

Priestly Clothing — Do Clothes Make the Person?

A D'var Torah on *Parashat T'tzaveh* (Ex. 27:20 – 30:10)

By Ilene Schneider

“V'atah t'tzaveh et-B'nei Yisrael v'yikchu eilekha shemen zayeet zakh kateet...”
“Now you shall command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of pressed olives...”

Summary

Parashat T'tzaveh begins with God choosing Aaron and his four sons — Nadav, Avihu, Elazar and Itamar — to be the Kohanim (priests). One of their tasks is to keep the lamps of the menorah burning continuously in the sanctuary and to use pure olive oil to light the menorah.

While officiating in the Sanctuary, the Kohanim are to wear special garments. Aaron, as Kohen Gadol (High Priest), is to be robed in especially distinctive hand-made vestments. The parashah describes — down to the last intertwined threads — the lavish garments of the Kohanim.

Many symbolic acts confirm the selection of Aaron and his sons as Kohanim. Aaron is presented with a robe and anointed with oil. The other Kohanim are then invested. Many sacrifices are brought to the sanctuary, placed on the hands of the Kohanim, waved before the altar, and finally burned to symbolize the right of the Kohanim to offer sacrifices. These rites are repeated daily for seven days.

Finally, the parashah describes the inner, golden altar used to burn the daily incense offering and the preparation for lighting it by the Kohen Gadol. Although Moses is in charge of setting up the administration and establishing the entire order of service while training his brother and nephews, his name is missing from this Torah portion.

Commentary

What is the significance of the lavish garments worn by the Kohanim? Do clothes make the human being, or is the Torah trying to make a statement about separating the sacred from the secular?

Rabbi A.L. Scheinbaum comments that clothing is a symbol of man's higher nature. By distinguishing between man and animals, clothes give a man special dignity. The Kohanim were, therefore, required to dress in accordance with their exalted position, reflective of man's higher calling.

According to Rabbi Mordechai Katz, among the garments worn by the Kohen Gadol was a coat symbolizing atonement for sins involving derogatory speech

about others. Its color (sky blue) was a reminder that our words rise to Heaven, and we should thus be careful about what we say. The neckline of the coat was tight, yet never ripped, reminding us to tighten our mouths when we are inclined to speak derogatory words about others. The coat also had gold bells that made noise and cloth bells that were silent, hanging from the bottom, indicating that there are times when we should speak and times when we should remain silent. Rabbi Katz says that the bells were to remind the Kohen Gadol of the need for humility in his actions, because they demonstrated a method of asking God's permission before entering the sanctuary.

Different generations of Jews have viewed the need for sacerdotal clothing differently. As servants of God, and thus exalted members of society, priests in the Torah wore distinguishing clothing. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., however, many garments associated with priestly functions passed into oblivion. For centuries thereafter, rabbinical dress was indistinguishable from that of any other Jewish worshiper.

It was only in the 1800s that the Reform movement adopted the Protestant character of rabbinical dress. Perhaps the early reformers had the rabbi don the robe of Protestant clergy to make the rabbi look like other clergy of the era while at the same time separating the rabbi's attire from that of the congregation. Today, the trend is to remove the robes to create a comfort zone between the rabbi and the congregation; the less formal nature of the attire aims at making a connection, rather than diminishing respect for the institution of the rabbinate.

Similarly, today's attire is less formal in general. One need not wear a suit to be a manager, a tuxedo to claim an Academy Award or a robe to be a member of the clergy. Whereas the followers of Moses might have needed to see all of the symbolic clothing, today's sophisticated people of all kinds understand the difference between clothing and the competence or character of the person wearing it.

Some scholars say that Moses was to have been chosen as the Kohen Gadol, as well as the leader of the Jewish nation. Because Moses accepted his leadership role reluctantly, God decided to make Aaron the Kohen Gadol, according to these scholars. Because Moses did not want to diminish Aaron's glory when Aaron became the Kohen Gadol, Moses' name is omitted. Does this demonstrate the humility of a great leader who allows someone else to bask in the glow of his success or the punishment of someone who obeys God reluctantly?

Rabbi Moshe Peretz Gilden comments that God chose Moses to lead the Jewish nation because God wanted a man with impaired speech to do the talking to Pharaoh. In that way, according to Rabbi Gilden, Pharaoh would

understand that God — not a gifted, persuasive orator such as Aaron — was responsible for the events taking place. Because Moses refused, God punished him by making Aaron the High Priest.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein explains that Aaron was chosen to light the menorah in the tabernacle even before he was selected to serve as the Kohen Gadol, because his character was most suitable for this task. Because of his sterling character, not lineage, he was given the honor to serve in his capacities in the Holy Temple. The menorah symbolizes the "light" of knowledge, and Aaron was pure in character, which means that he was the one who could best fill the job of teaching the masses.

According to Rabbi Label Lam, the fact that the Israelites are told to extract a single pure drop from each olive is an endorsement for the importance and the preeminence of Torah study, symbolized by the light of the Temple Menorah. Rabbi Lam adds that the first and the best olives are to be invested to support and promote this holy activity. The mind is the engine of each individual and the driving force of the nation. It needs the purest and most powerful form of fuel to create a lasting flame.