



Parashat Tetzaveh: External Torah & Internal Torah

Dear Friends,

Two days ago some teens told me “you don’t look like a rabbi, you don’t have a beard.” They meant it as a compliment! Nevertheless, this drasha is a reminder that the outer garments often say nothing about the inner.

From the moment of Moshe’s birth at the beginning of the book of Sh’mot and until his death - four books and 120 years later - at the end of the book of D’varim, he stars in all of the parashot except one: Parashat Tetzaveh.

How symbolic it is that Moshe is not mentioned in the parasha which is read on the week of his birthday, which is also the day of his death. That date - the 7th of Adar - is also the day which has been designated as the memorial day for Israel’s fallen whose place of burial is unknown.

Last week’s parasha - T’rumah - described in minute detail the Tabernacle itself. This week’s parasha deals with the Cohanim who will serve in the Tabernacle - Aharon and his sons.

One of the central themes in Parashat Tetzaveh are the five outfits of clothing that the Cohanim must wear, remove, wash, and replace.

Is there a connection between these things - between Moshe’s absence from the text, issues pertaining to the priesthood, and the changes of clothes?

There is one Torah, but anyone who studies it knows that it actually contains two: the external and the internal.

The external Torah deals with the realm of what is evident - the p’shat, the story, or the outer garment. The internal Torah deals with the hidden layers, the depths, the essence.

For example, in the external Torah Moshe’s absence appears as an aside, a detail which has no significance. On the internal level, the fact that Moshe’s name is not mentioned in this parasha is an invitation that we cannot refuse, to explore the depth of human nature.

Moshe is THE archetypal prophet (“navi”). Aharon is THE archetypal Cohen. Moshe brings (“mevi”) the words of God down to human beings and “dumbs them down” for us to understand. . He is connected to divine wisdom, to a higher intelligence - called

metaphorically in the Torah, “Har Sinai” or “Har HaElohim” (the mountain of God). Aharon does the reverse: he receives the earthly gifts from the masses - gifts that contain their hopes and wishes, their prayers, their fears, and their thanksgiving - and sets them on fire so that the smoke (“the aroma”) will reach the “One on High.”

Parashat Tetzaveh is the parasha of the Cohanim, the people’s representatives, and not of the prophet. Our parasha is dedicated to the earthly dimension.

The issue of priestly clothing deepens this idea even further. Clothing is, of course, a symbol of all that is external.

And so it happens that the parasha which is seemingly so “external” describes human nature in such a profound way. It describes our deep existential void. The prophet is absent, and so is God. From this existential void we have a constant need to fill it with all kinds of things, from charismatic leaders and gurus, to screens, exciting activities and content, food, etc.

That emptiness - which appears as boredom, as a sense of meaninglessness and insignificance - arises from human blindness. We are able to see only the external layer of reality, only the evident. The inner, the essence, the Divine, will always remain concealed.

Many people - if and when they think about God - imagine Him in heaven, outside of the world, outside of their life. In their imagination He runs things “from on high”. The professional term for this is a transcendental God. What began as a metaphor - because God is not actually located in the sky looking down on us - became a “fact,” God is in heaven!

It is no wonder that modern man and woman have such a hard time connecting to the idea of the Divine, since any sensible person knows that there is nothing in the sky other than air, clouds, birds, and apparently a whole lot of pollution...

The Torah itself created this metaphor. It placed God in the sky, as it were: **And God said to Moshe, ‘This is what you will tell Bnei Yisrael: you have seen that from the skies I spoke to you’** (Sh’mot 20:18). God “descends” to Mount Sinai, whereas Moshe ascends to Him, to the mountaintop.

Later in the Tanach, in the book of Psalms, it says: **The heavens are for God, and He gave the earth to human beings** (115:16). Even today’s rabbinate uses this image of a heavenly God. The prayer for the wellbeing of the State of Israel, a very modern addition to the prayer book, opens with **“our Father in heaven.”**

All of this does not mean that we cannot turn our gaze upwards towards God. Just as there is nothing stopping us from placing our hand on our heart when we want to “speak to the heart” or “speak frankly.” Turning our gaze upwards is simply an expression of our longing for the “higher” dimension, the “heavenly” quality of human existence, the exalted.

The Torah of the Mishkan (the Tabernacle), which began in last week's parasha, comes to rectify this distortion in human perspective, and Parashat Tetzaveh deepens this process even further. In the introduction to the instructions for building the Mishkan, God says to Moshe: **And they will make a temple for Me and I will dwell *within* them** (Sh'mot 25:8). God invites human beings to mature. Stop looking for Me in the heavens. Look for Me within you. Look for Me inside, in the depth of existence, for I am the essence!

In the human experience reality is devoid of God! When we look out into the world, we see only the external layer. The garment.

Next week the Golden Calf will make its appearance. Moshe, who has represented God until now, is still absent, and the People feel totally lost. They turn to Aharon and demand, bring Him back! Aharon, brilliantly, creates for them Golden Calf, and as he finishes creating the statue, the Torah relates "**And Aharon saw, and he built an altar before Him, and Aharon cried out and said 'tomorrow is a celebration for God'.**" Don't be confused! The celebration is not for the calf, but for God! Aharon **saw** the human distress. He **saw** their emptiness and their fear. He **saw** that the people were longing for the Divine. So he invited them to celebrate the Divine, to rejoice in the Divine that is within all things.

Thousands of years have passed since Moshe's absence. Not much has changed. We still find it hard to see the Divine within ourselves. We still experience vast emptiness. We still see mostly what is external and are sure that this is all there is, we see no inner essence.

The Internal Torah has not yet been revealed.

One hundred and fifty years ago, before there was any understanding of "invisible" germs around and within us, doctors refused to accept the possibility that they were in fact responsible for transmitting diseases from one patient to another. They refused to wash their hands. From their perspective, what is invisible does not exist.

Today we know that there are indeed germs. We wash our hands and even place people in isolation, even though most of us have never seen a germ in our lives. We believe the scientists who claim that they have seen them, and the Ministry of Health which requires us to go into isolation...

Today we can delve even further, even beyond germs... Today we understand that our senses are limited to the external - to the priestly garb, so to speak. If we take the clothing off, we will still not see essence, only another external layer (the skin). And if delve even deeper, and remove that layer too, we still will not reach the Divine, only another layer (of muscle tissue and bones).

We need to go even deeper!

Parashat Tetzaveh and all of the parashot that deal with the Mishkan - and perhaps even the entire Torah - are all pointing us towards the infinite Divine essence that exists within everything, and permeates all existence.

It's hard! The prophets are long gone. The cynics breathe down our necks and mock us about our "imaginary friend...". Like the doctors of 150 years ago, cynics can only see the external Torah. But we will not be swayed: there is an internal Torah, and yes, it is concealed. Just as there are germs in the world, even if we haven't seen them, so, too, there is an essence within everything, even if it is hidden from the human eye.

Only metaphors can describe this essence, and poets and artists will direct us to it. But when our inner eyes will finally open, even for a moment, we will discover the greatest truth of all: we will discover that everything is essence, everything is Divine, yes, even the Golden Calf!

This Shabbat is called "Shabbat Zachor." It is the Shabbat before Purim, when we remember what Amalek wrought (Haman is a descendent of Amalek). I wish to suggest that Amalek is not just any enemy. Amalek is the internal cynic within every one of us; the voice that weakens us, that bashes us in our vulnerable moments, saying: It's all nonsense. There is nothing. No essence. The heavens are empty. There is no meaning. What you see is what you get."

Megillat Esther, which we will read next week, does not mention God at all! Not even once! There is a message here: It is time to look for God deep inside. Deep inside everything. Permeating all of creation. That is the Internal Torah.

Yes, it's time!

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha