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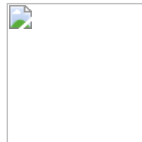
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The Illuminating Nature of Holy Objects

Harry Wexner ('12) | BronfmanTorah | Tetzaveh 2018



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Parshat Tetzaveh covers God's plan for the construction of Aharon's and his son's priestly garments. The portion says:

"You are to make garments of holiness for Aharon your brother, for glory and for splendor." (Exodus 28:2)

What are we to make of this emphasis on glory and splendor? It is strange that God, endowed with supernatural powers, leaves it to humans to create holy objects. Moreover, it seems peculiar that God instructs Aharon and his sons to fashion garments and objects out of the same resources and processes that materially-focused kings use to honor themselves. On first reading, this passage left me cold. The attention paid to the intricate details seemed to betray a fragility, and the exercise of fashioning garments struck me as a charade as soon as I allowed myself to feel skepticism. It does not make sense that an omnipotent being would place so great an emphasis on superficial details of objects with no inherent power. Where to go from there?

One might respond that, just as not all that glitters is gold, not all garments that project glory and splendor are Holy. In the same way that solid gold and gilded stone look the same from the outside but have different value, holy objects contains internal worth only suggested from the glance of the naked eye. Still, it is hard to understand the emphasis the Torah places on the superficial appearance of these objects if their essential significance—their Divine touch—is inherently unseen. Moreover, if God is omnipresent, it stands to reason that every object, every particle, is also invested with a touch of God. What makes these objects different?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe offered insight on this Torah portion when, speaking of the "everlasting lamp" mentioned later in the portion, he said:

"For such is our mission in life: to impart the eternity and perfection of the Divine to a temporal world, and to do so not by annihilating or overwhelming the world's temporality and diversity, but by illuminating its every state and condition—from 'evening' to 'morning'—with the divine light."

In other words, these objects are meant to illuminate—to bring spiritual enlightenment—but not to serve as exclusive exemplars for divine perfection. The objects God reserves for the priests use symbolism to help humans see beauty and holiness in the temporal world. More importantly, though, the objects are mundane and impotent compared to the perfection of the Divine because they must be. To give humans even a hint of Divine perfection would 'annihilate and overwhelm' the

world as we know it because it would create a unique and unattainable standard to which everything would be compared. The instruments humans use to signify glory and splendor must be inadequate because we have no possible way to represent infinity, to comprehend omnipotence, to approximate the unknowable dimension.

Developments in biology, psychology, computer science, and other fields suggest we are a randomly determined grouping of particles without freewill inhabiting a big clump of particles that came about by chance. At first reading, this week's Torah portion made a compelling case that the scientists have it right. They have the [Large Hadron Collider](#); the Torah portion has some garments and symbolic objects I am pretty skeptical of. The more time I spent with the passage, though, the more it seemed that the priestly garments serve a totally different illuminating function. That the priestly garments are understood to be imperfect does not make the passage trivial. Indeed, their illuminating function is in both their earnest human attempt to project holiness and, just as importantly, in the inevitability that they fall far short of divine splendor.

Thinking of the proscribed objects as symbolically illuminating while keeping in mind that they are flawed has great value. All of us, like the priests, have a responsibility to illuminate or perfect all that we can. My work as an urban educator ought to be informed by the most thoroughly honed and investigated practices available to me, but I will inevitably fall short of perfection. This week's portion and the Rebbe's commentary help me understand that while perfection may sometimes feel just out of reach, it is really orders of magnitude of orders of magnitude beyond my comprehension. That is liberating. The realization that we may be shining a light on a facade with infinite depth frees us to simply do our best to approximate love, beauty, and goodness we cannot come close to grasping.



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