Fashioning Jews
Greenspoon, Leonard J.

Published by Purdue University Press

Greenspoon, Leonard J.
Fashioning Jews: Clothing, Culture and Commerce (SJC #24).
Purdue University Press, 2013.
Project MUSE.  muse.jhu.edu/book/47050.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/47050
Editor’s Introduction

My mother-in-law, Magda Morsel, was born Magda Guttman in a Czechoslovakian village near the Hungarian border. One of eleven children, she was a teenager when World War II began.

In early 1944, members of her family were taken to Auschwitz. There she was forced to make and mend clothing for the S.S. officers and their families. Together with three of her sisters, Magda survived this concentration camp and other horrors before being liberated by the British at Bergen-Belsen.

From her earliest days as a young girl, Magda showed interest and aptitude in designing and sewing clothes. In the mid-1950s, Magda, her husband Sigi, and their daughter Ellie moved to Richmond, Virginia. During her years there, she worked in the alterations department of an upscale women’s clothing store, where she built an appreciative and loyal following as head fitter. We can only imagine what additional opportunities would have been open to her had not war and the Holocaust intervened to cut short her youth and her education.

She also had the time and opportunity to design some of her own clothing as well as clothing for her daughter, including Ellie’s wedding dress. Later, Magda took great delight in making dresses for our two daughters, Gallit and Talya. In all of this, Magda never worked from a pattern she purchased; she always made her own.

We dedicate this volume to Magda Morsel. In doing so, we also acknowledge other Jewish women and men who never had the chance to fulfill their talents or their dreams.

The chapters in this volume provide a richly textured picture of many aspects of the relationship between Jews and fashion from biblical times to the contemporary world. Through their choices—what to wear, how to wear it, when to wear it, how to make it, how to sell it, and where to buy it—Jews as individuals and as a group have had wide influence within their own communities and frequently in the larger world they inhabited.

We also recognize that frequently Jews were not given any choice as to what they would wear, how they would wear it, or where they would buy it. In these situations, clothing was one of the means by which Jews were forced into inferior positions. Even when Jews had choices, they were often restricted by those in positions of power.

Thus it is that fashion, which might appear to some as a narrow or even peripheral topic, elicits a series of multidimensional and multidisciplined
studies that appreciably enhance our understanding of Jewish history. There are few topics more closely related to daily life and living than the making, procuring, and wearing of clothes.

Today we often speak of a particular person or a particular event as making a fashion statement. But, as should be clear, people use fashion, or more broadly clothes, to make all sorts of statements all the time. As I summarize the contents of this collection, arranged in essentially chronological order, I will to the full extent possible use primary documentation to illuminate the arguments made in each chapter.

Christine Palmer is the author of the first chapter, “Unshod on Holy Ground: Ancient Israel’s ‘Disinherited’ Priesthood.” Within the Hebrew Bible, she observes, the detailed descriptions of priestly vestments make no mention of footwear. The classic rabbinic midrash to the book of Exodus, *Exodus Rabbah*, notes the absence and explains it in this way: “Wherever the Shechinah [the divine presence] appears one must not go about with shoes on; and so we find in the case of Joshua; Put off thy shoe (Josh. 5:15). Hence the priests ministered in the Temple barefooted.” Palmer’s explanation, based on a judicious reading of vast numbers of passages from biblical and extra-biblical sources, takes us in another direction, which allows readers to appreciate how bare feet give expression to the subservient role and status of the priest.

The second chapter in this collection that relates to the ancient world is Steven Fine’s “How Do You Know a Jew When You See One? Reflections on Jewish Costume in the Roman World.” After carefully sifting through the sources, Fine concludes that in antiquity Jews did not dress distinctly. This conclusion, which will likely surprise some readers, is based on a careful reading of well-known sources such as Philo, Josephus, and rabbinic literature. It is also buttressed by a lesser-known funerary inscription in “Greco-Latin” script that reads: “In Memorial of Anastasius and Decusanis and Benjamin, their son.” Through these words and the addition of some Jewish symbols, a non-Jewish artifact, complete with images of the deceased, was transformed into a Jewish one.

In the next chapter, Flora Cassen quotes from the sixteenth century Italian poet Battista Guarini: “Why does the Jew wear the letter O / Condemned to eternal torment, the Hebrew bears it as a sign of his grief / Or perhaps this vowel is used as a Zero, indicating his nonentity among men / Or since the Jews get rich through usury, it indicates how they get much out of noting.” Throughout her study, “From Iconic O to Yellow Hat: Anti-Jewish Distinctive Signs in Renaissance Italy,” Cassen discusses the many nuanced meanings of the O and other markers of their religion that Jews were forced to wear.
In the chapter that follows, Asher Salah also deals with Italy, but in a slightly different period and from a distinctly different perspective. His chapter is titled “How Should a Rabbi Be Dressed? The Question of Rabbinical Attire in Italy from Renaissance to Emancipation (Sixteenth–Nineteenth Centuries).” In appreciably deepening our understanding of these developments, Salah cites, among other contemporary documents, this caption accompanying an engraving of the interior of an early eighteenth-century synagogue: “They [that is, the adult males] put the ritual shawl, with eight strings for each corner, over the shoulders, as a towel, but the rabbis keep it over the head in order to distinguish themselves.”

With “The Clerks’ Work: Jews, Clerical Work, and the Birth of the American Garment Industry,” Adam D. Mendelsohn offers the first chapter in this collection that deals with the United States. Although such positions lacked the adventure and even romance of peddling, work as a clerk served as a rite of passage into America and the American economy for many young Jewish males in the nineteenth century. Spurred on by Mendelsohn’s observations, I did a bit of research myself, finding this snippet in The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History: “The Jews who settled in Cleveland were primarily shopkeepers and peddlers, although a few were skilled craftsmen. Peddling was a common avenue for entrance into a more stable commercial pursuit. By the 1870s the community had grown and businesses expanded: young or newly arrived Jews no longer peddled goods, but received their business training as clerks or bookkeepers in the firms of relatives or landsmen.”

Lisa Silverman takes readers back to Europe with her chapter, “Ella Zirner-Zwieback, Madame d’Ora, and Vienna’s New Woman.” In the mid-1920s, Zwieback owned what was arguably the most prominent and prestigious department store in Vienna. Madame d’Ora (the pseudonym of Dora Kallmus) was a leading fashion photographer who also made her name through portraits of political and cultural figures of the day. She produced many photographs as ads for Zirner-Zwieback’s store, and on occasion she took pictures of the department store owner herself. Silverman evokes one such picture with these words: “[In one portrait] Zirner-Zwieback uses her fur coat to tease the viewer by offering only a partial glimpse of the celebrity they wish to see. But the image of a temptress wrapped in black fur also specifically evokes turn-of-the-century paintings that play upon the notion of the Jewish woman as femme fatale. . . . The portrait also playfully utilizes the stereotype of the belle juive [beautiful Jewess] that figures woman’s ‘Otherness’ as the basis for her power.”

The next two chapters take readers to Germany in the 1920s and the early 30s. The first, by Nils Roemer, is titled “Photographers, Jews, and the
Fashioning of Women in the Weimar Republic.” As he points out, Jewish female artists were pioneers in the development of fashion photography during the period. Here is Roemer’s description of a characteristic photograph, “Pétrole Hahn,” produced by Grete Stern and Ellen Auerbach: “[This] advertisement shows a young blond-haired and dark-eyed female mannequin, wearing an old-fashioned nightgown and holding up the product. A closer looks reveals that the hand belongs to a real woman, thereby fusing the doll-like mannequin with a living woman. The creativeness and artificiality of beauty are being investigated while the advertisement promotes it.”

Kerry Wallach’s contribution, “Weimar Jewish Chic: Jewish Women and Fashion in 1920s Germany,” begins with this observation by a German Jewish satirist in 1927: “Judaism has literally come into fashion: everyone’s wearing it again!” Although obviously phrased as an overstatement, this remark broadly conforms to Wallach’s assessment that Jewish women played a significant role in creating and popularizing mainstream fashion trends in Weimar Germany. As another Jewish commentator of the time observed: “[The Jewish woman of today] leads fashion trends; serves as a strict judge of taste; and she functions as a critical barometer for the up and coming.”

Returning readers to the United States, Ted Merwin joins together two topics of perennial interest—clothing and comedy—in his chapter, “Unbuttoned: Clothing as a Theme in American Jewish Comedy.” His joke-rich account spans the twentieth century and, with Curb Your Enthusiasm, spills over into the twenty-first. Among the notable quotes, Merwin includes this parody by comedian Allan Sherman, “The Ballad of Harry Lewis” (sung to the tune of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic”): “Glory, glory, Harry Lewis / Glory, glory, Harry Lewis / Glory, glory, Harry Lewis / Glory, glory, Harry Lewis / His cloth goes shining on! / I’ll sing to you a story of a great man of the cloth / His name was Harry Lewis and he worked for Irving Roth / He died while cutting velvet on a hot July the fourth / His cloth goes marching on.”

Basing herself on a series of one-on-one interviews, Rachel Gordan prepared the next chapter, “‘What a Strange Power There Is in Clothing’: Women’s Tallitot.” The women Gordan interviewed, aged fifteen to mid-seventies, were from all over the United States and from many different backgrounds. One woman recalls that, when she was a girl, her rabbi would bring a shofar into the classroom, but exclaim: “I’d rather the girls not touch this.” In her own words, such occurrences “chased me away” from Judaism. Another woman associates her wearing a tallit with attendance at an egalitarian minyan at Harvard’s Hillel. This turned out to be an ideal environment for her. She says, “I really always wanted it. When I found it, I embraced it fully.”
The final chapter in this collection, by Eric K. Silverman, is titled “Aboriginal Yarmulkes, Ambivalent Attire, and Ironies of Contemporary Jewish Identity.” A wide-ranging survey from all corners of the world and from all levels of Jewish observance, this chapter highlights the diverse ways in which today’s Jews clothe themselves, with references and examples going all the way back to the biblical period. Within the American context, the tension between distinctive dress and the desire to look like everyone else can be seen as early as Mary Anton’s *The Promised Land*, from 1912: [We went] to a wonderful country called ‘uptown,’ where, in a dazzlingly beautiful palace called a ‘department store,’ we exchanged our hateful homemade European costumes, which pointed us out as ‘greenhorns’ to the children on the street, for real American machine-made garments.

Within the Hebrew Bible, the first reference to clothing—or the lack thereof—is in Genesis 3:7: “Then the eyes of both of them [Adam and Eve] were opened and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths.” The book of Exodus (here 29:5) speaks of special clothing for Aaron and his sons: “Then take the vestments, and clothe Aaron with the tunic, the robe of the ephod, the ephod, and the breastpiece, and gird him with the decorated band of the ephod.”

Elsewhere, a number of the prophets speak of clothing in both positive and negative contexts, for example, in Isaiah 58:7: “When you see the naked, to clothe him, And not to ignore your own kin.” In Haggai 1:6: “You have sowed much and brought in little; you eat without being satisfied; you drink without getting your fill; you clothe yourselves, but no one gets warm; and he who earns anything earns it for a leaky purse.”

The writers of the Hebrew Bible, we can well imagine, could not have anticipated the varied developments in clothing and fashion that characterized Jewish communities in post-biblical periods. But they would surely have been fascinated, as have we, by the many ways in which Jews have fashioned themselves and been fashioned by others.

Leonard J. Greenspoon