

TETZAVEH (EXODUS 27:20-30:10)

Dress to Impress

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

The Torah describes the special clothing that the *Kohanim* -- *Priests* had to wear. Every Kohain wore pants, tunics, and hats made of linen, (Ibid, 28:40, 42) and belts that were made of a linen and wool blend. (This linen/wool blend, called *Shatnez*, is normally forbidden.)

These clothes were essential to the Temple Service:

They (the clothes) must be worn by Aaron and his sons whenever they enter the Tent of Meeting (i.e., the Tabernacle in the desert, or the Temple in Jerusalem) or offer a sacrifice on the Altar, performing the Service in the Sanctuary. Otherwise, they will have committed a sin... (verse 43)

It's not just that a Kohain was not permitted to perform the service when he was "out of uniform." He also was not permitted to wear the garments when he was NOT performing the Service.

Why is the Torah putting so much emphasis on clothes? Does it really matter how the Kohain is dressed? Doesn't that seem superficial? Isn't it what's inside, what's in his heart that really counts?

While it is true that we should not overemphasize the importance of external appearances, we shouldn't underestimate it either. When one dresses for holiness, one feels an aura of holiness. The Kohain officiated in the Temple in pure white, linen clothes. They were special. It put him into the proper mind set. He just wouldn't accomplish the feelings of sanctity in a tee shirt and a pair of jeans. Once his assignment in the Temple was completed, the Priestly clothes had to be removed. Life outside of the Temple was common; life in the Temple was sacred. The clothing requirement helped the Kohain to maintain perspective as to the uniqueness of the Temple Service.

We are supposed to have special clothes for Shabbos. We are supposed to have even more formal attire in honor of Yom Tov, the Festivals. Dressing appropriately for the holiday gets us in the right mood.

Conversely, a mourner rips his clothes. He wears the torn garment throughout the week of Shiva. Even a small child in mourning wears a garment that was torn for him by an adult, in order to emphasize to him the bitter sadness of mourning. During the week before Tisha B'Av, we express our feelings of national sadness by prohibiting the wearing of Shabbos clothes.

On a personal note, a *Baal Bris*, one who is personally celebrating a Bris (Mohel, parent, and *Sandak*, the one who holds the baby) is supposed to dress up. When I perform a Bris on a weekday, I wear my Shabbos suit. When a Bris takes place on Shabbos, I wear my Yom Tov suit. No one else may notice the difference, but I do. Today is special; it is a personal Yom Tov for me and for the baby's family. The whole day takes on a different meaning, in part, because I am dressed for the occasion. (No, I haven't figured out a special garb for a Yom Tov Bris, but I'm working on it! :-))

Many years ago, in Israel, I met a young man from the U.S. who was struggling with his Jewish identity and commitment. He came from a non-religious background. He had been a somewhat wild teenager, and the demands of religious commitment presented a major challenge to his self-control.

A few weeks later, I met him again. To my shock, he had cut off almost all his hair! He had taken a Chassidic-style haircut – basically, a crew cut that left the *Payos* intact. He had stopped shaving, and wore a black suit with a white shirt.

He answered my unasked question. "No," he said. "I haven't become Chassidic. But I decided to dress the part. Let me tell you why. I'm still often tempted to hang out in the bars with my old friends. But how can I? How would it look if people saw a guy who looks like me walking into a bar? My new style of dress keeps me on the straight and narrow!"

External actions motivate internal feelings and inspiration. That's not being phony or disingenuous. That's working on yourself externally to jump-start your internal feelings. Are you annoyed with your child or your spouse? Do you resent your neighbor or your co-worker? Tell yourself how wonderful they are. Find something good about them. Keep telling it to yourself. Eventually, you'll actually believe it!

Are you depressed? Upset about something? Worried? If you wear your feelings on your sleeve, you will either alienate those around you, or make them as miserable as you are. You will also feed your own depression and get even more upset.

Take a hint from the Kohanim; dress to impress yourself and others. Put on a happy face. :-) You may even find that it fits!

Have a great Shabbos.

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