

D'var Torah for Parshat T'tzaveh
February 27, 2021; Congregation Sinai, San Jose, CA
Doug Brook

Two weeks ago was Shabbat Shekalim, the Shabbat about shekels which every year coincides with tax season. Last week was Shabbat Zachor, you might remember, and we read parsha Terumah which is a shout out to architects, as it recounted the detailed plans for constructing the tabernacle in the desert. This week's parsha, T'tzaveh, is the conclusion of Fashion Week in the Jewish world. Earlier this week, Purim featured the modeling of the latest in quarantine costuming, and today's Torah reading caps it off with what the trendiest kohanim – the Jewish priests – and the kohein gadol – the high priest – are expecting to wear this season. Please note that I'm exercising some restraint by not saying anything about today being Shoeshine Purim.

This year, the fashionable kohen who goes a little retro will wear a ketonet – a full-length tunic – and, if we can get a bit more personal, michnasayim – linen breeches –, and a mitznefet – basically a linen turban – and an avnet – a long sash worn above the waist, which was comically wrapped around the forehead of Spock in Star Trek IV to hide his ears while wandering 1980s San Francisco. (Nimoy had earlier, more famously introduced the hand gesture of the blessing of the kohein as the Vulcan salute. How do you know he didn't do this as an homage, too?)

Those four items provide the timeless look for the kohein, but the kohein gadol gets even more. A choshen – a breastplate which includes twelve stone jewels, one for each of the twelve tribes – a me'il – a cloak of blue wool with golden bells and pomegranates decorating the hem, a tziz – a gold plate worn on the forehead inscribed with “Holy is the Big G” – and an efod, a sort-of apron made of blue, purple, and red wool, linen, and gold thread.

Of course, if you want to see what all this looks like, check out the ark-opening scene near the end of Raiders of the Lost Ark. Belok's garb is quite accurate, as are the details of the ark itself. In fact, if you listen closely to his recitation in that scene, you'll hear most of the words from Bei Ana Racheitz which we sing right after the ark is opened on

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every Shabbat when we're in the three-dimensional, in-person world. Check it out. After Shabbat.

Two fun facts about the high priest's high fashion sense. First, the me'il – the blue wool cloak that would work as its own noisemaker for Purim. Some of these clothing items had practical use, and weren't just for show. In 28:35, it says of the kohein gadol when he's all dressed up and in the Holy of Holies, “and he will be heard in his coming to the Holy before the Big G and in his going and will not die.”

Moshe Chafetz, who wrote the Torah commentary Melekheth Machshevet in 1710, delves into what this verse means. Who will hear the kohein gadol? What will they hear? How will they hear him? What does being heard have to do with him not dying? Chafetz points out that the Sages said that the kohein on Yom Kippur (while in the Holy of Holies, and he'd be in there a while) would pray a short prayer so the people of Israel would not be terrified by the thought that he had for some reason died in there. Being struck down or whatnot. See? People's minds wandered during services back then, too.

However, ever the man interested in science and technology, R. Chafetz goes a step further and says that the Big G's wisdom shines through here in the me'il's golden bells. Because the bells would ring whenever the kohein would walk around, the Israelites would hear every movement of his legs and thereby know that he didn't die in there. So, the “voice” of the kohein here is a little metaphorical for hearing the kohein via the ringing of his bells.

Second fun fact, the efod. For those of you with shorter memories than – I forgot the rest of the metaphor – this is the pseudo-apron made of blue, purple, and red wool, linen, and gold thread. First of all, elsewhere in the Torah it says to not mix wool and linen, but here it does. Also, this garment specifically brings together blue and red, along with purple – the color made when blue and red are mixed together. Therefore, this piece of high priest haute couture is an obvious statement that the holiest thing is for everyone – wool or linen, red or blue – to just come together and get along.

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However, it should be obvious that I'm not the person to go on about fashion. So, consider for a moment the other, less talked about part of the parsha. After the catwalk is no longer in vogue, the parsha describes sacrifices – in preparation for the start of baseball's spring training games this week. This includes detailed instructions for the seven-day initiation of Aaron and his four sons into becoming kohanim.

Now, I went through initiation into AEPi, the Jewish fraternity. I can't talk about it specifically, but I can say that it was nothing like this. No, there wasn't any hazing, either.

What's detailed in the Torah about the kohein's initiation involves a ram, slaughtering it, sprinkling its blood here and there, and other things that I won't go into great detail about because some of it isn't great to talk about too close to lunch. There's also bread and matzah involved, and some barbecue instructions, and even some stuff that will ironically mess up the kohanim's nice new clothes. It's important to remember that the sacrifices are, in no small part, about symbolism. Symbolism in terms of an underlying intent that's at least as important as the physical gestures. Symbolism which can become even more apparent when considered in the context of the time and surrounding world environment of when the exodus occurred and when the Torah was written.

This is perhaps one of the biggest lessons one can take from the sacrifices which, today, can seem arcane and potentially deserving of a call from PETA. Without the gestures, the intent can still exist. Without the intent, the gestures are meaningless. So, which matters more? Gestures or intentions?

Now, almost a few people who know me know I have an affinity for haftarahs, the readings from the books of the prophets. Occupational hazard, both because I teach haftarah trope to your youth, and also because I work in Silicon Valley high tech where all they talk about are profits.

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With that in mind, today's haftarah is from the Book of Ezekiel. Every haftarah is related in some way to the Torah reading, or on special days is related to the special day. And it is called a haftarah because of a Hebrew word that means additional, not because it's half as long as the Torah reading. It's seldom that long.

So, today, Uncle Zeke brings us a vision for the altar that would someday be built for the Third Temple in Jerusalem, and its dedication. Of course, this harkens back to the Torah reading's description of the altar and its start-up routine in the tabernacle back in the desert. Ezekiel describes the altar in detail, much like the Torah's been doing for the tabernacle, its altar, and the new Kohein line of outerwear from Ralph Lauren.

After the First Temple was destroyed, Ezekiel has a vision of the Third Temple, which would be built by the Messiah, who hopefully will be savvy enough to hire some good sub-contractors. Ezekiel is one who believes the First Temple was destroyed because of the sins of the Jewish people, and the intent of his Third Temple vision is to make them feel ashamed of their deeds which brought that result. Of course, it's not just a dose of Jewish guilt, the intent is for the Jewish people to see what they do wrong and to change their ways. As later translated by Sonny Henry and turned into a Top 10 hit by Carlos Santana:

You've got to change your evil ways, baby,
before I stop lovin' you.
You've got to change, baby,
And every word that I say is true.

This furthers the little-spoken-of theory that if the Torah had been written in the 1960s, it would have said "baby" a lot more often. It also furthers the notion that everything benefits from, and can provide benefit to us, if it's considered in light of its context and its intentions. Shabbat Shalom.

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