

FROM YIDDISHKEIT TO COOLKEIT

Yitzchok Mouilly

Generally, I am easy to pick out in a crowd. Dark suit, white shirt, beard, and bright pink yarmulke. It is something I picked up at the bat mitzvah of one of my Hebrew school students about a year ago. I thought it was cool. The Hebrew school parents love it, the students see me as fun and somewhat more relevant, and it brings smiles to many in a variety of situations. So as I began thinking about this column I pondered the relationship I have with my pink yarmulke – what makes me relate to this pink yarmulke. It is cool, no doubt about it.

The question I ask myself, though, is this: Is cool what I'm striving for, the end result, or is it a potential vehicle to attain a greater goal? And then I began thinking about the Jewish condition and its relationship with doses of cool. From Heeb to Jewlicious, cool is definitely the status symbol of the times, and for Jews no less so.

But what does the source of the Jewish condition have to say about it? What does Torah, our guidebook for life, given to us by God, say about cool? Does this Torah embrace cool? Does it have to embrace cool to be more cool?


Rarely is any one idea cool for any meaningful period of time. And some things don't evolve with the passing waves of cool. Torah remains constant in a storm of social evolution. So maybe it's not Torah that is or is not, was or will be, cool. Rather, it's humanity, Jews, who need to find cool within Torah in order to have it resonate with our lives. For Torah is the constant in the perpetual flow of our existence.

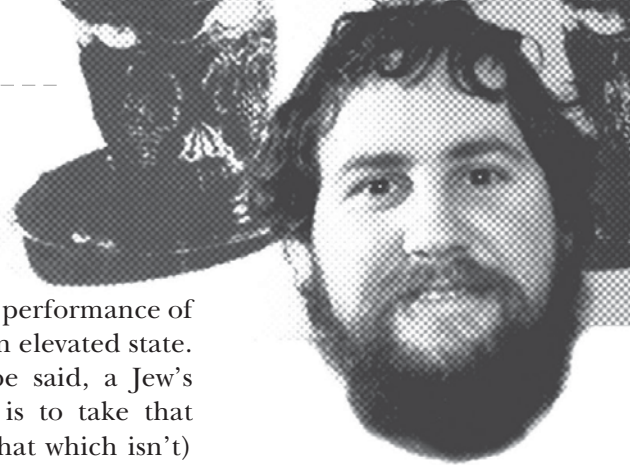
Chassidic thought reveals insight into the grand plan of our purpose here on the earth and thus shines some light on the subject of our coolness. God created the vast world in six days and then lastly placed man in the world for him to "toil the land." To toil and use the world as a vehicle to attain a higher level of consciousness. When one takes flour and water and kneads together matzah, the mixture is not just food; it is much more than that.

This matzah is used in the performance of a mitzvah, bringing it to an elevated state. As the Lubavitcher Rebbe said, a Jew's function in serving God is to take that which is cool (and even that which isn't) and elevate it to a higher level of reality. Everything, and all our actions, can be used as vehicles in the service of God. How much more so something that operates in the coveted arena of cool! When one takes pink fabric and fashions it into a yarmulke, it transcends the mundane into something both cool and authentically Jewish. This – coupling rituals and practices with one's expression of the Torah – makes Torah forever relevant and cool.

Art, especially contemporary art, has reached the apex of cool (one need only look at the long lines at the recent New York Armory Show to be persuaded). Art, as a discovery of the inner self, delves beyond the surface of a subject and engages the viewer at a deeper level; it challenges the viewer to wonder, to be awestruck, to imagine on a higher plane, on a deeper level of consciousness.

Contemporary Jewish art continues to chug down that road. It speaks to Jews who appreciate cool and its relevance to the world. As a rabbi and artist, I attempt to bring together these two worlds. Through my work I attempt to engage and create a dialogue – to blend the energy and vitality of our heritage with personal expression, to forge an alliance and make relevant the timeless Torah messages by creating deeper connections to God.

"Cool" enables people to take a fresh look at age-old ideas that may be adrift in our culture. It is not only a status symbol that we strive for but also a powerful means to convey our message, no matter what the message may be. And so whether it's a pink yarmulke on our heads or Shabbat candles on Friday at sundown, it is our commitment to these timeless customs that makes us Jews more relevant to ourselves, to humanity, and to our divine purpose in life. Now ain't that cool? 



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