



## Of Angels & Death: Women Wearing Kittels Rabba Sara Hurwitz

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I don't like to stick out. I don't enjoy a lot of eyes on me. After I step down from giving a sermon, I want to retreat. I certainly don't want to draw unnecessary attention to myself. And so it makes no sense that I would even consider wearing a kittel, a white outer garment usually worn by Ashkenazi men on Yom Kippur. In my synagogue, women often have the tradition to wear white. But none, as far as I know, wear a kittel. And yet, I feel drawn to the idea of wearing one for the very reason that it is a ritual garment that draws attention away from

the individual, and transforms Yom Kippur into a communal experience, where we are all dressed alike. It's the image that we sing out in the seminal prayer, *Unetaneh tokef*:

וְכָל בְּאֵי עוֹלָם יַעֲבִירוּ לְפָנֶיךָ כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן  
all creatures shall parade before you as a flock of sheep.

All of us, dressed alike, indistinct from one another, just like a flock of sheep, will pass under God's staff, our heads bent in prayer.

What is the origin of the minhag for men to wear a kittel? The Rema (*Orach Hayyim 610*) does not connect the experience to sheep, but to angels and to death:

יש שכתבו שנהגו ללבוש בגדים לבנים ונקיים ביוה"כ דוגמת מלאכי השרת וכן נוהגין ללבוש הקיטל שהוא לבן ונקי גם הוא בגד מתים ועי"ז לב האדם נכנע ונשבר

There are authorities who write that it is the practice to wear clean white garments on Yom Kippur, to resemble the ministering angels. It is in fact the practice to wear the kittel, which is white and clean and also serves as a garment for the dead. Through its use, a person's heart becomes submissive and broken.

First, the Rema associates wearing white clothing with angels, who also wear white. When we wear a kittel we elevate our status to that of angels, bringing ourselves one rung closer to God. And then, the Rema explains that the experience of wearing a kittel stirs our minds to consider our end of life, as some people choose to be buried in a kittel. Thinking about death propels us to think about our lives. Being angelic and focusing on the inevitability of death turns our focus away from worldly needs and towards our spiritual striving.

### Like Angels

Yom Kippur is a day when we leave behind our physical selves, focusing all our energy on prayer. Refraining from food, drink, and bodily comforts such as wearing leather, applying oil, and having sex, makes us more like angels. Angels, by definition, are not corporeal, and the prohibitions are meant to help us rise above our bodily needs, so that we can focus on returning to our pure essence, to become angelic. The Maharal of Prague paints this picture:

All of the mitzvot that God commanded us on [Yom Kippur] are designed to remove, as much as possible, a person's relationship to physicality, until he is completely like an angel (Drashot Maharal for Shabbat Shuva).

Therefore, we too must stand before God in simple white clothes.

And so, shouldn't women have this opportunity to tap into their angelic selves as they pray?

The Mishna Berurah (610:16), commenting on the Rema quoted above, clarifies that although women do wear white, they do not have the minhag to wear a kittel:

וְנוֹהֲגִין שֶׁגַם הַנְּשִׁים לּוֹבְשִׁים בְּגָדִים לְבָנִים וְנִקְיִים לְכַבּוֹד הַיּוֹם אֲבָל לֹא יִקְשְׁטוּ עֲצֻמָּן בְּתַכְשִׁיטִין  
שֶׁמִּתְקַשְׁטִין בָּהֶם בְּשַׁבָּת וְיוֹ"ט מִפְּנֵי אֵימַת יוֹם הַדִּין וְאִין נוֹהֲגוֹת לְלַבּוֹשׁ קִיטָל

It is the practice for the women as well to wear clean white garments to honor the day. However, they should not adorn themselves with the ornaments with which they adorn themselves on Shabbos and Yom Tov because it is necessary to be in awe of the day of judgement. It is not the practice for women to wear the kittel.

The Magen Avraham goes one step further, saying that women don't even have to wear white garments because they can never be like angels:

דוּגְמַת מְלֹאכִי - וּלִפ"ז אֵין הַנְּשִׁים לּוֹבְשִׁין לְבָנִים דְּאֵין יְכוּלִים לְהִיּוֹת כְּמֵלֵאכִים

To be like angels - and therefore, women don't wear white, as they are not able to be like angels.

Angels, according to this interpretation, are gendered, and women are not like angels. And yet, women and men stand together in prayer, with our feet glued together -- like angels -- during the *kedusha* prayer. What's more, the Torah contains references to women as angels, such as in the Book of Zecharia (5:9), where two "women came soaring with the wind in their wings."

וְהָיָה שְׁתֵּי נָשִׁים יּוֹצְאוֹת וְרוּחַ בְּכַנְפֵיהֶם, וְלָהֵנָּה כְּנָפִים, כְּכַנְפֵי הַחֲסִידָה.

The reality is that many women do wear white clothing on Yom Kippur, and I believe that wearing a kittel transforms regular white clothing into angelic ritual garments, a prayer uniform of sorts, where a community harmoniously joins together to pray with one heart and soul. Angels raise their voices together, unified in their goal to serve God, homogeneous, with all distinctions erased. So too, when we don a kittel, we are left humbled in our whites -- stripped away of any distractions of the external world. The kittel allows us to retreat into ourselves, while at the same time join as one with our fellow daveners.

### A Reminder of Death

The Rema goes on to say that wearing a kittel breaks our hearts, as it reminds us of "a garment for the dead." Although the deceased are wrapped in "*tachrichim*," a shroud made of pure linen, some have the custom to also be buried in their tallis and kittel. And so, on a day when we reflect on our lives, and the way we hope to live, we also confront death. The kittel is meant to remind us of the fragility of our lives, and both men and women must confront this inevitability. It is for this reason that the Magen Avraham, as well as the Be'er Hetev (who quotes the Magen Avraham), says that although women do not have to wear white clothing, they are permitted to wear a kittel "so that their hearts will be broken."

וּמ"מ הַקִּיטָל יְכוּלִים לְלַבּוֹשׁ שִׁכְנַע לִבָּם



## Reality on the Ground

There is halakhic precedent for women to wear a kittel. And the reasons that men wear a kittel are relevant to women as well. Shouldn't we strive towards standing like angels before God? And shouldn't we, too, be reminded of the unpredictability and fragility of life? Perhaps putting on a kittel is not necessary to achieve these goals, but it seems that for those who would like to adopt this minhag, it has the potential to transform our prayer experience. Indeed, women who do wear a kittel have told me that it really does help elevate their tefilah. When I asked women on Facebook to share their experience with wearing a kittel, the responses included the following:

"I like the idea of wearing white as we seek to repent and get our sins out, but, unlike all women I know in Israel, I don't actually have any white dresses. The kittel solves that problem."

"It takes the focus off clothing for both me and others, it feels angelic."

"I love wearing a kittel on the High Holy Days... It eliminates all focus on clothing and creates a special elevated aura, as it should be."

"I see it a little as a uniform for Yom Kippur prayer and it makes everybody look like angels."

At the same time that I was researching the halakhic permissibility of wearing a kittel, I was also examining my soul, deciding whether I should wear one. As part of my research, I decided that I needed to buy one, try it on, see how it felt. I walked into our local Judaica store, and asked the proprietor if I could see his kittels. "What size?" he asked. I hesitated, thinking that I could pretend that I am purchasing it for someone else, one of my children, perhaps. Somewhat embarrassed, I answered, "I am not sure. Can I see a few?" "Is it for you?" he asked. Not judgmentally or critically, but with kindness, as if women often walked into his store to purchase a kittel for themselves. He made it feel so normal. Later, when I tried the kittel on, the lace collar and lining felt angelic, pure, and feminine.

So, last year I did wear a kittel. At first, as the Kol Nidre service began, I felt self-conscious. Unsure. I looked around and noticed that people were doing exactly as they should -- they were focused on the words. Of the auspiciousness of the day ahead. And within minutes, the kittel was no longer my focus either. I poured my heart and soul into my tefilot for the year ahead, amongst them, the hope to pray as one with my kehila, and not feel separate. And this year I hope that many more women will join me, fulfilling the Magen Avraham's suggestion that wearing a kittel will help "break your heart" open to the possibility that our tefilot and connection to God may be just a bit deeper with the help of a white angelic kittel.

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