**Parashat Tetzaveh: Reality's Wardrobe**

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Dear Friends,

Parashat Tetzaveh is the great wardrobe parasha. Anyone who loves clothes - be it shopping or just an interest in fashion - will find it very interesting.

But before the clothing: Last week we dealt with the building of the Mishkan, the Tabernacle. This week we are meeting the people who will work in it. This is the first time in the Torah that we meet the Israelite priestly caste. This is significant because this caste, the Cohanim, will have a pivotal role in the spiritual life of the nation for more than a thousand years – until the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD. So – welcome to a behind-the-scenes view of the priestly caste whose role it is to mediate between Bnei Yisrael and God, and to bring the People closer to holiness.

What is amazing is that this first introduction to the role of the Cohanim does not deal with their special status or the sacrifices they will give; nor does it deal with the ethical standards God requires of them. Instead, most of the parasha is about their wardrobe. This is the way the discussion begins:

**1** "And bring you near to you Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that they may minister unto Me in the priest's office, even Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, Elazar and Itamar, Aaron's sons. **2** And you shalt make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for splendor and for beauty. **3** And you shall speak to all who are wise-hearted, whom I have filled with the spirit of wisdom, that they make Aaron's garments to sanctify him, that he may minister unto Me in the priest's office. **4** And these are the garments which they shall make**:** a breastplate, and an ephod, and a robe, and a tunic of checker work, a miter, and a girdle..." (Sh'mot 28)

Why is this important? Why start with outer appearances? Is this more important than ethical and moral standards? This question is particular pertinent because the Cohanim are meant to be role models for everyone. Just three parashot ago, on the eve of the giving of the Torah, we read the beautiful passage: 6 "…and you shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the Children of Israel." (Sh'mot 19) The priesthood is an ideal, and Am Yisrael is called to be a nation of holy priests.

So what is it about the priestly clothing that requires almost an entire parasha?

In a series of articles and TED talks, Prof. Donald Hoffman from UC Irvine – a scientist, theoretician and mathematician – argues that just as the computer and the smartphone need an operating system in order to fulfill their technological functions, so too the human mind require a kind of complex operating system to allow us to fulfill our role in the world. What an operating system does is to translate reality into usable data. It compresses it into recognized forms, enabling access and retrieval. This is the function of the human brain, according to Prof. Hoffman. He claims that two basic elements of the brain's operating system are an awareness of time and an awareness of space. In reality, he says, there is no time or space. The human mind translates the mystery of reality (called "Ein-sof" in Jewish thought) to the dimensions of time and space in which we can function.  
  
I would like to suggest a Jewish approach to the evolution of the human brain. The human operating system was "installed" by eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Immediately following this event, garments make their first appearance. The Torah insists on telling us that prior to this event, Adam and Eve were bare in the deepest sense; they were without any kind of coveringl. Then "their eyes were opened", but it isn't that their eyes saw something new – nothing around them had changed! Rather, their perception had change. Their brains now possessed an awareness of space which enabled them to discover where they were, and they hid in panic. They also now had a sense of time, through which they became aware of their mortality.

But who really needs an operating system? In other words, who needs clothing?

Next week, in Parashat Ki Tissa, Moshe will ask God to show him His glory. God will say: "A human cannot see Me and live." Pure, unadulterated reality is not accessible to us. Therefore, the operating system is meant to clothe it to enable us to perceive what we can. In this way, humans can communicate within reality, interpret it and give it meaning.

Reality has no objective meaning. Rather, it assumes form and meaning by means of the human operating system acquired at the Tree of Knowledge (metaphorically, not historically or biologically), clothed as it is with layer upon layer of coverings. "The bare truth" is no longer accessible to humans. They (we) were banished from the Garden of Eden, and two angels bearing swords guard its entrance.

Hoffman uses an excellent metaphor to explain the role of clothing as layers of separation from reality. He compares them to the icons we see on our computer desktop. The icon is not the program itself. The program is located somewhere within the computer. The icon is an external "garment" which symbolizes that which is within.

For all intents and purposes, be it the judicial system or journalism, we rely on our "clothed" sense of reality to determine what is true. This is fine, because we have no other choice.

The Mishkan, and later the Temple, were The icon which represented God's presence in our world. A Jew would bring an offering or a sacrifice to God – one of gratitude, pardon, or tithes, and the Cohen or the Levite, dressed in a prescribed manner, would act as the "layer" of God's presence there to receive it. And it worked! The pilgrim bringing the sacrifice experienced a meaningful meeting with God, and from his point of view God had accepted his offering. In exchange, he felt blessed and exonerated.

A colorful tent, a priestly caste, a tradition of sacrifices and incense, an entire wardrobe – this was an operating system personified by layers of cloth and clothing. Is it possible to catch a glimpse of the "bare truth" under all of these layers? Apparently not, because "No human can see Me and live."

What is the message here? That what we are able to perceive symbolizes that which is unperceivable; that the operating system we have is all that we can have; that we should submit to it, seek to improve it, create new applications, but never confuse it with reality; that what perceive is not reality, but the processed, reduced version of it. There is great humility to be had from this message.

The Hebrew words for costumes, clothing, overcoats, freedom, and shame all share the same roots – ח.פ.ש., ב.ג.ד., מ.ע.ל., ל.ב.ש. . These are all elements of the system through which we are able to meet God. So far, we have no other.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha