*Fur is back in fashion: what do Jewish law and ethics have to say about it?*

In principle, there is no halachic or ethical objection to the wearing of fur. Rather the contrary: classic Jewish sources embrace the idea that animals were created to be of use to humans, and that they somehow achieve their potential by contributing to our happiness and comfort. At the same time, there is a strong notion of *kvod habrios* (respect for all creations) that gives rise to specific halachic obligations to avoid *tzaar baalei chaim* (cruelty to animals).

As a matter of strict halachah, I have in general no obligation to investigate the source of animal products that are sold to me from a perspective of ensuring that the animals have been treated correctly (particularly because in the case of slaughtered meat the laws of *shechitah* incorporate protection for animal welfare to a high degree).

But there is a difference between having a duty to inquire into the origin of animal products and the treatment of the animals, and deliberately shutting ones eyes to animal cruelty that one either does know about or would naturally suspect if one turned ones mind to the question. In the case of hunted fur, there is no particular reason to suspect cruelty; it is true that traps are sometimes used as well as straight shooting, but there is naturally a premium on shot fur as the pelt is less likely to be damaged, and so as a general rule one may be able to assume that high-quality hunted fur products are produced relatively humanely.

The resurgence of the fashion for fur, however, and the recent demand for it as a low-cost fashion product, has concentrated the industry on farmed rather than hunted fur. And the economics of fur farming are obviously based on tightening margins rather than setting standards for animal welfare. A number of fur-producing animals are presently kept (both in European and non-European settings) in conditions that would definitely offend against Jewish principles of *tzaar baalei chaim*; and for farmed animals gassing is still a painful and common method of slaughter so as to avoid damaging the pelt. Indeed, when one considers the price of certain fur products in clothing stores today and asks oneself how they could be produced for the price, a reasonably sensitive shopper is likely to suspect that the animals are likely to be maintained and killed in unpleasant conditions.

While this certainly does not translate into a clear halachic prohibition against buying fur without investigating the conditions in which the animals producing it are kept, those whose Jewish life goes beyond avoiding technical prohibitions and includes embracing and applying underlying principles of Jewish ethics are likely to feel a responsibility to think about the processes by which fur (and other animal products) are put on the market. This might have been asking rather a lot of the average consumer a few years ago: today, however, when the general market-place includes a range of sectors committed to animal welfare and other ethical principles, it should not be difficult for a Jewish consumer to find ways of ensuring that fur comes from animals kept in conditions compatible with Jewish principles of animal welfare.

The idea that “they’ll sell it anyway whether I buy it or not” is not, of course, in accordance with Jewish ethical teaching. Avoiding being *machzik yedei ovrei aveirah* (supporting wrong-doers) is a fundamental Jewish principle; and we know that consumers today can quickly and significantly influence market conditions by their buying patterns, particularly if they take the trouble to express the ethical and other matters that affect their choice of produce.

Of particular relevance to the orthodox Jewish community is the fact that the hats which men wear are mostly sourced from naturally produced felt, which is an animal product. Synthetic versions do exist (and are now in common use for Chassidish *shtreimlech* for example) but most common brands are natural felt. Buyers who wish to regard themselves as sensitive to Jewish ethical principles of cruelty to animals are therefore likely to wish to inquire of makers and sellers where they source their materials or products, and what they are able to tell the consumer about the conditions in which any farmed rabbits or other felt-producing animals are kept.

Fake fur is of course sold extensively today. There was at one time a sentiment against it, when there was a general prejudice against fur clothes generally, based partly on animal welfare considerations. Today, with fur returning to fashion generally, the availability of fake fur is such that most people are likely to consider it neither insensitive in itself nor to be avoided for other ethical reasons. (And the wide availability of fake fur means that most consumers will probably not worry that people might think they are wearing real fur, despite the realism of some of the better synthetic brands.)

Finally, it should be noted that although vegetarianism and veganism have not traditionally been mainstream within the orthodox Jewish communities, there have always been those whose sensitivity to the feelings of animals as an aspect of their *kvod habrios* has led them to avoid the use of animal products entirely or to a certain extent. They are likely to regard fur as an unnecessary fashion accessory rarely produced without any cruelty to animals, and therefore best avoided; and their view is entitled to respect from an ethical perspective, whether or not one shares it.