

Parashat Tetzaveh 5777, 2017:

The Garments of the Kohen Gadol: Their Meaning and Significance

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the refuah shlaimah of Devorah bat Chana and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

A significant number of *pasukim* (verses) in our *parasha* and in Parashat Pekudei are devoted to the design and creation of the *bigdei kahuna* (the garments of the *Kohanim*). Moreover, no less than 38 verses in our *parasha* focus upon the intricate details associated with the mystical garb of the *Kohen Gadol* (the High Priest). In my view, one of the introductory *pasukim* to this section bears particularly careful examination: “You shall make holy garments (*bigdei kodesh*) for your brother Aaron, for honor and glory (*l’kavode u’l’tiffaret*).” (*Sefer Shemot* 28:2, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The expression, “*l’kavode u’l’tiffaret*,” is difficult to understand, since the Torah does not stipulate the manner in which the *bigdei Kohen Gadol* (garments of the *Kohen Gadol*) will impart honor and glory to Aaron and subsequent *Kohanim Gadolim*. The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) grapples with this problem in his *Commentary on Sefer Shemot* 28:2:

“For honor and glory” may be interpreted in this manner: In order that he [Aaron] will be revered and elevated in such magnificent and splendid garments. As the text states: “...with a robe of righteousness He has enwrapped me; like a bridegroom, who, priest-like, dons garments of glory...” (*Sefer Yeshayahu* 61:10) This is the case, since, at the time of the Torah, these garments [of the *Kohen Gadol*] were most often worn by the

kings of this period. [Moreover,] this was unmistakably demonstrated in regards to [Joseph's] coat: "...and he [Jacob] made him a fine woolen coat." (*Sefer Bereishit* 37:3) ...This means that Jacob dressed him like a son of one of the ancient kings.

Thus, according to the Ramban, the very act of wearing such king-like garments imbued the *Kohen Gadol* with great prominence in the eyes of the entire nation.

In a somewhat parallel fashion to the Ramban, my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), elaborates upon the underlying rationale of the *bigdei Kohen Gadol* and their association with the concepts of authority, dignity and humility. He begins by describing the *Kohen Gadol's* clothing as a type of uniform that represents authority:

"You shall make holy garments for your brother Aaron, for honor and glory." People appointed by the public, such as government officials, have always worn uniforms. The uniform indicates that the one wearing it holds an office and is endowed with authority. Even an absolute monarch wears a uniform to distinguish himself from the ordinary citizen. Leadership and distinction express themselves in distinctive garments... (This and the following quotes, *Chumash Mesoras HaRav, Sefer Shemot* 28:2, page 249, based upon the notes of Aton Holzer, underlining my own)

At this juncture, the Rav discusses how one acquires dignity, and explores its inextricable connection to the clothing one wears:

... the dignity of man lies in his dress. Dignity, unlike any other capability, must be planted into a person. If dignity is not part of his educational process, he will never possess it; dignity does not come on its own. In a king or ruler, personal capabilities, or the lack of them, often go unnoticed. However, lack of dignity is noticed, and a ruler that exhibits it is punished by the people. Clothing is an expression not of the intellect, but of the dignity of man, and uniforms imply that those donning them are specially selected by the people and are given certain privileges that others do not receive.

Next, Rav Soloveitchik analyzes the relationship that obtains between humility and authority in reference to the *bigdei Kohen Gadol*, and the *Kohen Gadol* himself:

There is a special aspect of humility that is indispensable to positions of power. One's authority comes not from within, but from without. G-d wanted the *Kohen Gadol* to realize that he was undeserving of his position. When he wore his "uniform," the *Kohen Gadol* recognized that he filled his role not due to his own merits – which were insufficient for anyone to assume such a high office. The same was true of the king; without the donning of the royal garments, he would not have the authority to act as king.

The Rav's three essential points provide us with a deeper understanding of the import of the *bigdei Kohen Gadol*: The uniform indicates that he holds a unique office and is endowed with authority. Then, too, clothing is an expression of the dignity of man. If this is true in general, it is all the more so the case regarding the *Kohen Gadol*. Crucially, the *bigdei Kohen Gadol* are intended to engender humility within the *Kohen Gadol*'s persona. The Almighty wanted the *Kohen Gadol* to realize that he was undeserving of his position based solely upon his own merits; instead, he was directly chosen by the Master of the Universe to serve in this role.

In his analysis of our *pasuk*, the Ketav Sofer (Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer, 1815-1871) places great emphasis upon the expression "*bigdei kodesh*" that appears prior to the phrase "*l'kavode u'l'tiffaret*." He notes that, in general, "*bigdei kodesh*" connotes garments that would add to the holiness of the one who wears them, since they would appear to be made specifically for this purpose. As Rav Sofer clarifies, however, this was completely unwarranted in Aaron's case:

But in truth, it was completely unnecessary for Aaron to undergo the preparation generated by these garments, since he was fitting to serve the Almighty without them – just like our teacher Moses, may his memory be a blessing, who performed the sacrificial service in a simple white cloak. (*Sefer Ketav Sofer, Sefer Shemot*, s.v. *v'asita bigdei kodesh* (2), this and the following translation and underlining my own)

Why, then, did Aharon **need** to wear the *bigdei Kohen Gadol*? Fascinatingly, the Ketav Sofer's answer underscores one of Rav Soloveitchik's major ideas concerning our verse, namely, the overarching significance of humility:

[Given the honor and glory of the *bigdei Kohen Gadol*,]...arrogance and an overweening sense of self-importance could easily have become implanted in Aaron's heart and mind, since he was different in kind and degree from all the other *kohanim* and uniquely chosen by Hashem. As our Sages never tired of teaching, arrogance is a negative behavioral trait from which few people can be saved. This, then, was the precise reason why Aaron needed the holiness of these garments (*kedushat habegadim*) - in order that they should save him from the sin of conceit and haughtiness and ensure that arrogance would not become part of his personality...since, [after all,] they were the clothing of kings...

While it is certainly the case that very few of us could ever become the *Kohen Gadol* and thereby be *zocheh* (merit) to wear his king-like garments, we are nonetheless the sons and daughters of kings. As Abaye teaches us: "Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, Rabbi Shimon, Rabbi Yishmael and Rabbi Akiva maintained that the entire Jewish people are the sons of kings." (*Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 128a*) As such, each of us has the potential to bring the holiness, honor and glory represented by the *bigdei Kohen Gadol* to Hashem and our entire nation. With our heartfelt desire, and the Almighty's never-ending blessing and support, may this be so. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.