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## Retailoring our "Hold Garments"

Zohar Atkins | Parshat *Tetzaveh* 5775

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*"And you shall make for your brother Aaron  
garments-of-holiness (bigdei hakodesh)  
for the sake of dignity [divine presence]  
and splendor [divine radiance]."*

*Exodus 28:2*

וַעֲשֵׂיתָ בְּגָדֵי קֹדֶשׁ לְאַהֲרֹן אֶתִיד

לְכָבוֹד וּלְתִפְאֵרֶת:

This week's Torah portion is kind of like the Vogue Magazine, Spring Edition, for priests. In our portion, called *Tetzaveh* (Exodus 27.20-30.10) you can find the latest (commanded and commanding) styles for sacred-ware (*bigdei hakodesh*): sashes and ephods of blue, purple, and crimson yarn, breast plates with lazuli, carnelian, chrysolite, and emerald,

turquoise, sapphire, amethyst, and beryl, jacinth, agate, crystal, and jasper; and of course, head-dresses of fine linen.

The exhaustive sartorial descriptions give us the sense that without the proper accoutrements, the priestly function would be impossible. When it comes to a job as significant as sacrifice, you are what you wear. Clothes are central to the spectacle of holiness. And, whether or not we ourselves like the baroque taste of our ancient ancestors, it is clear from the text, that, in principle, aesthetics is to play a crucial role in the spiritual task of the Israelites.

Nevertheless, *Tetzaveh* is hardly an easy read, bordering on boring. If one approaches the Torah with what Bible scholar, James Kugel calls, “[a hermeneutics of omniscience](#),” (the view that nothing in the Torah is superfluous, and that, by extension, the Torah harbors in itself infinite meanings), then one might be tempted to speculate that God intentionally gave us a boring *parsha* to instruct us in the spiritual art of patience. A more sophisticated version of such an argument might draw on the work of British psychoanalyst, [Adam Phillips](#), or the journalist [Rebecca West](#), who, in her pot-stirring coverage of the Nuremberg Trials, describes how her boredom during the trials forced her to take an enlightening walk around the bombed-out German countryside, enabling her to approach the historical scene from a different, less official angle; or else, one might draw on the notorious and polarizing German philosopher, [Martin Heidegger](#), who wrote in 1929 that “profound boredom, drifting here and there in the abysses of our existence like a muffling fog...reveals beings as a whole” (“What is Metaphysics?” in *Basic Writings*, pp. 99). Each of these thinkers urge us not only to endure boredom, but to embrace it as a blessing in disguise, claiming that it is from a place of ordinary boredom that we are prompted to engage ourselves and our surroundings non-habitually and insightfully. Meanwhile, it is our absorption in techniques of distraction, they claim, that keeps us from being our best, most alive selves. Like the Hasidic masters of Jewish tradition, these authors want us to understand that our spiritual task requires us to work with what’s most difficult and seemingly profane in our lives in order to break through to—and ultimately release—its essential holiness. “Being stuck” and “awakening” are not ultimately opposites—if only we could recognize this! (On this paradoxical topic, see the tale of Rebbe Nachman that Rav Mish discusses on the “Text and City” blog [here](#) as well as this classic poem of Adrienne Rich z”l, “[Power](#)”).

Having entertained the above, however, let me suggest a different possibility: *Tetzaveh* is not so much a boring *parsha* as it is an *uncomfortable* one. The reason may be that the Judaism we have come to know is a Judaism that placed a ban on graven images, and that punished our ancestors for finding spiritual meaning in a golden calf. Monotheism, so it seems to those of us who live in the shadow of the great rationalist and negative-theologian [Maimonides](#) means iconoclasm, meaning that all visual imaginings of God must be read away, reduced to allegory. The one, true God is beyond shape and form (*ayn lo d'mut haguf, v'ayno guf* - "he has no image, nor a body", we sing every Friday in *Yigdal*.) Or as the punch line to an old Jewish joke goes, taking this theology to its logical conclusion: "There's only one God and we don't believe in him." In short, is there not a core tension between the striking visuality of the Tabernacle and priestly vestments on the one hand, and the more contemporary Jewish view—no doubt influenced by Deuteronomy—that what matters is less the visual event itself than our ability to tell the story (a point we rehearse and re-affirm each year during *Pesach*)? The very fact that I am asking the question gives the answer (yes). And of course, there is a hard-hitting irony in *reading* about visual marvels that no longer exist. The very fact that what has survived is the litany of what the priests wore, and not the clothes themselves, testifies to an historical arc in which *words* ultimately defeat *things*. The vanishing of precious and semi-precious stones from our religious "life-world" (to borrow the phrase of [Husserl](#)) has forced us to read our texts about them under a foreign light. The horizon of concern through which we must greet *parshat Tetzaveh*, then, is first and foremost a horizon of breach, rift, distance. We read the words *bigdei kodesh*, and even translate them into English, and yet we are still far from understanding what these words say, what they said, and what they give us to say. Yet perhaps, like boredom, the alienation one can feel when encountering a text like *Tetzaveh* offers training in the spiritual way. For starters, perhaps the strangeness of *Tetzaveh*—like any difficult text—can teach us to **see strangeness as an essential condition of our being in-the-world**, and can teach us to place ourselves in question. What is truly strange is not the splendor of the priestly garments described in the Bible, but our own, estranged relationship to the symbolic power of priesthood. We might begin by asking ourselves: Who today is a priest and why? How do our contemporary priests safeguard, in the sense of "protect us from the danger of" the divine—and what does occupy the status of "divine" in our society? Finally, what do terms like "purity" and "impurity" mean today? Are they totally irrelevant without sacrifices and without a Temple? And what, finally, are the contemporary cultural markers that we might consider *bigdei kodesh* (holy garments)?

Having acknowledged the abyss between us and the text, let me conclude with a Midrashic move back towards intimacy with it. First, like all good *midrashim*, we need a question, something must “bother” us.

“And you [Moses] shall make for your brother Aaron garments-of-holiness (*bigdei hakodesh*) for the sake of dignity [divine presence] and splendor [divine radiance].” (Exodus 28:2)

ועשית בגדיי קדש לאהרן אחיך לכבוד ולתפארת:

Here are my three questions (though no doubt they have been asked by many others, too): Why is Moses specifically required to make clothes for his brother, Aaron, and what is the referent and force of “*l’khavod u’litifaret*” (for dignity and for splendor)? For whose dignity? For whose splendor? Aaron’s? God’s? Moses’s own? The people’s? The garments themselves (*a la art-for-art’s-sake*)? And what, finally, is the relationship between holiness, dignity, and splendor? I want to answer each of these questions with one answer, inspired by the Jewish-French thinker [Emmanuel Levinas](#) and the medieval commentator [Ramban](#). Moses’s act of clothing his brother is an ethical act par excellence. The holiness of these garments derives not from their composition alone, but rather from the fact that they are *given*. One cannot make clothes of holiness for oneself, one can only make them for another. In philosophical language, that is to say, holiness is not an innate property inhering in things themselves, but is rather the *mode* in which they appear. Holiness is only a *possibility* of appearing, not an established fact, and it can only come to pass through an act of generosity. Were it otherwise, anyone might have made the garments. But God specifically singles out Moses—*v’asitah*—and *you* shall do it. The dignity and splendor referred to in the verse, then, may similarly be read as referring to the primordial act of *Hesed* (loving care) on Moshe’s part, albeit in response to a divine command. Moses—do this thing for your brother—to show me, yourself, him, and the rest of the Israelites, that it’s not about you. Do it so that my beauty and glory will show in every given thing. Do it to teach future readers that sanctity is not merely a hypostasized costume, a totem for the naive, or a fetish for the needy, but the halo of making room for others, of empowering them to glow, and sharing in their splendor.

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