YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**PARASHAT TETZAVEH**

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**Dedicated in memory of   
Joseph Y. Nadler, z”l, Yosef ben Yechezkel Tzvi**

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**The Garments of the High Priest**

**By Rav Michael Hattin**

Introduction

Parashat Tetzaveh continues the description of the building of the Mishkan. In exhaustive detail, the Torah spells out the garments of the Kohanim or priests. The typical priest wears four garments during the course of performing his service: breeches, a tunic, a belt and a turban. The Kohen Gadol, or High Priest, wears these four basic garments (with some variation in form) and four others in addition: a robe, an ephod, a breastplate, and a headband. Although we shall spend some time describing the form of these garments, we shall concentrate to a greater degree on their larger significance, and on the symbolism of the Kohen Gadol as an archetype.

"Separate your brother Aharon and his sons from among Bnei Yisrael and bring them close to serve as my Kohanim: Aharon, Nadav, Avihu, Elazar and Itamar. Make sacred vestments for Aharon your brother for honor and for glory." Commenting on these verses, the Ramban (13th century, Spain) explains: "Aharon ought to be honored and glorified by wearing garments of honor and glory...for these garments resemble garments of royalty in form. At the time of the Torah, the monarchy would have worn such clothing. The tunic signifies leadership just as Yosef was presented by his father with a 'tunic of many stripes'...thus, Aharon was to be clothed as a king of ancient times...the miter is still worn by royalty and nobility to this day...the breastplate and ephod are regal attire...and the headband is a type of crown. The materials used to make these garments, namely gold, sky-blue, purple and crimson, are precious and rare." Thus, the Ramban understands that the Kohen Gadol represented a kind of sovereign, for his garments of office were fashioned out of unique and expensive materials and in their appearance resembled the vestments of a king. As we investigate the matter further, we shall discover that the garments of the Kohen Gadol may have been royal and regal in form, but in substance were something else altogether.

**The Special Four Garments**

'Me'il' or Robe

Let us explore the idea further by considering the specific construction of some of these garments. Recall that four out of the eight garments of the Kohen Gadol were worn by the regular Kohen as well. The breeches, tunic, and belt of the Kohen Gadol were not substantially different from those of the regular Kohen, although there are traditions maintaining that generally speaking, the tunic and belt of the Kohen Gadol were prepared from more precious textiles or were woven with a finer and more beautiful design. The turban or miter of the Kohen Gadol was either of an entirely different type from that of the regular Kohen, or else was worn in a different manner. In any case, the more significant differences obviously concern the additional four garments that the Kohen Gadol donned as an expression of his special role.

The Me'il or robe was worn on top of the tunic and was woven entirely out of precious sky-blue wool. Upon its bottom rim were placed woven 'pomegranates' made out of sky-blue, purple and crimson wool. Either alternating between or else within the hollow pomegranates were small bells of pure gold all around. "Aharon shall wear this robe when he performs the Divine service. The sound of the bells shall be heard when he enters the Sanctuary before God and when he goes out, so that he shall not die."

What could be the purpose of this garment? Let us consider that when wearing it, Aharon's every step is announced by the serene and harmonious chiming of the bells. It is not possible to walk in this garment without being gently but constantly reminded of its gravity. Although its outer trappings may resemble the precious and golden vestments of monarchy, the primary message of this robe is not one of power, wealth, authority or control. The Kohen Gadol is a 'king' of a different sort. His steps are taken before God and he is always aware of His overarching presence. The Kohen Gadol stands before God and ministers before Him. The aim of his activities is to establish a cohesive connection between himself and the Deity. His clothing thus represents the essential dignity of the human being, the 'regal' bearing of Man which is primarily expressed by his unique potential to be aware and conscious of God.

Bear in mind that clothing is the outer gesture of our special stature in the world as human beings. No other creature has the need or the desire to fashion a covering for its naked and exposed body. No other creature can understand the profound concepts of modesty, humility or restraint that clothing fundamentally represents. These ideas are uniquely human, and are the product of the recognition of a Transcendent God in Whose constant presence we live. To don the garments of the Kohen Gadol is to take on the mantle of living life as a sanctified person, whose every footstep bespeaks Godliness. As we shall see, the other garments of the Kohen Gadol amplify this theme.

**The 'Ephod' or Vest, and the Breastplate**

The ephod was a vest or cape-like garment woven out of threads spun from gold, sky-blue, purple, and crimson wool and twined linen. Worn on top of the robe, it had two shoulder straps upon each of which was placed a precious onyx stone set in gold. Upon these two stones were engraved the names of the twelve tribes of Israel: "Place the two stones upon the shoulders of the ephod as remembrance stones for Bnei Yisrael. Aharon shall carry their names on his shoulders before God as a remembrance." It is clear from this description that the ephod was not simply a garment of royalty that glorified Aharon. An integral aspect of its construction was the placement of the two stones on Aharon's shoulders as 'remembrance.' Thus, as Aharon ministers before God, he carries upon his shoulders the symbolic burden of his office, for he represents the entire people of Israel. Though he alone is selected to minister before God in the inner chambers of the Sanctuary, he stands there not as a remote and detached priest of the Deity, as a single and individual human being, but rather as the embodiment of the entire people. They too stand before God, for their names are clearly inscribed on his shoulders. His activities as Kohen Gadol, the deeds associated with hands and arms, are colored by the insignia of the people which he carries upon the shoulders.

Extending from the shoulder straps of the ephod were two cables of gold from which was suspended the breastplate, or 'Choshen.' This ornament was fashioned out of a piece of material woven after the manner of the ephod. It was doubled over, and on its surface twelve gold settings were placed. In each of the settings was a precious stone associated with one of the tribes. Within the doubled fold of the breastplate was placed the mysterious 'Urim veTumim,' understood by some as mystical names of God. Significantly, the theme of remembrance is also associated with this ornament: "Aharon will carry the names of Bnei Yisrael in the Choshen of Judgement upon his heart when he enters the holy place, as a constant remembrance before God. You shall place the Urim veTumim in the breastplate and they shall be upon Aharon's heart when he enters to minister before God. Aharon will carry the judgement of Israel upon his heart before God always."

Again, we have a precious, ornamental article of clothing that indicates not glorious authority but rather the awesome responsibility of representing the people. The judgement of the people, their standing before God, is symbolized by the placement of their names upon Aharon's heart. His very life force, the sincerity and integrity of his being, the proverbial 'heart' that the Torah associates with one's essential and true character, is here linked with the names of the tribes. This breastplate, composed of the twin elements of the tribal names and the Divine appellations, is worn upon the heart, for the possibility of a connection between God and Man is a direct function of the sensitivity and receptivity of one's elemental core.

**The Headband**

Finally, we have the "Tzitz" or headband that the Ramban understands as a type of crown. Made out of pure gold, it was inscribed with two words: "Kodesh LaHashem" or "Holy to God." "This plate shall be worn on Aharon's forehead. Aharon shall thus carry the expiation for the sacred offerings of Bnei Yisrael...It shall be upon his forehead at all times to make the offerings of Bnei Yisrael acceptable before God." The headband, like the other 'royal' clothing of the High Priest, is prepared out of precious and valuable material. And, like the shoulder straps and the breastplate, it carries with it a text, a statement of its purpose and meaning. Engraved on its surface are but two words, but they are the two words that best capture the essential mission of the Kohen Gadol. He is holy and consecrated to God, for the purpose of his service is to establish a connection with God and to stand before His presence as a representative of the people. The robe rings with awareness, the epaulettes of the ephod speak of deeds, the placement of the breastplate suggests 'heart' or spirit, and the Golden Headband signifies thought. Worn upon the head, it consecrates the intellect to God's service, for it is acts, emotions, and understanding that make up the human personality.

**The Explanation of Saadia Gaon**

In his abridged interpretation to the Book of Shemot, Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra (12th century, Spain) quotes the words of Saadia Gaon (10th century, Babylon) to the effect that the Mishkan represents a microcosm of the universe as well as a macrocosm of the human being. Saadia explains that the construction and vessels of the Mishkan have parallels in the larger universe as well as in the small human being. Thus, for example, the Mishkan contained curtains to partition its spaces in a hierarchical way. In parallel fashion in the universe at large, the sky divides the earth from the heavens; in the miniature universe of the human being the diaphragm separates the 'higher' organs of respiration from the 'lower' organs of digestion. In the larger universe there are spiritual beings known as 'angels,' in the intermediate dimension of the Mishkan there are the cherubs which sat upon the Ark, and in the miniature world of the human personality there is the capacity for thought. Rav Saadia delineates eighteen principal features of the Mishkan, which link it to the universe at large as well as to the human being. Some of the links seem less convincing than others, but the general thrust of his interpretation is quite compelling.

Most significant for our purposes, Saadia asserts that the Kohen Gadol also has a counterpart in the larger universe as well as in the microcosm of the human being: "In the world is humanity, in the Mishkan is the Kohen Gadol, and in the human being is the heart." In other words, the Kohen Gadol is not to be misunderstood at all as an intermediary, as some sort of necessary link that bridges the great divide between God and the people of Israel. Rather, when clothed in his majestic attire he represents all of humanity, and in his capacity as High Priest proclaims the singular message that the greatest and most honored role of the human being is to live life in the constant embrace of God. The chasm can indeed be spanned, for the innate qualities of the human being, the 'heart' of creation, are attuned to a connection with God.

The intrinsic dignity of the person, the so-called royal garments of the Kohen Gadol, is a function of having been created 'in the Divine image.' That image, however, is only a potential, a latent state that must be nurtured and developed, in order to be realized. The message of the Kohen Gadol is that God has given us the opportunity to feel His presence, to sanctify our lives with His closeness, and to achieve our ultimate purpose as human beings through that nexus. Paradoxically, however, we must live our lives conditioned by the reality of His proximity in order to encounter that proximity. By donning the garments of the High Priest we submit to a way of life that is never far from the experience of God's presence. This experience is not an intellectual or conceptual construct but rather the most actual and concrete Reality conceivable.

Shabbat Shalom