

Torah Portion Tetzaveh Exodus 27:20-30:10

This Shabbat's Torah portion is called Tetzaveh (which means you shall command) from Exodus 27:20-30:10, and continues the description of how the Israelites were commanded to construct the tabernacle, which we started to hear about in last week's portion. We are commanded to create a ner tamid, "a constantly burning light," above the sanctuary ark and to appoint Aaron and his sons as priests to manage the sacrifices offered in the sanctuary. Every Jewish congregation has a ner tamid in their sanctuary that continuously burns. This reminds us of God's everlasting presence.

We also have detailed descriptions of the clothing that Aaron, as High Priest, was to wear:

1. An ephod which is an apron of gold, blue, purple and scarlet yarns, and fine linen, with a belt around the middle and two shoulder straps, each containing a lazuli stone inscribed with six names of the 12 sons of Jacob, representing the 12 tribes of Israel.
2. The breastpiece of judgement, which was a square-shaped container decorated on the front with four rows of precious stones, each framed and mounted in gold, and each bearing a name of the 12 sons of Jacob. This is attached to the ephod with gold chains
3. The Urim and Thummim, which was a small box through which it was believed God spoke; and was worn by the priest inside the breastplate of judgement.
4. A blue robe embroidered with a hem of pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson yarns with bells of gold
5. A headdress that had a gold plate engraved with the words "Holy to the Lord" attached to it and which hung on his forehead.

6. A fringed linen tunic
7. A linen headdress.
8. An embroidered sash.

Wow, it's hard to believe he could even walk with all that gear on him!

There is so much imagery in this portion with a great deal of pomp and circumstance in making Aaron high Priest, with his special clothing and specific instructions for his ordination. Aaron and his sons knew how to “dress the part” of the priesthood. Their clothing was so distinct that they wore them for that reason alone, shedding them immediately as they left the sacred ground. These garments were so renowned that over the centuries they set the standard for acclaimed celebratory events worldwide. Just think of all the kings around the world throughout the ages and their crowns and their dress of Royal robes and precious stones. We still have a representation of these Priestly outfits in our Ark, with the “dress” of the Torah, with the beautiful covers, the breastplates, and the Rimmonim or bells on top.

This evening ended the actual day of Purim, although we will be celebrating it tomorrow evening with our whole congregation. It is a time for us to dress up and also “play the part”. Even King Achashverosh knew the importance of the Jewish priestly garb. We are told in midrash that: “King Achashveirosh made a feast of one hundred and eight days in order to demonstrate his greatness and might. On each day he revealed different treasures to the eyes of the people. Among other valuables, he also displayed the bigdey kahuna (priestly garb). King Nebuchadnezzar had brought these to Bavel when he destroyed the Beit Hamikdash, and since then, they had been carefully preserved in the royal treasures of Bavel.”

This special garb was so important the text warns in Exodus 28:35: "Aaron shall wear it while officiating, so that the sound of it is heard when he comes into the sanctuary before the Eternal and when he goes out-that he may not die". Nachmanides tells us that the bells were for announcing the approach of the priests before God. He says: "For according to royal protocol, one who enters the king's palace unexpectedly is liable to death." We read about this from our own Purim story tomorrow night, when Esther says she dares not go before the King without being summoned, for fear of death.

Aaron's ordination ceremony is described in great detail, as well. The Hebrew phrase for "ordination" literally means to "fill their hands." So the ritual dress is accompanied by this filling of hands. What could this have meant? We could imagine that the Priest had a tremendous job to do so he had a lot on his hands. It could also mean that they were given a sacred responsibility to fulfill with their hands, or that the Israelite's lives were in their hands because they were the mediator between the people and God. Also, the Priests literally used their hands as they blessed the people with the sign of the Shin.

Although wearing the garb was part of one's duties, it does not indicate what the Priests needed to offer with their own personality and their kavannah or intention. The bells announced their presence, but they needed to come forward with confidence and reassure the people that they could fill their hands with their important tasks and could be entrusted to perform their sacred responsibility.

The psychologist, Carl Gustav Jung used the term "persona" to indicate our social selves-the faces we put on in public. We have many social masks: policeman, professional, mommy, rebel, clergy, and even priest.

So how do we use special dress or garb to further out duties or take on a “role” in society, and do you think these special uniforms or outfits are still relevant today? We, of course, know of specific uniforms for people in the military, or our police officers, or nurses and Doctors. On the High Holidays, many clergy and some congregants, even, wear white robes to signify the purification of themselves and of the community.

There used to be “dress codes” for certain events or occasions that are now somewhat obsolete. Some schools and places of work have special outfits to wear. Even in social gatherings, this sometimes happens, although less frequently now. When I was younger, people would dress up to go to an Opera, a Broadway show or the Symphony. For me, dressing up added to the excitement of going to these performances. Now guys, I know most of you hate putting on ties, and now, many people go to these performances in jeans or very casual dress, which you probably enjoy!

I also remember that my parents would never let me go to Temple in jeans and I had to dress up for Friday night services. For High Holidays, it was a ritual that I always got fancy new clothes. To this day, I cannot go to Shabbat services at Temple in casual clothes. It just doesn't feel right. However, I know there are others that would much rather feel comfortable and wear what they want. There is no “right” or “wrong”, necessarily, but to me, it takes away from the importance and dignity of the events. Just like you would dress up to meet a King or Queen or President, wouldn't you dress up for God-the sovereign of the universe? This is my own personal opinion, and I have no problem with your choices. I would much rather have people going to performances and to Temple in casual clothes, rather than not go at all, so please do what you want, just go to these things! I know I can't

wait until we CAN all go to these things together! Indeed, there are few places left where fine attire is required.

Tomorrow we celebrate the insanely crazy holiday of Purim. Rabbi Dean Shapiro calls it “upside down day”, when our social roles may be inverted, with masks and costumes. We are able to change into a new persona, a policeman becomes a villain or a common person becomes royalty. This way, we may show the world aspects of ourselves that we usually keep to ourselves. This proves that there is more to our persona than what a uniform or costume may show. We have many aspects to our personalities. Our unique talents and qualities, like kindness, happiness, sadness, patience, diligence, integrity, and even anger and frustration at times. A Chasidic tale teaches that an angel precedes every human being, walking before us proclaiming to one and all: “Behold! The image and likeness of God!” Our task is to see beyond the clothes, the roles, the personae, and see the unique and essential human being with the divine within each of us.

I hope you will all join us tomorrow night in celebration of Purim with your upside-down costumes and with merriment and joy as we celebrate Religious Freedom and learn how the Jewish people were saved by Esther and Mordechai! Shabbat Shalom.