



What We Wear & Who We Are

Every day, when we wake up, one of the first things we do is change into our clothes for the day (even if, during the pandemic, those clothes are sweatpants and t-shirts). We rarely think about it, but the clothes we wear do more than just keep us modest and warm; they give us a sense of security and dignity.

The texts in this activity will help us examine our relationship with what we wear, why we might be grateful for it, and how we can channel that gratitude to help “clothe the naked.”

We are grateful to our partner Areyvut for preparing this activity.



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An old Jewish folktale begins on a cold and miserable night, with snow and sleet blowing through the deserted streets of a village. The rabbi approached the village's wealthiest man to seek help for the poor people suffering from the cold winter. The wealthy man invited the rabbi inside, honoring him with tea while talking business beside the crackling fire. When the rabbi started talking about the plight of the poor people in the winter, the wealthy man brushed him off, telling him that poor people liked to complain. The wealthy man escorted the rabbi to the door, returning to his warm, comfortable room, and settled down in his favorite chair near the fireplace.

The following cold and miserable night, the rabbi returned. Again, the wealthy man invited the rabbi into his warm house, but this time, the rabbi refused.

"No," he said, "I won't be long." And then the rabbi asked about the wealthy man's health and the health of his family. The rabbi continued on and on, asking him about his business, and spoke about the affairs of the community for a long time. The wealthy man could not dismiss the rabbi out of respect for him, but the biting wind was blowing fiercely and the wealthy man was getting increasingly uncomfortable since he had answered the door in his slippers and yarmulke, dressed in a thin shirt and his house pants.

The rabbi, donning a warm coat with a fur lining, ears covered, and wearing heavy winter gloves, talked on and on. He refused to enter the wealthy man's house and kept telling the wealthy man that he only had one more thing to say and then he'd be on his way. The wealthy man's toes grew stiff with the icy cold wind.

Suddenly the wealthy man cried, "Oh, rabbi! Those poor people with no warm clothes. . . I never imagined it could be like this. This is terrible. It is horrible. I never knew, honestly! Something must be done!" He went into the house and returned with a purse full of gold coins. The wealthy man changed his ways that night, and he became a regular contributor to the funds collected by the rabbi for the poor.

- How did the circumstances of this exchange alter the wealthy man's opinion?
- When it comes to staying warm in winter, what are you grateful for?
- How might we inspire a change in our culture's attitude toward helping those with unmet needs?



2

A Jewish educator once escorted a group of students to help out at a soup kitchen that also distributed clothes to their guests. As they traveled home, one of the students appeared very perplexed. The student shared that they'd gifted one of the soup kitchen's guests a sweater, but that the guest had declined to accept it because they didn't like it. "He had nothing," the student said. "Why would he refuse the sweater?"

- Why was the student confused?
- What empowered the guest to refuse a much-needed contribution?
- When it comes to choosing what you wear, what makes you grateful?
- What does it look like to balance the directive to "clothe the naked" with treating everyone with respect and worthiness?



3

The Talmud teaches us: If a man who is in debt for a thousand *maneh* wears a robe worth a hundred *maneh*, he may be stripped of it. But he must still be provided with a robe that fits his standing, for, as we have been taught in the name of R' Ishmael and R' Akiva: Everyone in Israel deserves such a robe.

(Talmud, Shabbat 128a)

- How does your clothing relate to your sense of dignity?
- What is your initial impression when you see people on the street wearing dirty, torn clothes?
- Do you agree with the statement in Shabbat 128a? Why or why not?



Take Action

Now that we have a sense of all of the different dimensions of “clothing the naked,” we can show gratitude for our own clothing by taking action:

1. **Work with your local community aid organization (a shelter, an outreach facility, etc.) to start a new hat, scarf, and glove drive in the fall season so that people have the clothes they need to keep them warm in winter.**
2. **Start a yarn collection. Through social media, invite and virtually teach others to crochet or knit hats and scarves to donate.**
3. **Ask for gift cards to a local store where warm clothes can be bought. Donate the gift cards and allow the recipients to choose their own warm clothes.**



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