'the *Admor* the doctor'. Bernhard was a famous Jewish physician of Polish descent who renounced his faith during the Enlightenment but subsequently reembraced his Jewish roots and joined the *Hassidut* movement. He studied at the Faculty of Medicine in the University of Breslau, Poland, and also occupied several senior medical positions in general society. Bernhard served as a physician in the royal palace, apparently as the official doctor of Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm III, and in the Prussian military. He was appointed the personal physician of Polish general Józef Zajączek and also the supervising physician of all the western districts of the Duchy of Warsaw [39].

After regaining his faith, Bernhard served as the physician and close associate of several Hassidic leaders and was a particularly enthusiastic follower of the 'Seer of Lublin'. Due to his medical activity in non-Jewish high society, the Seer granted Dr. Bernhard permission to continue wearing his European dress. He instructed him, however, to grow a 'small neat beard', claiming that this would do no harm to his activity as a physician [40]. Notably, Maimonides (1138-1204) permitted a Jew who associated with royalty and was often in the courts of non-Jewish rulers to dress as customary in higher society and even permitted him to shave his beard [41]. The Seer probably demanded that he grow a beard because in European society a well-kept beard was a customary norm and not a distinctly Jewish mark.

Several illustrations portraying rabbis who operated as physicians throughout Europe reflect the use of European dress. Yisakhar Ber Teller (born circa 1607) was a physician in the city of Prague and a disciple of Joseph Solomon Delmedigo [42]. His picture is featured in his medical treatise 'Be'er Mayim Haim', written in Yiddish and published in Prague in 1650. Teller is shown in a European costume that includes an elegant coat and a wide-brimmed hat. He does not have a full beard, rather only a moustache and a chin beard. Alfred Rubens claimed that because he was a physician the community regulations allowed him to wear the customary period medical costume [43].

Another physician who embraced European looks was Abraham Cohen of Zante (1670-1729) [43, p. 158]. Abraham Cohen, who was a rabbi, physician and philosopher, was certified as a physician at the University of Padua and operated as a physician on the island of Zakynthos in the Ionian Sea, ruled by the Venetian Republic. His picture appears at the beginning of his book 'Kehunat Abraham' published in Venice in 1719 [44]. There, Cohen is portrayed as wearing a costume customary among scholars in non-Jewish society. He has on a long wig and is clean shaven [45].

4. Conclusions

From medieval to modern times, the clothes of Jewish physicians reflected the tension inherent in their status. They were supposed to reflect on one hand their dignified status and affiliation with an elite professional group, and on the other their belonging to an inferior and discriminated group. Christian and Muslims historical sources record different clothing items worn by Jewish physicians in various places and times, which reflect their status: a red garment or hat, a long cape, a ring, or wearing a sword that served as an item of jewellery or a status symbol [46]. Then again, the physician's attire is mentioned in different documents in the context of discrimination against Jews and marking them as contemptible and abject, for instance wearing the yellow Jews' hat or a badge of shame.

Items of clothing that serve as a mark of ignominy contrasted with the appreciation accorded the physician for his activity and contribution to non-Jewish society. In Christian Europe with its practice of discrimination against Jews, physicians normally had to bear a mark of ignominy on their clothes similar to all other Jews. Some historical sources attest to physicians who were exempt from wearing the pointed Jews' hat or a badge. However, these were rare individual cases of physicians who were permitted to treat non-Jews and operated with much success among general society or physicians who treated rulers and key figures and were granted special dispensations. A lack of discrimination against medical staff with regard to their clothing was evident in the University of Padua, which exhibited tolerance towards Jewish students and did not force the Jews to wear a different hat than their colleagues.

The first source to discuss the question of whether Jewish scholars are permitted to wear clothes typical of non-Jews is that of Maharik, who lived in fifteenth century Italy. Maharik did not prohibit wearing clothes customary in non-Jewish society so long as they were not expressly connected to rituals or immodest. As we have shown, the cape he discusses originated from the Church, but Maharik permits it because it was utilized by university scholars or physicians with no religious affiliation.

Over time, his fundamental permit became a legal precedent utilized by various halakhic decisors in Jewish communities in Italy, Poland and Germany, and as we shall see below it remained valid until recent generations. The context of the halakhic deliberations regarding wearing clothing customary among non-Jews is the fact that on one hand the physician was an inseparable part of Jewish society and expected to maintain the customary religious and social norms of his group of origin. On the other, the physician operated in wider social spheres and his patients included members of various faiths. Different clothing than that customary among local physicians might have harmed his status and livelihood.

In other words, the attire of Jewish physicians from medieval to modern times reflects the tension between the clothing's role in linking the individual to Jewish society and its values and the individual's need and right to express his professional status within general society. The physician's costume had

implications for his livelihood and also for the ability to become integrated in general society, which at times benefitted the Jewish community as well.

On principle, various rabbis permitted physicians to wear clothes customary among non-Jews, and we even saw that some physicians received specific permission to do so, for instance Dr. Haim David Bernhard. Of the actual practice of Jewish physicians regarding clothing we learn from illustrations and engravings. Yisakhar Ber Teller and Abraham Cohen of Zante appear in pictures with a European countenance. Yisakhar Ber Teller is wearing a European coat and a wide-brimmed hat and Abraham Cohen was documented wearing a European-style coat, a long wig, and clean shaven.

In recent generations the halakhic debate on the issue of permission to wear clothes customary among non-Jews has switched its focus from the medieval cape of the physicians to the modern white coat. Beginning from the late nineteenth century, once Medicine became a scientific discipline, physicians and health professionals began to wear a white coat, initially intended to protect them from infectious agents in surgical procedures [47, 48]. Wearing a white coat represented the transition to the scientific approach of modern medicine, and in time it became a symbol of the status of medical professionals, as the colour white symbolizes cleanliness, purity and life [49-51]. Some see the white coat as a symbol of authority and thus as an element that affects the physician-patient relationship [52].

Several modern halakhic decisors who relied mainly on Maharik's ruling regarding the *Cappa* claimed that there is no prohibition against wearing the modern doctor's coat although it was designed in the general secular world, as it is used only for professional purposes [53]. At present, wearing the white coat poses no problem for observant Jewish physicians and this norm is also customary among ultra-Orthodox physicians.

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