

Tetzaveh 5782
Dress With Success
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Before I speak about our parashah, I invite you into a brief exercise in Jewish literacy. If you like, please repeat after me:

אל תסתכל בקנקן, אלא במה שיש בו.

I promise it's nothing bad. Let's try it again.

אל תסתכל בקנקן, אלא במה שיש בו.

Who can tell us what this means?

“Do not look at the container, but rather at what it contains.” Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi stated this often, as we learn in Pirkei Avot (4:20). And we know this axiom, even if we didn't learn it from Pirkei Avot, All of us probably agree with it, at least under most circumstances.

I promised I wouldn't ask you to say something bad. But in light of today's Torah reading, those words appear at odds with what the bulk of our parashah deals with: instructions for constructing sacred vestments for Aharon and his sons, for dignity, adornment, and beauty. How are we to understand God wanting clothing itself to be sacred, and to be sacred in those ways—for dignity, adornment, and beauty?

This focus on the visual –that what's on the outside matters in and of itself–*should* feel surprising, because in nearly every instance where clothing has been mentioned up to now, it comes in the context of deception. As a matter of fact, the very word for clothing–*beged*–means deception! Think of the *Vidui* on Yom Kippur: we chant *Ashamnu*, ***Bagadnu***–that's the word, *beged*–we have deceived. And clothing itself can deceive. It covers our naked reality and allows us to present ourselves however we might like to be perceived, regardless of our true character.

The question gains significance when we consider that clothing matters in all sorts of ways in our Tanach. It signifies and symbolizes, communicates, beautifies, dignifies, and humiliates, and serves as a commodity and as a tool. Its cleanliness or dirtiness,

intactness or being torn matters. The Serfaria website lists 4,915 public primary source sheets dealing with clothing. In nearly every case, clothing serves an instrumental role in a broader dynamic.

Here, in our *parashah*, there seems to be a full focus on clothing as object and agent; it is the clothing itself that matters.

The commentators try to understand this clothing explosion on the surface level; they do not agree about what the key features of the vestments are supposed to look like. Most of them stay there, trying to figure out the patterns themselves. Perhaps that is not surprising, since a skilled and wise artisan is supposed to construct the garments, and the best the commentators can do is surmise how those entrusted with the task will see fit to carry it out.

But virtually no one asks *why* the clothing *matters*. It may be reasonable to assume either that it would have been obvious to them, or to our biblical ancestors, or that since nothing at all was obvious about appointing a particular family to oversee and manage the sacrificial cult, filled with its own new structures and ideas, the notion that its officiants should be uniformed for the task would not be any more surprising. In any case, the question of why it should matter that the priestly garments should dignify, adorn, and beautify their wearers appears to be a modern question.

In light of the rabbinic tradition and our own general desire to value internal qualities over external appearance, let's engage the question: What might the Torah want to teach about the clothing in the one place where it makes clothing the subject?

First, we must concede the possibility that the Torah does want to teach precisely what it seems to say: that *Kohanim* need to wear special clothing for dignity, adornment, and beauty, presumably *theirs*.

Now, let's consider other possibilities.

Rav Avital Hochtein asks what it is about dignity, adornment, and beauty that we are supposed to value and take into our lives, not only with regard to priests, but for all people. She answers her question midrashically. In a lovely exposition, she reads other sources in parallel with ours and points to notions of intimacy, fear of God, artistic freedom, and diverting focus from the body. Her work is smart and creative. In the end, her treatment of the subject is more homiletical than explanatory. Her clearest point, as I read her, is where she lands: the priestly vestments are meant to draw attention to their wearers, marking their presence in their roles. We're back where we started.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks does offer an opposing theory, one that resonates for me. Noting that this is the first time words used in reference to God, “glory and splendor,” are to be shared by human beings, he suggests that the priestly vestments are part and parcel of the Mishkan aesthetic. That aesthetic is meant to offer an emotional resonance our biblical ancestors needed to help them experience the Divine. It is hard to feel intimately connected to the Divine when God only manifests as overwhelming power. He writes, “The priests appear in clothing that points to a beauty and splendor beyond themselves... There is a place for aesthetics and the visual in the life of the spirit... I believe that beauty has power, and in Judaism it has always had a spiritual purpose: to make us aware of the universe as a work of art, testifying to the supreme Artist, God.” I like what Rabbi Sacks suggests: that the priestly vestments are not about venerating beauty, but rather, about beauty venerating holiness, pointing people away from the priests themselves and toward the Divine.

Rabbi Sacks’s teaching accords with the *pshat*, the literal reading of our Torah text. He has given us an interesting way to understand what the Torah might mean by asserting that the priestly vestments are sacred, and that they lend dignity, adornment, and beauty—but in his reading, not to the wearer, but to the Divine.

Let us now consider what the Torah seems, at first blush, to be saying: that the vestments add an aesthetic of dignity and beauty to the wearers themselves. Well, of course they did! That’s what uniforms do, and we need not look away from that reality. I imagine that each of us is conscious of what we wear, especially for important occasions. This tallit I am wearing today is my Shabbat tallit, my Rabbi tallit, my only full tallit, made of white wool. With it, on Shabbat mornings, I dress in clothing that I generally reserve for Shabbat. You may have heard the advice, “don’t dress for the job you have, dress for the job you want.” Even if you haven’t, we know that people who cannot dress “right” for a job interview likely won’t get the job. Here’s a little secret: when I was a college student I wore business attire to my final exams. It helped me focus on doing the job I was there to do. I “dressed for success.” When clergy friends of other faiths have shown me their ritual garb, I have been moved to feel something like, “Wow, I see you differently in these vestments than how I see you in plainclothes. Even when our conversations are sacred, when I see you in these vestments, I see you as serving an elevated role.”

Having given stability to the view that clothing matters, whether through the exigencies of Rabbi Sacks or our own common sense and experience, let us return now to the statement of Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, who is known simply as “Rabbi:” “Do not look at the flask but at what it contains.” I want to suggest that Rabbi’s statement reinforces the

notion that priestly garb matters, precisely because he is making a polemic, insurgent point. This is the rabbi who codified the first major work of Judaism as a religion, the Mishna, which lays out the practices that form the backbone of the Judaism we know today. We do not practice Temple Judaism as a nation with a sacrificial cult. The Pharisaic tradition that spawned Rabbi and his colleagues rejected the priesthood as the legitimate authority over the People of Israel. By Rabbi's time the sacrificial cult was caput, and the Kohanim were out of business. And Rabbi says, "fine!" The role of the priests called for uniforms and prescribed functions. They were literalists, and they did not believe the general population needed to, or even should, study Torah. The Pharisees overturned the biblical framework and created a religion, the Judaism we practice. In subverting the priestly tradition, Rabbi asserts the religion he has dedicated his life's work to codifying. In that religion—our religion—we draw intensely on "ושכנתי, בתוכם," the indwelling presence of God and the primacy of personal qualities and dispositions over outward appearances.

Whether intentionally subversive or not, Rabbi's statement, "אֵל תִּסְתַּכֵּל בְּקִנְיָן, אֲלֵא בְמֵה" שְׁשִׁי בּוֹ," which may sound trite to us, is shattering in light of its context and in light of our parasha. For us, I think, it creates a space and a tension we carry with us to this day. Each point sharpens the other. Rabbi's assertion allows us to take the Biblical point more seriously, and the Biblical point cautions us against overusing Rabbi's.

We have inherited the memory of an ancient Temple cult with minutely prescribed practices and inspired costumes, together with an evolving religion, built on different assumptions, even as it seeks to live out mostly the same goals and underlying values. It is for us not to confuse symbols with people but to allow them to inspire us when they are worthy and reject them, even dismantle them, when they are not. So, too, is it for us to cultivate inner lives where goodness thrives, to cloak our goodness in humility and mitzvot, and to connect our hearts to the sacred spirit in one another. In all of those ways, may it be our blessing to dress with success.

Amen.