

## **Dress for Success or Re-Assess the Dress?**

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An invitation arrives in the mail. You open it with anticipation. The paper is crisp, the words elegantly written, perhaps there are sparkles or designs to enhance the appearance. You can tell this is an announcement of something special.

And then you see the words at the bottom of the page that answer the first question that comes to mind: What should I wear? Words like “Black Tie,” “Smart Casual,” “Dressy Chic” attempt to help us to know how to appropriately honor the occasion. They try to guide us in understanding the expectations of the place. Occasion and place mean something as we carefully search our closets in order to arrive at the event ready to honor both.

But what if that special event is a Bar or Bat Mitzvah? What if it is a Jewish holiday? What if it is a Shabbat morning service in shul? How do occasion and place speak to us sartorially and guide our choices so that we and our children understand that how we dress reflects how we learn to respect and honor these events as well?

One of the ways in which children learn the relative significance of occasion and place is by knowing that there are certain things that they wear and don't wear. Occasion and place merit different kinds of attire. Think, for example, about the sports field. There is a designated uniform which defines both the occasion and the place. Proper team apparel induces pride in each participant and confidence that he or she is properly “suited up” for the mission ahead. How can this also work in the synagogue? In the course of their Jewish education, children learn that the synagogue is a special and important place. They learn that the Torah is the way in which God speaks to us through the many beautiful stories, laws, and teachings, and that prayer is the way we speak to God using the siddur and the prayers of our hearts. People are given honors that invite them to be publically close to the Torah or to participate in a milestone ceremony in which God's presence is surely felt.

So how does one dress for an occasion at which God is present for us and for the community? How do we come to shul “suited up” for that place? How do we help our children, both by guiding their selection, and by example, to choose appropriate clothing for the synagogue?

It is not necessary to go on a shopping spree to accomplish this. With a few simple guidelines, this is easy to achieve, and it is never too early to start. These lessons, learned early, establish a lifelong pattern. First, help your child to select clothing that they feel is “special.” It need not be fancy but in their minds it should be something “different” than they would wear on the playground or to a regular day at school. **For boys, a buttoned shirt instead of a T-shirt, and pants instead of sweats or jeans make the point; for a teen, a tie and a suit jacket are appropriate choices.** Second, consider the coverage the clothing provides. We all recognize that this can be more challenging for girls but the message is

nonetheless important. Modest clothing that shows respect for one's body and doesn't just "show" one's body is appropriate. For a simcha celebrant, a beautiful outfit that directs the wearer's and the community's attention to the significance of the occasion is not only admired by all, but shows maturity and an understanding of the occasion and place. Service attendees and guests who dress similarly also honor the occasion and place. **In keeping with this message, strapless, sleeveless, and low-cut tops for women and girls are better worn at non-religious events, outside of a synagogue.**

Each opportunity we take to teach our children how to participate in synagogue life is an opportunity for them to have a positive, successful experience in our synagogue and, by extension, in any synagogue they visit. Let's help our kids "dress for success."