

Clothes maketh the man...

Tetzaveh 5782/2022

The central theme of this week's Parasha is the sacred clothes that the Cohanim would wear. Moses is commanded to make sacred clothing for his brother, Aaron¹ and later we are told that these clothes would prepare the Cohanim for their rites, so that they should not face an untimely death.

What is it about clothes that are so important?

The Seforno states that the clothes are meant to inspire the Jewish people and meant to endear the Cohanim, especially the Cohen Gadol, the High Priest, to the Jewish people. After all their tribal namesakes are inscribed on the very clothes we are talking about². It seems according to the Seforno that the priestly garments place us in the trap of the human condition best described by Mark Twain, in that 'clothes are the man' and that 'there is no power without clothes'³.

While it might have been true that the wandering Israelites needed more motivation to accept the authority of the priests after having been enslaved to Egypt, the idea that clothes would become the inspirational element for the Jewish people's acceptance is a hard pill to swallow.

The Malbim provides an alternative answer. The outer clothes were designed and made by skilled artisans, but the under clothes were to be made by the Cohanim themselves, so that they understand the state in which their spirit should be in. When Moses is commanded to instruct Aaron and his children to make vestments, he is instructing more about the way in which the clothes should inspire the Cohanim, not the way in which people should reflect upon the Cohanim⁴.

That clothes maketh the man might be true, but it is not about the external power it creates, rather the mindset for the person themselves that is important.

The Babylonian Talmud talks about King Achashverosh who was prone to utilising the sacred items taken from the Temple following its destruction by the Babylonians. The Talmud explains by virtue of the same words, that the clothes he was wearing at the feast were the clothes the Cohanim would wear⁵. The clothes therefore did not maketh the man. No one, especially the Jews, took him very seriously. His own advisor tried to trick him, his wife thought he was a usurping thief, and the Jewish people were able to expose the duplicity and have the decrees reversed. The clothes did not bring him power, because he expected the clothes to have an external impact, rather than the internal one necessary for true power.

All of this reminds me of the Hans Christian Anderson story, The Emperors New Clothes, whereby the king is so full of himself and his wealth and materialism, he is tricked into believing thin air was a garment of splendour that would elevate his stature. Everyone went along with it, until a young boy, innocent and naive, called out the spectacle for what it is was – there is no power in the clothes you wear, unless you use them to inspire the depths of your soul.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**