

Parashat Tetzaveh
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“The origins of clothing are not practical. They are mystical and exotic. The primitive man in the wolf-pelt was not keeping dry; he was saying, ‘Look at what I killed!’”
(Katherine Hamnett)

The priestly vestments described in this week’s Torah portion are also anything but practical. The High Priest in the sanctuary wore an elaborate outfit made up of six separate garments: a breastpiece (*choshen*), another coat (*ephod*), a robe (*m’il*), a fringed tunic (*ktonet tashbetz*), a headdress (*mitznefet*) and a sash (*avnet*), not to mention the *Urim and Thummim*, the instrument of decision held together with the *choshen* and used to determine the will of God in critical national matters. The lay-priests also had to wear specially made tunics, sashes and turbans while serving in the tabernacle. Like the primitive man in the wolf-pelt, these decorated priests also communicated a message: *‘Look at what I have been asked to do! See in my garments the glory and majesty of God whom I serve in this sanctuary!’*

Commentators have long seen in the regal priestly garments both the attempt to fill observers of the worship with awe and respect for the religious leaders *and* to sensitise the priests themselves to the holiness of what they were doing. In that sense, the priestly garments were meant to induce both feelings of pride *and* humility in those who donned them.

In our Jewish world today we no longer have priests with exclusive rights to ritual couture. Religious garb, such as the tallit, tefillin, and kippah are for all Jews to wear. They too, like the primitive man’s wolf-pelt, communicate a message: Check out my faith! See how I immersed I am in Jewish tradition! And like the priestly clothes, our religious garb is meant to induce in us both feelings of pride and humility: pride in the opportunity to “wear” our beliefs and commitments in a very tangible, very tactile way; and humility in bearing the responsibility for representing publicly those very beliefs and commitments.

But we all know that as much as clothing can reflect one’s inner personality (the Malbim commented about the priestly vestments: *“the garments were external but they symbolized their inner vestments”*), clothing can also function to conceal one’s self. Rather than use our clothes to identify our core values, we may often use clothes to obscure them. It is curious that most years (except this one because it is a leap year) just days after we read about the priestly “costumes”, we ourselves don another set of Jewish costumes, our Purim costumes. Yet unlike our regular ritual clothes (tallit, tefillin, kippah) that concretise our inner convictions, our Purim clothes cover up who we truly are.

So much is hidden in the story of Purim, most notably God. And yet the story is of those who would struggle to find and release the sacred qualities of faith, courage, truth and justice even when their divine source is hidden. Perhaps we delight in the opportunity to mask ourselves on Purim because it is human instinct to sometimes recoil from public proclamations of faith and instead bask in the freedom of anonymity. Or, perhaps from time to time searching for truth in darkness is more challenging and compelling than being led to it by the light.

As you dress for Shabbat tonight, and indeed every day, ask yourself: what am I communicating with my choice of clothes? Or, what am I trying to avoid communicating? Like every other dimension of our lives, fashion too can be a frame for deeper mindfulness about our presence in the world, our connections to others, and, of course, to ourselves.

A final thought from the ancient words of Epictetus: Know, first, who you are; and then adorn yourself accordingly.

Shabbat Shalom.