

## Holy Garments

By Rav Chanoch Waxman

I

Shortly after the beginning of Parashat Tetzave, the Torah turns from the topic of the structure of the Mishkan, the central motif of Parashat Teruma, to the topic of the priests, the Mishkan's staff. God commands Moshe on the selection of the priests, the manufacture of garments for "honor and beauty," the identity of the manufacturer and finally the specific garments to be manufactured. Strikingly, rather than detailing the role and function of the priests in the Mishkan, a topic that briefly surfaces at the very beginning of Parashat Tetzave (27:20-21), the Torah focuses solely on the priests' attire. In fact, all of Chapter Twenty-eight, all forty-three verses, consists of an extensive and detailed description of the garments. While outfitting the priests in honorable and beautiful garments is clearly important for the status of the sanctuary and the public perception of the priests (Ramban 28:2), one wonders why the Torah describes the garments in such great detail and at such length.

The structure of Chapter Twenty-eight constitutes an important tool for sharpening our formulation of the problem. After the brief introductory section (1-5) outlining for whom and by whom, what clothes and what materials, the Torah focuses almost exclusively on a handful of specific garments worn by the high priest alone. If we follow the *stumot* and *ptuchot*, the traditional divisions of the text, the breakdown goes as follows:

- a. 1-5 – the introduction as described above
- b. 6-12 – the ephod
- c. 13-14 – the instructions for the gold frames and gold chains, by whose means the "choshen," or breastplate, is to be fastened to the shoulder pieces of the ephod (28:25)
- d. 15-30 – the design of the "choshen mishpat," the breastplate of judgement, and the instructions for its attachment to the ephod
- e. 31-35 - the "me'il ha'ephod," the robe of the ephod, and its decoration
- f. 36-43 – the remainder of the garments: a) the "tzitz," (head plate), (36-38), b) the tunic, hat and belt of the high priest (39), c) the tunics, hats and belts of the standard priests, and finally d) the pants of all of the priests and the command to dress them (40-43).

As mentioned above, the Torah concentrates almost exclusively on the four garments that are unique to the high priest. The first four segments outlined above, a sum total of twenty-four verses, describe the "ephod-choshen" system (see 28:28), while the fifth section centers on the "me'il," the coat, of the high priest. Finally, even the last segment opens with a detailing of the *tzitz* before briefly sketching the garments worn

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in common by the high priest and the standard priest. Rather than investigating the general question of the significance and importance of the priests' attire, we must focus on the specific question of the meaning, function and purpose of the garments unique to the high priest.

One of the general themes discernible in the description of the high priest's clothes may be glimpsed by focusing on the last of the specific garments mentioned, the "tzitz." After commanding the inscription of the words "kodesh laShem," Holy to the Lord, on the "tzitz" and detailing its fastening to the forehead of the high priest, the Torah states as follows:

...and Aharon shall bear (ve-nasa) the iniquity (avon) of the holy things that the children of Israel consecrate...and it shall win acceptance (le-ratzon) for them before (lifnei) the Lord. (28:38)

While a term based upon the stems "nsa" and "avn" can sometimes mean "bear the iniquity" in a negative sense (see [Vayikra 5:1](#)), most often such a term carries connotations of "carrying the sin" for another, removing the sin and achieving forgiveness. For example, God is described in the thirteen attributes of mercy ([Shemot 34:7](#)) as "nosei avon," meaning "forgiving sin." The primary role of the "tzitz" appears to be atonement. By symbolizing the process of consecration and dedication to God, the inscription of "Holy to the Lord" achieves atonement for, and repairs the errors that take place during the process of sanctification and consecration. In the formulation of the text, the message "wins acceptance" for the less than perfect people and their flawed offerings in the eyes of God (see Rashi 28:38).

The motif of atonement is also apparent in the instructions for the "ephod-choshen" system. The Torah informs us that Aharon will carry (ve-nasa) the names of the tribes of the children of Israel, which are inscribed on the stones set into the "choshen," "le-zikaron lifnei HaShem tamid," for remembrance before the Lord continually (28:29). Similarly, in the very next verse after commanding the insertion of the "urim ve-tumim" into the "choshen," the Torah states that Aharon will carry (ve-nasa) the judgement of the children of Israel "lifnei HaShem tamid," before the Lord continually.

All of this echoes the statement a few verses earlier regarding the "ephod" (28:11-12). Aharon had been commanded to carry (ve-nasa) the "avnei shoham" engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel on the shoulder straps of the "ephod" as a remembrance (zikaron) before the Lord (lifnei HaShem). As pointed out previously, the term "nasa," "bearing" often carries connotations of atonement. Likewise the conjoining of "zikaron," remembrance, and "lifnei hashem" sounds a near identical note. In [Bemidbar 10:9-10](#) God commands the sounding of the "chatzotzrot," the trumpets, in both times of war and trouble, and on holidays. In the case of war, the purpose is to be remembered (ve-nizkartem) before God (lifnei HaShem) and be saved. In the case of holidays the

purpose is to be remembered by God (ve-hayu le-zikaron lifnei HaShem) and to have the holiday offerings accepted. A "remembrance before God" activates God's mercy and action on behalf of the children of Israel.

Not only the terminology of the text carries connotations of God's mercy and forgiveness, and hence atonement, but also the materials used to craft the "ephod-choshen." The centerpiece of the "choshen" consists of four rows of precious stones, twelve all together, with the name of one of the tribes of Israel engraved on each individual stone. Each stone is framed in a gold setting (17-21). Interestingly enough, in Sefer [Yechezkel \(28:12-13\)](#) the prophet develops a strikingly similar image involving nine of the twelve stones utilized in the "choshen." Yechezkel laments:

You were the seal of perfection  
Full of wisdom and flawless beauty  
You were in Eden, the garden of God  
Every precious stone was your adornment  
Carnelian, chrysolite, and amethyst;  
Beryl, lapis lazuli, and jasper;  
Sapphire, turquoise, and emerald;  
And gold beautifully wrought for you

Yechezkel informs the sinner that once he had been the perfect work of a divine craftsman. Once he had been adorned with precious stones and gold. Once he had been in Eden. Once he had existed in a pure state before having sinned.

Sefer [Bereishit \(2:11\)](#) confirms the linkage of the central materials of the ephod-choshen and Eden. One of the four rivers that emerges from Eden, the river Pishon, leads to the land of Chavila, the place of gold and shoham stones ("even ha-shoham"). These are some of the exact materials collected for and utilized in the construction of the ephod-choshen in Sefer Shemot ([Shemot 25:7](#), 28:6,9-11,13-27). Apparently, the engraving of the names of the tribes of Israel on the precious stones of Eden (28:9-11,17-21) and their framing in a golden setting (28:11,13-14,20, 22,24) constitutes a symbolic reenactment of an Eden-like state. It figuratively transforms the tribes of the Children of Israel into the man who was the perfect work of the divine craftsman, the man who still deserved adornment with jewels and gold, the man who had not yet sinned. By carrying the names of the tribes of Israel before God (lifnei HaShem) adorned with the setting of Eden, the high priest finds favor for Israel in the eyes of God and achieves mercy and atonement.

While the text explicitly stated which sins the tzitz atones for and corrects (28:38), the Torah makes no such explicit declaration in the case of the ephod-choshen. What does the ephod-choshen atone for? The key may lie in the phrase "choshen mishpat," the proper name of the choshen. Normally, this term is translated as "breastplate of judgement," a translation reached by following the standard meaning of "mishpat." Perhaps atonement is necessary for the children of Israel's errors in keeping the "mishpatim," the judgements commanded by God in Parashat Mishpatim (see [Shemot 21:1](#)).

Alternatively, perhaps atonement is necessary for errors in justice, the process of mishpat, whereby divinely ordained norms are applied to human reality. Yitro had already advised Moshe that the process of justice was too heavy for him

to bear alone and that he required others to help him carry (ve-nasu) the burden of teaching and applying the laws of God (18:14-16,22-23).

In fact Yitro apprehended only part of the problem. The burden of properly applying the laws of God is too heavy for any human or group of humans. The very act of mishpat, teaching and applying the transcendent Torah to mundane human reality, is inevitably fraught with error and requires atonement. Perhaps this is the burden of "mishpat" that Aharon carries in order to achieve divine favor and atonement (see Rashi 28:15).

There exists yet a third possible interpretation. In contrast to the standard translation of "judgement" and the resulting translation of "breastplate of judgement," the term "mishpat" can also be interpreted as "decision," yielding a translation of "breastplate of decision." As Rashbam points out (28:15), the sections that describe the ephod-choshen system close with the command to insert the urim ve-tumim into the choshen.

The mysterious urim ve-tumim constitute a type of oracle, a sort of decision-making device (see Rashi, Ibn Ezra and [I Shmuel 28:5-7](#)). The first conversation between God and Moshe concerning Moshe's death and the impending transfer of leadership testifies to this interpretation. God informs Moshe that national decisions will be made in a slightly different fashion after Moshe's death. Yehoshua will lead with the assistance of Elazar the high priest and will consult "the decision (mishpat) of the urim before the Lord" ([Bemidbar 27:21](#)). By this means, the intermediary of the high priest and urim ve-tumim, decisions will be made about war and other matters of national importance.

Accordingly, the "breastplate of decision," the ephod-choshen system, constitutes the point of God-Israel interaction on matters of national importance and survival. When the high priest and leader request guidance from God, it is attempted in a context that displays the names of the tribes prominently, that sets them in Eden and adorns them with the purity of Eden. The ephod-choshen attempts to arouse the mercy of God, and achieve atonement for Israel in preparation for receiving guidance from God.

The theme of atonement surfaces not only in the specific passages that describe the tzitz and ephod-choshen, but also in the interaction and joint symbolism of the three pieces of apparel. Rashbam (28:36) claims that the tzitz and its inscription of "Holy to the Lord" function and achieve atonement by virtue of their relation to the engraving of the names of the tribes of Israel at other points on the high priest's body. This requires some explication.

As mentioned previously, the names of the tribes of Israel are engraved on the stones of the "choshen," to be located at the high priest's heart (28:29). The "choshen" is then fastened tightly to the "kitphei ha-ephod," the shoulder straps of the ephod, by means of golden rings and chains (28:22-28). These shoulder straps once again carry the names of the tribes of Israel, engraved on the shoham-stones located at the top of the straps, on Aharon's shoulders (28:9-12). The final engraving occurs near the highest point on the body of the high priest, his forehead. Here God commands Moshe to engrave not the names of Israel, but the formula of "Holy to the

Lord." The inscription of "Holy to the Lord" constitutes the peak of a pyramid that begins at the heart of the high priest. The names of the tribes of Israel merge upwards into the mantra of "Holy to the Lord" thereby elevating, sanctifying and consecrating the tribes of Israel to God. By virtue of this elevation, the high priest achieves atonement for the children of Israel. In sum, when the High priest dons his garments and serves before God, he transforms his very body into a device for achieving sanctification and atonement for the children of Israel.

### III

The interpretation of the high priest's clothes propounded until this point, as a device for achieving atonement, should go a long way to explaining the length and detail the Torah devotes to their design. Atonement constitutes one of the central purposes of the mishkan and the high priest (see [Vayikra 16:15-18](#)). In addition, this interpretation fits well with the structure of Chapters Twenty-five through Thirty.

Throughout these chapters, the Torah commands the design and building of the mishkan, and lists the necessary materials and personnel. The order runs as follows:

- i) 25:1-9 – the command to construct the mishkan and collect materials.
- ii) 25:10-22 – the ark.
- iii) 25:23-30 – the table.
- iv) 25:31-40 – the menorah.
- v) 26:1-30 – the curtains and pillars of the mishkan.
- vi) 26:31-37 – the inner curtain.
- vii) 27:1-8 – the altar.
- viii) 27:9-19 – the external courtyard and its curtains and pillars.
- ix) 27:20-21 – the command to collect olive oil and kindle the menorah.
- x) 28:1-43 – the command to designate priests and the manufacture of their clothes.
- xi) 29:1-37 – the induction ceremony for the priests and the first operation of the mishkan.
- xii) 29:38-46 – the command of daily sacrifices and description of God's meeting with Israel at the mishkan.
- xiii) 30:1-10 – the golden incense altar.
- xiv) 30:11-15 – the collection of money for the maintenance of the mishkan.
- xv) 30:17-21 – the lather utilized by the priests when they enter the sanctuary.
- xvi) 30:22-33 – the command to manufacture "anointing oil" to sanctify the priests and vessels.
- xvii) 30:34-38 – the command to manufacture the incense.

At first glance, the order of the parashiot appears strange. Sections i through viii, the corpus of Parashat Teruma concern themselves with the physical structure of the mishkan and its vessels. Sections ix and on seem to represent a change in theme. From this point on the priests and matters related to the priests constitute the central motif. However this presents many difficulties. For example, why is the kindling of the menorah mentioned first before the selection of the priests? Why are the "golden incense altar" and the "lather," sections xiii and xv respectively, mentioned in the segment pertaining to

priests as opposed to in the segment delineating the vessels of the mishkan, Parashat Teruma?

In fact, the turn at the beginning of Parashat Tetzave, delineated as section ix above, should be viewed not as a switch to the general topic of priests and matters related to the priests but as a move from structure to operation. Sections ix through xvii begin to outline the critical operations of the mishkan and the materials and objects necessary for those operations. Consequently, the segment opens with the daily kindling of the menorah, a critical daily operation. This theory also explains the placement of the sections detailing the lather and "golden incense altar." Their primary role is to function as part of certain daily operations the priests perform in the mishkan (30:7-8 & 30:19-21) rather than as part of the physical structure of the mishkan, the tabernacle and house of God. Consequently, they are mentioned in the operations section, rather than in Parashat Teruma.

This brings us full circle to the garments of the high priest. Just as the kindling of the menorah constitutes a crucial operation of the mishkan, so too atonement constitutes a crucial operation of the mishkan. In fact, the very first vessel mentioned in Parashat Teruma, the ark, is covered by the "kaporet," the place where the high priest sprinkles blood in order to atone, (le-kaper) for the sins of the nation ([Vayikra 16:14-17](#)). In a similar vein, the operations section, Parashat Tetzave and on, dwells extensively on the garments of the high priest, clothes that are critical for the daily kapara operation of the mishkan.

### IV

Let us turn our attention to another aspect of the high priest's garments. Like the theme of atonement, it is intertwined with the multiple inscriptions present in the high priest's apparel. If we follow the chronological order of the text, the first of these is the engraving of the names of the tribes of Israel on the avnei shoham, which are attached to the shoulder straps of the ephod and which Aharon carries on his shoulders (28:11-12). The second is the engraving of the names of each tribe on the stones of the choshen. Aharon carries these on his heart (28:29). The third inscription is the formula of "Holy to the Lord" engraved on the tzitz, which Aharon bears on his upper forehead right beneath his hat (28:37-38). One wonders, what constitutes the significance of these particular locations?

In fact, one of these locations constitutes a place where matters of great importance are kept. In Sefer Bemidbar, when Moshe divides the oxen and wagon donated by the princes amongst the Levites for the purpose of transporting the Mishkan, Moshe refrains from distributing any to the Levites descended from Kehat. The text explains:

To the sons of Kehat he gave none, because the work of the sanctuary (kodesh) belonged to them, they bore it on their shoulders (ba-katef yisa'u). [Bemidbar 7:9](#)

The sons of Kehat were charged with transporting the holiest components of the Mishkan, the actual vessels of the sanctuary. Consequently, in accord with the honor and sanctity of the objects, they were required to carry them personally, on their shoulders, rather than by means of beasts of burden. This sheds new light on the Torah's demand that the high priest carry the names of the tribes of Israel on his shoulders (ve-

nasa ... al shtei k'teifav) (28:12). Apparently, the names of the tribes of Israel constitute objects that are holy to the high priest. He bears them upon his shoulders.

The places of heart and head also appear in another context in the Torah. Earlier on in Sefer Shemot, when commanding the people to forever remember the day that God redeemed them from Egypt, Moshe informs them that

...it shall be for a sign upon your hand and a remembrance (zikaron) between your eyes...with a strong hand God brought you out of Egypt. (13:9)

This of course is the command of tefillin. The people are commanded to place certain texts, in this case one relating to the redemption from Egypt, on their hand and between their eyes, traditionally understood as the upper arm near the heart and the area of the upper forehead. Strikingly, the choshen and tzitz also involve writing placed adjacent to the heart and head. Furthermore, just as tefillin are termed a zikaron, a remembrance, so too the Torah repeatedly utilizes the term "zikaron" to describe the functioning of the garments of the high priest. What is the meaning of the parallel of the choshen and tzitz to tefillin?

In the case of tefillin, the purpose of the device is to function as a zikaron, a reminder to the wearer of the content of the text, to know in both his heart and head that God redeemed him from Egypt. Apparently, the choshen and tzitz function in a similar manner. Placing the names of Israel and the formula of "Holy to the Lord" on the heart and head of the high priest serve to remind him of dedication to Israel and God. The priest carries consciousness of Israel in his heart and of God in his head.

In sum, we can discern a second theme present in the Torah's description of the high priest's garments. They function reflexively. The "zikaron" is not only to remind God of Israel but to remind the high priest of Israel and God. Israel must be holy to the high priest and hence he carries them upon his shoulders. Israel must be located in the heart of the high priest and hence he carries them upon his heart. The high priest must remember his dedication to God and his function as a device to dedicate and elevate Israel to God and facilitate the God-Israel relation. Hence he carries the statement "Holy to the Lord" engraved upon his head.

## V

The two themes implicit in the high priest's clothes presented above, the motif of atonement for Israel on the one hand, and the reflexive definition of the role of the priest on the other, provide an interesting perspective on the development of the institution of priesthood in the Torah. The Torah first mentions priesthood in the narrative describing the revelation at Sinai. God commands Moshe to descend the mountain and warn the people and "the priests who come near the Lord" to keep their distance (19:22). Who are this spiritual elite, these priests who come near the lord? Apparently, they are not solely Aharon and his sons (see Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban). In this light, the command to designate Aharon and his sons as priests (28:1) constitutes not just an act of enfranchising a select group, but also a delegitimization and disenfranchisement of a larger group, "the priests who come near the Lord." One wonders what constitutes the distinction

between the priesthood of "those who come near the Lord," the pre-Sinai institution of priesthood, and Aharon and his children, the post-Sinai institution of priesthood?

Perhaps the Torah's lengthy discourse on fashion, the symbolism of the clothes, provides the key. Previously, priesthood had consisted of a spiritual class, those who strove to come close to holiness, for no other purpose than the natural religious tendency to search out God and attempt to serve him and cling to him. The text terms this "the priests who come near the Lord" (19:22). However, in the context of mishkan, the context of post-Sinai priesthood, the universal religious quest is not the sole focus or purpose of priesthood and perhaps not a purpose or focus of priesthood at all. The garments of the high priest define the function of priesthood. The clothes make the man. The priest serves not for himself, not as part of his own religious quest, but as a bridge between God and Israel. As his garments indicate, he serves to elevate Israel and atone for their sins, to repair and maintain the God-Israel relation.

## Further Study

1) While dealing extensively with three of the four garments unique to the high priest, the ephod, choshen and tzitz, the above shiur neglects to deal with the fourth garment of the high priest, the me'il. See 28:31-35 and the comments of Rashbam. How can the me'il be explained according to each of the interpretations presented in this shiur?

2) [Talmud Zevachim 88b](#) states that the placement of the section detailing the garments of the priests, chapter 28, near the section of the Torah commanding sacrifices, chapter 29, teaches us that "just as sacrifices atone so too the priest's garments atone." As part of its correlation of the various garments with various sins, the Talmud states that the tzitz atones for "azut panim," "arrogance/brazeness." Relate both the general and specific claims of the Talmud to the themes developed in this shiur.

3) Take a look at [Vayikra 10:1](#), the sin and death of Nadav and Avihu. As background read at least 9:7,15 and 23-24. How do the themes developed in the shiur above shed new light on the error of Nadav and Avihu?

4) Most commentaries (Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Ramban etc.) assume that the first born are the priests mentioned at Har Sinai that are replaced by Aharon and his sons. Some commentaries connect this to the events of the sin of the golden calf. Take a look at [Shemot 32:4-6](#) and the comments of Ramban. How different is the theory of the commentaries from the theory presented in this shiur?

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