

Adonai/Adidas T-Shirt

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Adonai Adidas T-Shirt

Upon first glance, this snug, light-grey vintage t-shirt features the ubiquitous logo of the German multinational athletic wear manufacturer Adidas. A second look, however, reveals that the word “Adidas” has actually been replaced with the word “Adonai” (Hebrew for “my lord”), one of the titles by which Jews address God. I purchased this shirt online via an eBay auction as an addition to *Shmattes*, an exhibition project I founded featuring t-shirts that address the issue of cultural Jewish identity in contemporary America. The following discussion will place this t-shirt within the postmodern, late capitalist market in which it circulates as a cultural Jewish artifact. When examining this t-shirt, it is first important to note the fit of the item itself. This t-shirt is designed to closely hug the body, so that not only the messaging on the t-shirt but also the body of the wearer will be highly visible. While the gender of the

t-shirt's intended wearer seems unclear, that person's chest and torso will inevitably be emphasized by the item's tightness. The placement of the word "Adonai" in the chest area attracts additional attention to the wearer's body. Popular postwar stereotypes of Jewish women as asexual and Jewish men as impotent and servile make the tight-fitting design of this t-shirt particularly surprising, as those stereotypes would suggest that Jews would not opt to wear such a revealing item.¹ Importantly, these stereotypes also cast Jews as physically feeble and laughably incompetent at sports.² This t-shirt thus troubles preconceptions about the Jewish body by incorporating both sexuality and athleticism with "Adonai," a signifier of Jewishness. With this t-shirt, a Jewish wearer could also be affirming Adonai rather than athletic acumen as the source of social or personal validation. Likewise, the wearer might be parodying an American culture so obsessed with the sculpting and maintenance of the athletic body that this preoccupation verges on worship.

Discussing the t-shirt's wearer introduces the additional consideration of this item's status as a commodity that is produced and consumed as apparel. Aside from a tag that identifies the manufacturer as Platinum T's and notes that the t-shirt was made in the United States, the t-shirt was sold online with no accompanying additional information. Having been sold through eBay, a global e-marketplace that facilitates the obscuring and dislocating of commodities from their original sources, the t-shirt provides no real clues as to its history or its creator's intended meaning. This lack of production information is not, however, problematic from a critical theoretical perspective, which I find to be the most appropriate lens for analyzing this t-shirt. Critical theorists generally discuss cultural production within the context of postmodernity, an era marked by the unprecedented commodification of culture. According to Fredric Jameson, the era of postmodernism is chiefly characterized by "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness" that emphasizes image and surface rather than substance or history.³ In the late capitalist economic order associated with postmodernism, Jameson describes an attendant process of decentering during which the individual subject is constantly bombarded with an endless array of signs to consume. Among critical theorists, the emphasis on postmodern consumption over production extends to artistic work itself. Roland Barthes famously proffered the concept of the "death of the author": the idea that the consumer's multiple interpretations of a text hold more significance than the intended meaning of the text's producer, who is likely unaware of all the cultural forces underlying the creation of the work.⁴ From a critical theoretical perspective, it is fitting that this t-shirt emerged seemingly *ex nihilo*, as the consumers of the t-shirt, rather than the creator, are responsible for interpreting the t-shirt's multiple meanings as a postmodern visual text. In fact, I purchased this t-shirt specifically because it so accurately embodies the commodified, postmodern nature of contemporary American Jewish life. As a project, Shmattes aims to shed light on the phenomenon of the "culturally Jewish" identity in postmodern America. In this context, signifiers become detached from their traditional, straightforward meanings; this process of destabilization is especially evident in this t-shirt, as it is capable of generating many different interpretations depending on the wearer's perspective.

The t-shirt's appropriation of a multinational sportswear corporation's logo into a sacred

Hebrew name for God offers multiple plausible readings. This appropriation could be simply a clever play on words: in Jameson's terms it could be read as a politically and otherwise innocuous postmodern pastiche of the Adidas brand.⁵ A more critical approach might take into account the commodification of this sacred name for the deity and its subsequent selling in the marketplace for profit. Perhaps the visual conflation of the name "Adonai" with an internationally ubiquitous logo presents a reconsideration of God in relation to capital or a commentary on the postmodern iteration of Karl Marx's commodity fetishism in the form of brand worship.⁶ If this t-shirt parodies the worship of commodities, it engages with Adonai's well-known first commandment to the Israelites prohibiting idolatry in the Book of Exodus.⁷ Because this t-shirt is American-made and not actually produced by Adidas, it might be critiquing Adidas from a distance, as a corporation responsible for sweatshop production and exploitation of laborers in the name of profit.⁸ After all, historically many American Jewish individuals and organizations have very publicly advocated for social justice causes, particularly with regards to labor. On the other hand, stereotypes of Jews as avaricious money-grubbers have proliferated since the Middle Ages, and even today Jews are commonly associated with banking and finance. Given the inherent contradictions posed by this t-shirt's design, the conflation of the Jewish God's name with the Adidas logo truly lacks one stable, closed interpretation.

Because this item incorporates a Hebrew name of God not well-known to a broader American public, especially a Christian public, it is possible that many non-Jewish (or even ethnically Jewish) viewers of this t-shirt will fail to recognize the t-shirt's reference. As this t-shirt only communicates with a relatively exclusive and historically stigmatized in-group—engaged Jews and knowledgeable non-Jews whom Erving Goffman would term the "wise"⁹—the t-shirt restricts its audience to those who can understand the word "Adonai." To a highly Jewishly engaged viewer, even the Adidas trefoil could be viewed as a postmodern permutation of a *taga*, or the crown with three flourishes that adorns certain letters of the Hebrew alphabet.¹⁰ The *taga* appropriation acts as an even more obscure reference for a highly knowledgeable Jewish audience, yet still exists within the confines of postmodern, commodified culture.

Because it presents various fluctuating and destabilized meanings, this t-shirt exemplifies the decentered, postmodern context from which it has emerged. Its contradictory messaging provides opportunities for engaging with this object from multiple points of entry. The t-shirt's inherent ambiguity in terms of its interpretation makes it a particularly salient addition to the Shmattes collection.

Citation Guide

1. Anne Grant, "Adonai/Adidas T-Shirt," Object Narrative, in *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion* (2014), doi:10.22332/con.obj.2014.49

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Notes

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2. Alan Klein, "Anti-Semitism and Anti-Somatism: Seeking the Elusive Sporting Jew," *Sociology of Sport* 17, no.3 (2003): 213-228.

3. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 58, <http://www.sok.bz/web/media/video/JamesonPostmodernism.pdf>

4. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. Stephen Heath, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill, 1977).

5. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 64.

6. See Karl Marx, "Part I: Commodities and Money" in *Capital Volume 1*, ed. Frederick Engels, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, 1st English ed. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887; Marx/Engels Internet Archive [marxists.org], 1999), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm>.

7. Exodus 20:3.

8. Garrett Shishido Strain, "Universities Dump Adidas Over Labor Disputes," *The Nation*, October 9, 2012, <http://www.thenation.com/blog/170443/universities-dump-adidas-over-labor-disputes#>.

9. Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 28.

10. *Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Tagin,” accessed July 2, 2014, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14197-tagin>.