

CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN

by Rabbi Berel Wein

If it is true that clothes make the man, it is apparently doubly true that clothes make the kohen, especially the kohen gadol - the High Priest of Israel. The description of the garments to be worn by the kohanim and the kohen gadol during their hours of service in the Temple is specific, detailed and inspirational. Each of the garments has a specific purpose aside from the obvious one of clothing the kohen. The garments described were meant to be a source of honor and glory, not only to those who wore them but for the Temple and for the service of the God of Israel as well. Because of this purpose, the great commentators to the Torah searched for the symbolic, even mystical, meanings and lessons represented by the priestly garments. For, apparently, to understand the message of the garments of the priests would allow for a greater understanding and appreciation of the entire concept of service to God as defined by the Torah.

The Torah describes not only the garments of the priests and of the kohen gadol but also outlines the order of dress for the installation of the kohen gadol into his lofty public position. The Torah points out that, of necessity, the lower part of the body must first be covered. In the process of dressing, the final piece of clothing that the kohen gadol donned was the tzitz - the golden plate which bore the name of God in relief upon it and which the kohen gadol tied to his forehead. The lesson here is simple and obvious and certainly not limited to the kohen gadol or to the Temple service. The lesson is that one should not proclaim one's own godliness, to flaunt the name of God, so to speak, brazenly on one's forehead, unless one is certain that the lower part of one's body - one's everyday, mundane, human behavior is covered with the proper ethics and modesty that the Torah ordains. There are many who rush to place the tzitz on their forehead but there are few who realize that in order to be entitled to do so all of the other pieces of clothing of one's life need be covered properly and in good moral order.

The Talmud teaches us that the tzitz had the power to bring about enormous forgiveness for the public sins of Israel. It could restore purity and holiness to the Temple and its public worship and sacrificial service. By proclaiming openly Israel's loyalty and dedication to the service of the Lord, the tzitz clearly delineated the priorities in the both the public and private sectors of Jewish life. Worn properly by the right person - the true kohen gadol, who is the heir of Aharon not only genetically but morally and spiritually as well - the tzitz became a statement of the Jewish dedication to the service of God and man and the pursuit of holiness in human life. But again, a tzitz worn by a person who is otherwise improperly clothed is of little value. All of Jewish history proves the accuracy of this conclusion.

Finally, the idea of proper dress, dress that brings honor and glory to those who wear clothing and to the society that views that clothing, is central to Jewish life and values. Clothes that are provocative, that are vulgar and insulting to others, that are physically immodest and meant to attract anti-social response, are all frowned upon by Jewish tradition. There need not be specific uniforms in the Jewish street (though I must admit that Jews apparently love to wear specific uniforms to identify themselves and their attachment to a particular group) but modest, clean, attractive dress should be the rule for our society. In that sense, perhaps we can all agree that clothes do make the Jew.

Shabat Shalom.
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