

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Tetzaveh

If there would be one place in the Torah where we might expect to learn about the proper attire for prayer, it might be parshat Tetzaveh, wherein the Torah describes the special garments the high priest wore when he performed the service in the Temple. Since the kohen gadol (high priest) wore these special garments only when he served in the Temple, this suggests that perhaps we too should wear special clothes when we pray in our synagogues. Is it fair to draw a comparison between the high priest's special clothing and the way we ought to dress when we pray?

Let us start by analyzing the function of the Kohen Gadol's clothing, as described by the verses in the beginning of our parsha. Hashem tells Moshe to make holy clothes for his brother Aharon "for glory and splendor" (Exodus 28:2). Ibn Ezra (12th century) explains these garments are meant to set the kohen gadol apart from all other Jews, giving him a special designation. Baal Haturim (13th century) underscores this point by noting that the Torah (28:4) omits the pants of the kohen gadol from the list here. Since the Torah stresses here that the clothes set the kohen gadol apart from other people, it leaves out the pants from the list, as even an ordinary person wears pants. Nachmanides (13th century) builds on this idea, proving from passages both in Megillat Esther and other places in Tanach that the garments of the kohen gadol were royal clothes made with the most exquisite fabrics and worn either by kings or princes.

Does the Torah intend to inflate the ego of the kohen gadol and encourage him to pride himself over others? The Torah (28:3) clearly dispels this notion, saying that the artisans should make the garments for Aaron "to sanctify him to minister to me." The glory and splendor of the kohen gadol is meant strictly to show the importance and centrality of service in the life of the Jew. Just as we dress up for important occasions and meetings, the kohen gadol would dress up in order to serve G-d in the Temple with the utmost respect and dignity.

But should we mimic the kohen gadol and dress up to pray with majestic, royal garb? The Talmud (Shabbat 10a) cites the verse (Amos 4) "Prepare towards your G-d, Israel" as a source that one should close one's belt before praying if one had opened it while eating. Then the Talmud relates that certain rabbis in Talmudic times would either wear special shoes or a special cloak on top of their clothing before praying, again citing the verse from Amos. By not referencing the Torah verses describing the clothes of the high priest but instead quoting a more obscure verse from the Prophets, the Talmud implies that the rabbis dressed up for prayer because of a different reason.

"Prepare towards your G-d, Israel" implies that the unique clothes for prayer help a person prepare himself mentally for prayer. Since we find it so incredibly hard to relate to G-d, who we cannot know with any of our five senses, we need to come up with strategies to help us imagine that we stand in "the presence of G-d while we pray. We are not all high priests, so we do not need to wear royal garments whenever we pray. But the rabbis recognized they would be affected by the clothes they wear, so they wore special clothes (although not royal garb) to help them develop the proper mindset for an encounter with the Almighty.



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The Talmud (ibid.) then records that Rabbi Kahana only wore his special cloak when he prayed during peaceful times, and he would cite the verse from Amos when doing so. But in turbulent times, he would take off his stately coat, explaining "I am like a servant before his master." Surely R' Kahana always prayed like a servant, with a submissive tone and posture! Yet R' Kahana prepared to relate to G-d differently depending on the circumstances in the world. He would dress like a prince when times were good, but in tough times, he would dress like a servant. How do we understand Rabbi Kahana's seemingly inconsistent behaviour?

We can appreciate Rabbi Kahana's change in dress when we view it in contrast to the clothes of the kohen gadol. The kohen gadol wore the same clothes, whether dark clouds of war hung overhead or peace reigned in the country. In Temple times, the divine presence could always be sensed and the kohen gadol always dressed like a prince in front of the king. But in Talmudic times, after the destruction of the second Temple, G-d's presence was withdrawn and not as apparent. Rabbi Kahana noted this and therefore did not always dress like a prince. In times of world distress, when he felt G-d withdrawing himself even more, he would prepare to pray in an especially submissive way. Rabbi Kahana, a Jew praying in exile, realized he could not always relate to G-d as a prince before a king.

In the Lecha Dodi poem we sing on Friday night, we say, "Don your splendid clothes, My people." In context, the poet refers to the dawn of the redemption, when Jerusalem will metaphorically shake off accumulated dust and rise to its glory of yore. Perhaps the "splendid clothes" that G-d desires refers to the clothes of the Kohen Gadol, which the Torah says he should wear "for glory and splendor."

The poet recognizes that without a temple, we do not have a kohen gadol to wear the majestic clothes. He yearns for the time when G-d's presence will be so obvious and the Jews will serve him in the Temple in the most majestic way, with glory and splendor. Until then, we must rise to the challenge to use our special clothes to relate to G-d in prayer to the best of our ability.

*Shabbat Shalom.
Rabbi Yosef Saltzman*

