



***Authentic Kabbalah - Sephardic Studies
Benei Noah Studies -- Anti-Missionary/Anti-Cult Materials***

Wearing White Garments on Shabat A Halakhic & Kabbalistic Review

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Part 1, The Sod Side

Many are those who strive to incorporate greater amounts of Kedusha (holiness) into their lives. However, in our day and age there has arisen much confusion as to what Halakhic path one is to follow in order to best accomplish this goal.

There are many paths in Halakha (Torah Law). There have arisen separate laws (Halakhot) and customs (minhagim) among the different Jewish communities around the world. The minhagim of the Ashkenazim is different from the minhagim of the Sephardim, which is different from the minhagim of the Hasidim, which is different from the minhagim of the Yemenites. In addition, each of these individual groups has sub-groups within them, each that observe Halakha and Minhag different from one another.

While all these paths are the “divrei Elokim Hayim” (ways of truth from G-d), still some minhagim (customs) are able to better assist one whose goal is the pursuit of holiness.

The minhagim of the holy Mekubalim (Kabbalists) cross cultural and ethnic lines and are observed equally by Ashkenazim and Sephardim, Modern Orthodox and Haredim. The sacred practices of the Mekubalim serve to enable the ones observing them to fill themselves with an abundant spirit of holiness and to serve our blessed Creator according to mystical means that align the physical and spiritual worlds. The minhagim of the Mekubalim are not required practice for all Torah observant Jews because many of these sacred practices are too arduous for the layman to perform. Nonetheless, for those who so strive and succeed in their practice, the rewards are beyond that which words can describe.

One of the special minhagim of the holy Mekubalim is the wearing of white garments on the Shabat. While the Ari'zal has recorded the importance of this tradition, the minhag of wearing white garments predated him by many centuries. It is apparent from the Gemara (Kidushin 72a), that wearing white clothes, even on a daily basis, was a minhag of the Talmudic Rabbis. While this minhag changed over the years, the importance of wearing white garments, specifically on the Shabat, has not been lost.

Rabbi Haim Vital, who alone authoritatively recorded the teachings of his Rabbi, the Ari'zal, writes with regards to the white garments worn of Shabat the following in his Sha'ar HaKavanot (The Gate to Meditations).

*"A man is required to wear white garments [on Shabat] and not of any other color. I received from my teacher [the Ari'zal] (obm) that according to the color and hue of a man's garments that he wears on the Shabat in this world, thus exactly will a man be dressed in the world to come, after his death on every Shabat day. He said to me that one Kabbalat Shabat the soul of a certain Rabbi who had died in his days [i.e., in the lifetime of the Ari'zal] appeared to him. He saw him wearing all black [clothing] on the Shabat day. He [the Rabbi] said to him [the Ari'zal], **"because in this world I wore black on the day of Shabat, thus do they punish me here [in the world to come] after my death to wear black garments even on the Shabat day."***

Know that the minimum is to wear four white garments, these are the outer garment, the lower garment, the sash upon one's lower garments and the robe that is [worn] upon the skin. I have seen my teacher (obm) in the winter days would wear on the day of Shabat modestly concealed a garment of purple [woolen "long johns" underwear] underneath his upper white garment. He was not concerned other than to have four white garments, which were the outer garment, the lower garment, the sash and the robe, as mentioned.

The four garments correspond to the four letters Yod Kay Vav Kay as recorded in the holy Zohar, in accordance to the secret of the eight priestly garments, four of which were gold, corresponding to ADNY and four white corresponding to YHVH. These four garments are the secret of the world of Beriah as recorded in the Introduction of the Tikkunim, that "the King wears garments of Beriah on the Shabat day."

Also, know that these garments are an aspect of the Ohr Makif (surrounding light) on the outside. This is also related to the secret of the garments discussed in the Shaharit prayers in the blessing "who clothes the naked."

Sha'ar HaKavanot, 63a, Rabbi Haim Vital

While certain information in this section from the Sha'ar HaKavanot is clear and easy to understand, the mystical insights mentioned therein might be a little baffling to one not trained in the lessons of Torah mysticism. This is not the time nor place for a full commentary to the words of the Sha'ar HaKavanot. For those interested in an in-depth understanding of this material, I recommend to you the Hebrew language Shemen Sasson commentary to the Sha'ar HaKavanot. For the layman, I will endeavor to

provide a small understanding that might add some insight into the mystery of the meaning of this practice.

The four white garments worn on Shabat correspond to the white garments worn by the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) in the Beit HaMikdash (Temple). These four garments correspond to the four letters of the holy Name YHVH and thus to the attribute of mercy. They also act as garments for the Neshama soul, manifest now on Shabat Kodesh. The Neshama soul emanates from the letter Hey of G-d's holy Name YHVH, and manifests the supernal Shekhina.

Thus, the four garments are said to be the secret of the world of Beriah, which is the source of the Neshama soul. When the Tikkunim say that "the King wears garments of Beriah on the Shabat day," it means that the spirit of G-d bonds with the Neshama souls of the righteous (symbolically "wearing" them as garments) on Shabat Kodesh through the intermediary of the Shekhina, G-d's holy Presence.

The four golden garments correspond to the holy Name ADNY (Adonai) and correspond to the attribute of judgement. During the six days of the week we are subject to the normal forces of the universe and are thus subject to the powers of severity and judgement. On Shabat Kodesh, Benei Yisrael are given a special opportunity to rise above the influence of the normal universe and enter a realm above time and space. This realm of Shabat corresponds to G-d's attribute of mercy and corresponds to the holy Name YHVH.

When one is fully observant of the holy Shabat, in all its Halakhic details, one's soul ascends above into the higher spiritual planes and is transformed. One's inner essence is purified from the dregs of weekday influences. Yet, in order for this transformation to be complete in all of one's being, there must be an external change that corresponds to the internal change. This requires a change of one's clothing.

The clothing manifest what is called one's Ohr Makif (surrounding light). This light can be called one's aura or light of spiritual protection. The Ohr Makif is the light of the soul that hovers over and around the body. Its light is absorbed into one's clothing, thus making them holy. One's Shabat garments are considered blemished if they do not reflect the correct color or hue of the Ohr HaMakif. In such a case, the Ohr HaMakif does not have a proper vessel upon which to dwell. Because it has no proper resting-place, thus the protective power of the Ohr HaMakif is weakened. This is considered a sin in the eyes of Heaven.

When the Rabbi appeared to the Ari'zal in a vision he expressed that his soul was dressed in black as a punishment for his wearing black on Shabat in this world. The nature of this punishment is this: due to the fact that his black clothing worn on Shabat in this world weakened the power of his Ohr HaMakif to shine, so now after his death, his Ohr HaMakif is still weak. Thus his soul did not radiate brilliant light as do holy souls, rather his soul was "dressed in black," meaning that his soul lacked the spiritual energy necessary to ascend into the higher spiritual planes (thus his soul was on earth

to be witnessed by the Ari'zal). He was being punished for his sin, measure for measure. He did not let his Ohr HaMakif shine in this world, so heaven held back his Ohr HaMakif from shining in the world to come. May Heaven protect us from such a fate of darkness.

Although we now have a basic understanding of the mystical nature of this most important practice, we must proceed and understand how this practice is viewed, not according to mysticism, but rather according to Halakha (Torah Law). For although we recognize the spiritual importance of this practice, this does not mean that Torah Law has been ordained in accordance to the mystical understandings. We must review the laws regarding this practice as understood in the eyes of our holy Rabbis. We must also review any peripheral laws associated with it.

Part 2, The Halakha Side

The Sephardim and Ashkenazim have always differed concerning the authority of the holy Zohar as a Halakhic text. In his greatest work, the Beit Yosef (Orah Haim 141, 123b), Rabbi Yosef Karo has written that any Halakhic matter whose details of observance are not clearly specified in the Talmud should be observed according to the directions of the Zohar, even if and when there is a consensus of Rabbinic opinions calling for a different method of observance.

For Rabbi Karo, the author of the Shulkhan Arukh, the ultimate Halakhic authority is the Talmud Bavli, followed by the Zohar. Only then are other Torah law codes examined. Thus for example, if the great Torah codes of the RaMBaM, the Rosh (Rabbeynu Asher) and the RiF (Rabbi Yitzhak Alfasi) interpret a Talmudic law in one fashion and the Zohar interprets it in another fashion, regardless of majority rule, the authority of the Zohar supercedes. This is such an important dictate that sometimes a ruling in Rabbi Karo's own Shulkhan Arukh is put aside and Torah law (for Sephardim) is decided according to the Kabbalah of the Ari'zal, the natural outgrowth of the holy Zohar.

The Ashkenazi community, on the other hand, has never been supportive of the holy Zohar as a Halakhic authority. While all the holy Rabbis of the Ashkenazi communities accept and revere the Zohar as a work of mysticism, their Halakhic opinion is that mysticism takes a secondary position, not only to the Talmud, but also to the various Rabbinic Law Codes. This opinion is clearly stated by Rabbi Moshe Isserles (the RaMA) in his Darchei Moshe (Orah Haim 141, #b).

Concerning our topic of issue, the obligation of wearing white clothing on Shabat, we will see the conflicting opinions of Ashkenazim and Sephardim come into play. Each community holds a Halakhic point of view on this matter based upon the above opinions. We will begin with an understanding of the Sephardi Halakha on this issue.

Hundreds of years before the Ari'zal, Rabbeynu Bahya wrote his classical commentary on the Torah. While he does not mention anything about the wearing of white on Shabat, Rabbeynu Bahya however makes a very strong point against wearing black on

Shabat. Without knowing of the vision that the Ari'zal was to have centuries later about the soul of the Rabbi being punished for wearing black on Shabat, Rabbeynu Bahya provides for us the reason why it is considered such a grievous sin. In Parashat Shoftim on Deut. 18:10-11 (the laws of forbidden idolatry), Rabbeynu Bahya writes that the wearing of black on Shabat was originally a custom (minhag) of Babylonian idol worshipers of the stars. For the Babylonian idolaters the Shabat (which they called Shapatu) was a day of mourning and self-castigation. It was a somber day, dedicated to the planet Saturn (our "Saturday" is Saturn's day) whose wrath one wanted to placate by self-castigation and self-punishment.

The prominent psychologist Erich Fromm has written about this and his words help us to understand the mystical significance of the holy Shabat as well as to explain what Rabbeynu Bahya wrote in his commentary.

In his work, "The Forgotten Language" (Grove Press, 1951), Fromm writes: *"Saturn (in the old astrological and metaphysical tradition) symbolizes time. He is a god of time and hence the god of death. Inasmuch as man is like G-d, gifted with a soul, with reason, love and freedom, he is not subject to time or death. But inasmuch as man is an animal, with a body subject to the laws of nature, he is a slave to time and death. The Babylonians sought to appease the lord of time by self-castigation. The Bible in its Sabbath concept makes an entirely new attempt to solve the problem: by stopping interference with nature for one day you eliminate time; where there is no changes, no work, no human interference there is no time. Instead of a Sabbath on which man bows down to the lord of time, the Biblical Sabbath symbolizes man's victory over time; time is suspended, Saturn is dethroned on his very day, Saturn's day".*

Rabbeynu Bahya writes, **"According to this wisdom (of idolatrous star worship) one wears black.** We (Jews) however wear on the Shabat fine wool of many colors, as it is written, "honor it (i.e., the Shabat) by not going in your (regular) ways" (Is. 58) . . . Blessed be G-d Most High who has graciously bestowed upon us knowledge and intelligence by knowing His Torah and mitzvot and prevented us from following the mistaken (belief) in the stars and constellations."

It is thus apparent that the wearing of black garments on Shabat has a relationship to the practice of idolatry. Even if this connection is minor or outdated, it should be enough for all Rabbis to band together and collectively forbid the wearing of black garments on Shabat, similar to the forbiddance to seek out fortune-tellers and soothsayers. How unfortunate that this is not the case.

While not mentioning the opinion of Rabbeynu Bahya, the Sephardi Sage, Rabbi Yosef Haim, the Ben Ish Hai of Baghdad says, in no uncertain terms, that it is forbidden to wear black clothing on the Shabat.

In Sefer Ben Ish Hai (S.S. Lekh L'kha 18), Rabbi Haim states, *"No one should wear black garments on Shabat. Even if one happens to be traveling, one should not wear weekday or black clothing on Shabat wherever one is at the time, whether in a hotel, on*

a ship or in the desert. People observing the twelve months of mourning for their parents who wear weekday or even black clothes on Shabat are making a big mistake, it is not permitted to do this.”

Notice that the Ben Ish Hai does not require that everyone wears white. For whatever reasons he does mention this sacred practice. Yet, the wearing of black he forbids outright.

As is known the general minhag of the Ashkenazi communities is specifically to wear black on the Shabat. None of their holy Rabbis, however, have ever offered an answer to the objections of Rabbeynu Bahya and the Ari'zal. As far as most Ashkenazim are concerned, this is their minhag and that is that. If their Rabbis wear black on Shabat then so will they, period. Some have even gone so far as to offer a reason (based on the Gemara) that black garments are the most modest of colors and therefore appropriate dress for Jews. While this might be true of the weekdays, this does not address the Torah requirement to *“honor it (i.e., the Shabat) by not going in your (regular) ways”* (Is. 58), meaning to wear specifically different garments on Shabat than one does on a weekday.

I have even heard of attempts by some to offer a mystical justification of wearing black on Shabat. In the RaMaK's Pardes Rimonim, he outlines the colors of the sefirot. Due to its concealment, RaMaK mentions that some attribute the color black to the highest sefirah, Keter. This, in their eyes elevates the color black above all others (also, black absorbs all colors). However, if this opinion were true, it would have been accepted by the Ari'zal and by Heaven. Yet, as we have seen from the vision of the Ari'zal, one's soul is punished after death for wearing black on Shabat. Therefore, this teaching of the RaMaK must not be applied to Shabat garments.

Although today all Ashkenazim wear black on the Shabat, this was not always the case. The Ba'al Shem Tov and the early generations of Hasidim all wore white on Shabat. This minhag, however, was unexplainably changed by Rabbi Sar Shalom, the first Rebbe of the Belz community, when he adopted the Shabat garb of the “Mitnagdim” (the anti-Hasidic Rabbinic community) (ref. Sefer Dover Shalom 365).

Since this time, most Hasidim have lost touch with the original sacred practices of the Ari'zal. As true to Halakhic form, Ashkenazim (even Hasidim) have stay faithful to their original non-mystical ways while the Sephardim have maintained their mysticism. This has remained true until the advent of the modern State of Israel, which led to the destruction of traditional Sephardic Judaism.

In order to survive the anti-religious onslaught of the early Zionists; Sephardic Jews fled into the Ashkenazi religious world and into their yeshivot, adopting their minhagim. Today, fifty years later, most Sephardim around the world follow the practice of the Ashkenazim to wear black on Shabat.

Many years ago, I asked addressed one great Sephardic halakhic authority in Israel about this practice. I directly asked him in light of the Sephardic and mystical authorities that forbid wearing black on Shabat, how did he justify doing so. He responded to me with only two words, "*Kakh HaMinhag*" (this is the tradition). He did not try to justify it further. He was, however implying that the Sephardim have been overcome by the Ashkenazim and that he felt powerless to respond.

We thus find that the Sephardim and others who maintain the sacred practice of wearing white on Shabat are few in number. Now a question must be asked: are the minority even allowed to observe a minhag that makes them stand out so from the majority. In other words, if everyone is wearing black, does one have permission to wear white? There are long Halakhic discussions about how overlapping minhagim are to be followed. However, this is not the time nor place to discuss this matter.

In brief we must review the specific issue: in a community where everyone wears black, regardless of the Ari'zal and the Kabbalah, does one have permission to wear white? There are a number of Halakhic authorities, Sephardi and Ashkenazi who address this issue.

The Ashkenazi author of the Mishneh Berurah commentary to the Shulkhan Arukh, the Hafetz Haim, records in his Beur Halakha (262, Begadim Naim) that in a place where black is worn, one shouldn't wear white on Shabat because it appears haughty. The Sephardi authority the HiDA also quotes authorities who support this position (ref. Kaf HaHaim 262:26).

The Ashkenazi Be'er Hetev commentary (262:4) mentions the tradition of wearing the four white garments and even states how they relate to the four letters of G-d's holy Name YHVH. Nowhere does he mention not to wear them because of haughtiness.

The Ashkenazi authority, the Eliyahu Rabbah (ref. Beur Halakha) states that haughtiness is only applicable in public. Therefore, in the privacy of one's own home, one may wear whatever one desires. I know of a number of Hasidim who wear a black over-garment when they attend Synagogue on Shabat and upon arriving home remove it and wear white.

In order to address this accusation of haughtiness we have to turn to the ultimate authority of Sephardic Halakha, Rabbi Haim Sofer. In his Kaf HaHaim commentary to the Orah Haim section of the Shulkhan Arukh (262:26) Rabbi Sofer writes the following: "*Reference the Aharonim (later Rabbis) who wrote that if one wears white in a place where white is not worn or in the presence of someone greater than himself who does not wear white, this appears haughty. **However, from the writings of the Ari'zal who wrote that the example of the garments one wears on Shabat one will wear in the world to come, it appears that there is no haughtiness here. One is only concerned about the nature of the garment of one's soul's in the world to come. And the verse does say, "All that a man has will he give for his soul." (Job 2:4)***"

In conclusion, we have learned that wearing white garments on Shabat is a spiritual imperative. Wearing black garments on Shabat will lead to spiritual punishment, regardless as to how widespread the practice. Due to the original idolatrous origins of wearing black on Shabat as an expression of idol worship, the modern Ashkenazi minhag must be viewed as a minhag b'ta'oot (a mistaken practice) and abandoned immediately. Those not willing to do so should be viewed as haughty!

It is the correct and proper minhag for all Jews, Ashkenazim and Sephardim alike to wear four white garments on Shabat corresponding to G-d's holy Name YHVH. By observing this practice we properly honor the Shabat (as referred to by Rabbeynu Bahya above). We also save our souls from punishment and draw ourselves closer to Kedusha (holiness) and closer to our beloved Creator.

May we all have the courage to be honest, do teshuva and change. Shalom.