

You Shall Make Sacred Vestments

“You shall make sacred vestments for the glorious adornment of your brother Aaron. And you shall speak to all who have ability, whom I have endowed with skill, that they may make Aaron’s vestments to consecrate him for my priesthood” (Exodus 28:2-3).

In the Book of Exodus the Israelites are guided, in meticulous detail, to create a system of worship. Chapter 28 turns to the making of priestly vestments. Why does the sacred text present a long, tedious list of details? Can priestly vestments really be that important?

Let’s begin our reflection by considering the meaning of clothing today. What does your own choice of clothing signify? Why do we give authority to people in uniforms? How does festive or sacred clothing affect our experience of time and place? What messages are communicated through a piece of cloth?

Jewish commentators on this passage have interpreted the significance of clothing in various ways. For example, says Benno Jacob:¹ have you noticed that the Genesis creation account makes no mention of God teaching man and woman how to make a fire, till the soil or build a house. All is left to their initiative, except for one thing: *God makes clothes for them*. Not only does God make ‘garments of skins,’ but God actually ‘clothes’ them (Gen. 3:21). Just as royalty are clothed in fine robes, God clothes man and woman as a sign of their consecration to be parents of the human race. Following the divine example, Moses clothes Aaron and his sons as a sign of consecration to priestly office.

Other commentators,² favouring an allegorical interpretation, view the priestly clothing in moral terms. To put on a garment is to be vested in qualities of fine character, to be God-like. *“O Lord my God... You are clothed with*

honour and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment” (Psalm 104:1). This idea is used to solve a contradiction in the text: Why does God command Moses to make the garments in v.2, then command the people to make the garments in v.3? The allegorists explain the double-command like this: The garments in v.2 refer to the instruction in holiness that Moses is to give the priests. The garments in v.3 refer to the outer garments of cloth that symbolize these inner ‘vestments of the soul.’ Note that the people who are to make these outer garments are described as ‘skilled’ (v.3). In the Hebrew, to be ‘skilled’ is literally to be ‘wise of heart.’ Only the ‘wise of heart’ understand the true meaning of the garments and the inner virtues they represent.

Think about it:

- In Jewish practice, a prayer shawl (*tallit*) with fringes (*tzitzit*) at the corners is worn. The fringes are a reminder of a Jew’s responsibility to observe God’s commandments (*mitzvot*). A blessing is prayed before wearing the *tallit*.
- In his letter to the Christians of Ephesus, St Paul urges his readers to “clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.” (Ephesians 4:24)
- This week, examine more closely what you wear, where you wear it, and why you wear it. What are you ‘saying’ by your dress customs and choices?

1. Jewish biblical scholar, 1862-1955.

2. E.g., Malbim, 19th century Russian-Jewish rabbi. Sources: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996). Scripture: NRSV.

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