

Echoes of Eden

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Parashat Tetzaveh 5774

Searching for a Heart of Gold

Clothes can do many things; they can express a mood or serve as camouflage, attract attention, even seduce. Clothes can both conceal and reveal who we are. In this week's parasha the clothes of the newly-appointed High Priest are described in unusual detail. These clothes were stunning; the combination of colors and precious metals created a collage that expressed the importance of the clothes themselves, and presumably of the person wearing them. These clothes were both ornamental and ceremonial, laden with precious gems and metals, and we might wonder how such opulence is commensurate with the spiritual nature of the High Priest's mission.

Throughout history, there have been contenders for this exalted position and the trappings that are its hallmark. In fact, the rabbinic tradition regarding Korach's rebellion emphasizes that Korach coveted Aharon's garments as well as his job. Korach, we are told, complained that Aharon strutted about, dressed like "a bride on her wedding day;" apparently, that is precisely the kind of preening Korach desired. His fixation on the garments was part of a narcissistic fantasy: He wanted to be no less than the center of attention. He wanted to be dressed in the beautiful clothes. This may have been the motivation in another episode recounted in the Talmud of a man who approached Hillel the Elder and asked that he facilitate his conversion to Judaism – but only on condition that he

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would become the High Priest.

What was the nature of this clothing? Was it considered magical, or was it simply a sort of uniform, intended to set apart the High Priest from all others, lending the wearer the authority and power of office? Rabbinic teachings stress that the priestly garments had symbolic significance that was part and parcel of their appearance. The garments were an integral part of the job of the High Priest, and when they were worn by the person worthy of them, the clothes themselves brought about forgiveness for many of the indiscretions of which the nation was guilty.

First and foremost among these special garments was a vest, worn on the heart, which bore the names of the twelve tribes. Careful consideration of this vest reveals the secret of the clothes, the man who wore them, and the task with which he was entrusted.

At the burning bush, God revealed Himself to Moshe, and tasked him with a job that seemed - to Moshe - to be far beyond his own capabilities: Moshe pointed out his own inadequacies, but God reassured him that He Himself would see to it that the mission would be successful, and that, in addition, Moshe would be assisted by his brother Aharon. In fact, God told Moshe, Aharon was already on his way to meet him, "happy in his heart" that his younger brother Moshe had been chosen for greatness (Shmot 2:14). This was no polite smile or superficial social gesture; this was an authentic emotion from the depth of his being, attested to by God Himself. Coming after the entire book of Genesis, in which it seems brothers can never get along, we are relieved when Moshe and Aharon are joyfully reunited, when Aharon feels no jealousy or resentment that his younger brother has been chosen, or that he himself has been called upon to "play second fiddle" to Moshe. He feels only happiness for Moshe, and is more than willing to play a secondary role in the mission that lies ahead.

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fact, he loved all of his “brothers” and “sisters”, and did his utmost to assist them in any way he could. This went beyond his immediate family; Aharon

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considered the entire nation his extended family, his brothers and sisters, and in his heart they were all precious, holy, and immensely valuable.

The selection of Aharon for the unique position of Kohen Gadol was, therefore, a natural choice: Aharon never saw his job as the expression of his own needs or desires; he consistently put the needs of his family first. Aharon mastered the art of thinking and feeling in the plural. He thought in terms of

“we”, not “I”, which is why he was uniquely capable of wearing the precious stones and gold of the priestly vest on his heart: He wore them as an expression not of his own ego and needs, but as a representation of the entire Jewish people. He wore on his heart a mirror, as it were, of what he felt in his heart. He did not wear clothes that glorified him; he basked in the clothing that expressed the holiness and preciousness of his brothers and sisters, and carried the weight of their spiritual and physical wellbeing in - and on - his heart. When Aharon entered the sanctuary, he never entered as an individual. He represented the dreams and aspirations, the holiness and sanctity, as well as the shortcomings and failures, of the entire nation. He prayed, from the depths of his heart, for forgiveness for the nation – a nation that was nothing more or less than his own extended family, whose names were inscribed on the vest on his heart. Only a man with a heart of gold, a heart that was filled with happiness by the success of others, could be capable of wearing such clothing.

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/02/audio-and-essays-parashat-titzaveh.html>