

A Cultural History of Jewish Dress.* Eric Silverman. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 259 pp.

Reviewed by Leonard Greenspoon

Eric Silverman, an anthropologist based at Boston's Wheelock College, has produced what is, in many ways, a splendid study of the cultural significance of "Jewish dress" throughout history, from the biblical period to contemporary times. For the topics he covers, Silverman's volume is prodigiously well researched, engagingly paced, clearly and accessibly written, and nicely illustrated.

For the purposes of this review, it is useful to divide Silverman's nine chapters into three groups: the first four chapters cover, in roughly chronological order, Jewish communities from the time of the Hebrew Bible to the early 20th century. The next three chapters (five to seven) constitute a substantial analysis of traditions of dress within Hasidic Judaism, itself the most traditional of Jewish constituencies. The last two chapters comprise the final section, a lively and copiously illustrated foray into selected elements of Jewish popular culture as exhibited in yarmulkes (also known as *kippahs*), t-shirts, and, yes, underwear.

Silverman's prose is typically as richly textured as many of the garments he describes. Thus, any summary of it risks leaving out as much as or more than it includes. Nonetheless, a brief account of some of Silverman's conclusions is not out of place.

Chapter one ("[Un]dressing the Israelites") surveys the vast number of clothing edicts—admonitions as well as prohibitions—found in the Hebrew Bible. The Israelites as a people were thereby set apart from others; even items shared with others had unique symbolism for God's people. The second chapter ("The Fashion of the Rabbis") speaks of the meticulous way in which the classical rabbis determined in a precise manner what biblically mandated religious ware such as the *tallit* (prayer shawl) and *tzitzit* (fringes) entailed. Ironically, outside of these few ritual items, Jews dressed essentially like everyone else of the period.

The title of chapter three ("Bitter Bonnets and Badges") speaks to the many restrictions in clothing Jews faced, in both Christian Europe and Muslim lands, during their prolonged Middle Ages. The multitude of regulations, not always strictly applied, from the outside was sometimes matched by Jewish communal concerns that wealthy Jews not make ostentatious parade of their bejeweled finery. The freedom, in clothes as in so many other aspects of civic and personal life, enjoyed by Western European Jews in the 18th and 19th centuries is indicated by the title of the next chapter ("Dressing for Enlightened Citizenship"). A far wider choice in hats was among the benefits enjoyed by newly emancipated Jewish men, as they (along with their wives), tried out—enthusiastically or hesitantly—whatever innovations their host society offered.

Chapters five and six ("Fashionably Modest or? Modestly Unfashionable?" and "Black Hats and Unsuitable Suits" feature discussion, often in minute detail, of female (chapter five) and male

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(chapter six) garb among Hasidic Jews. This analysis highlights the significance for insiders of slight variations—in everything from skirt length to hat adornment—that outsiders would hardly notice. The first half of chapter seven (“Straps, Fringes, Snails, and Shawls”) continues to highlight traditional ritual clothing, while its second part illustrates a distinctly un-traditional practice, women’s *tefillin*.

The last two chapters (“I ♥ Yarmulke Day” and “Jewtilicious”) demonstrate how mostly younger Jews expropriate items of traditional (yarmulkes) or popular (t-shirts) culture to make in-your-face statements about Judaism and being Jewish. Often funny, sometimes obscene, occasionally almost insane, these articles of clothing leave no doubt that their creators and wearers are proud, if not always traditional, Jews.

With such a wide range of culturally significant clothing on display in this volume (helpfully accompanied by a well curated glossary and other aids), what’s not to like? Two features of this otherwise successful study stand out.

First, Silverman’s conclusions (the closing feature of each chapter as well as of the book as a whole) do not actually conclude—that is, sum up—the preceding material. Although this may seem to be a minor quibble, and in fact probably is, readers typically expect “conclusions” to give them a thumbnail summary that they can use to decide whether to read more fully or to make sure they have successfully identified an author’s main points.

Of greater substance is Silverman’s protracted emphasis on Hasidic habits. There are perhaps 300 thousand Hasidic Jews among possibly as many as 15 million Jews worldwide. Their influence, in clothing as well as in many other areas of life, is far larger than that. And they certainly constitute a mother lode of illustrative data for the type of cultural analysis Silverman has undertaken.

But there is a price, or rather two prices, to be paid for all of the attention Hasidic Jews have garnered here. First, even a careful reader may come away with the conclusion that Hasidic styles, and their extensive theological underpinnings, are representative of Jews as a whole—either in reality or in an aspirational sense. Along with this comes the impression that there’s really nothing, or at least not much, of cultural interest in the ways the other 14 and a half million Jews of today dress. It is indeed true that for many of these Jews, religion (traditional or otherwise) is a negligible factor in what they wear or do not wear. But this is certainly not always the case. Silverman hints at some of these instances, but does not give them the thoroughgoing analysis they deserve.

On balance, Silverman’s work is a joy to read and to look at. It is also a model of cultural analysis and represents in many of its conclusions an authoritative voice. If readers, or at least some of them, are left asking for more, this can be judged a defect or more positively viewed as a spur for further research and reflection. In warmly recommending Silverman’s work, this reviewer chooses the second, positive assessment.

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