

Kol Nefesh Masorti Synagogue

Sedra Tetzaveh / Shabbat Zachor

(Exodus 27:20 - 30:10 & Deuteronomy 25:17-19)

Robert Stone, 4 March 2023

וְאָתָּה תְּדַבֵּר אֶל־כָּל־חַכְמֵי־לֵב אֲשֶׁר מָלֵאתִיו רוּחַ חָכְמָה
וַעֲשׂוּ אֶת־בְּגָדֵי אֹהֶלן לְקַדְּשׁוֹ לְכַהֲנֹנֹלִי:

You shall speak to every wise-hearted person whom I have filled with the spirit of wisdom that they make me Aaron's robes, to consecrate him to be a priest to Me. (Ex. 28:3)

Today is Shabbat Zachor, the Shabbat before Purim, when we read in our second scroll the verses from Devarim commanding us to remember Amalek. The connection is obvious: Amalek, the King of the Amalekites, slaughtered the Israelite stragglers, whom Robert Alter identifies in his commentary as “the old and the infirm”, as well as women and children. Haman, a descendant of Agag, the king of the Amalekites, tried to kill the Jews.

Most of our Sedra today, however – Sedra Tetzaveh – is taken up with a detailed description of the robes and paraphernalia to be made for Aaron as High Priest. Sedra Tetzaveh frequently occurs on Shabbat Zachor. What is the connection here? Well, there is a common thread of clothing, if you'll excuse the pun. Just as the High Priest is to have a special costume, so we wear special costumes during Purim, in our Purim spiel. In the case of Kol Nefest this is to be *15 Shades of Green*. In the case of my other synagogue, Finchley Reform, we are doing *Esther the Musical* – based on *Matilda* for which the flyer says, “Miss Trunchbull says you must wear your school uniform”. Purim is a time for fancy dress – indeed, according to the Shulchan Aruch, it is the **only** occasion on which cross-dressing is permitted. So how does the connection work?

Well, let's begin with Aaron's robe. God tells Moses to ‘speak to every wise-hearted person whom I have filled with the spirit of wisdom, that they make Aaron's garments to consecrate him, to be a priest for Me.’ (Exodus 28:3). The vestments – a breastplate, an ephod, a robe, a fringed tunic, a headdress, a sash and other accoutrements – are then described in loving detail. We learn how they are to be made, what materials are to be used, how they all fit together – sumptuous descriptions ‘of gold, of blue, purple and crimson yarns and of fine twisted linen’ (28:8), and of thirteen kinds of precious and semi-precious stone.

Some may think this a bit odd. Sacred craftsmanship? Constructed textiles as a holy pursuit? Surely Jews are above all a people devoted to the word – to the study of Torah, Talmud, endless volumes of commentary and controversy. As Amos Oz and Faniz Oz-Salzberger put

it in *Jews and Words*, ‘Jewish continuity has always hinged on uttered and written words, on an expanding maze of interpretations, debates, and disagreements, and on a unique human rapport. ... Ours is not a bloodline but a textline.’

Yet here we have 43 verses devoted to clothing design – and in other Sedrot, an equally detailed description of the design and building of the Tabernacle, not to mention a further description of Aaron’s vestments when Bezalel and his skilled team actually make them. These are not incidental matters. If Aaron is not wearing the right vestments when he approaches the altar, he will die (28:42). Aaron’s vestments are an outward manifestation of Aaron’s role as a High Priest with a right to enter the Mishkan, but they also function as a constant physical reminder to Aaron of the holiness of his role and the need for him to perform it with mindfulness.

To make the vestments, God’s instructs Moses to speak **אֵל-כָּל-חַכְמֵי-לֵב**, which the Etz Hayim Chumash and others translate as ‘all who are skilful’, but which literally means ‘every wise-hearted person’ as Robert Alter translates it, or ‘wise of mind’, as Everett Fox has it. The commentary in the Etz Hayim Chumash notes, ‘There is a wisdom of the heart, an emotional maturity born of age and experience, that is different from intellectual knowledge and is specially suited to fashioning holiness.’ But the concept goes even beyond the emotional. In Biblical terms the heart is a lot more than the seat of the emotions. The Koehler-Baumgartner Lexicon gives 12 meanings to **לֵב** apart from that of the heart as an organ, ranging from one’s inner self through courage to will and intention to reason and conscience.

The Torah scroll is dressed as the High Priest, with a robe, a breastplate, *rimonim* (pomegranates) and bells. When we see a beautifully worked Torah cover or breastplate or *rimonim*, or a lovely *tallit*, we are witnessing the work of someone wise of heart who knows how to ‘worship God in the beauty of holiness’ (Psalm 29:2). Kol Nefesh has a Knit and Natter group – who make not just baby hats but also beautiful items like the cloth that covers the reading table.

Fancy dress and cross dressing at Purim can hardly be described as worshipping God in the beauty of holiness’, but it is a recognition of the power of clothing as an external manifestation of the state of the **לֵב**, of the heart, the mind, the inner self. The fancy dress we wear at a Purim, like the obligation to get drunk, expresses our rejoicing at the victory over

Haman, but it also expresses our sense of the world turned upside down. Those who set out to kill the Jews are themselves exposed and killed.

So what we wear can be important, not only in what it tells others about us, but also in how it impacts on the way we feel about ourselves,

To conclude our consideration of this issue, I will finish with an anecdote that includes the most elegant put-down I have ever come across. When I was in the Foreign Office, when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, a friend of mine who was working in No. 10 Downing Street told me that the Prime Minister's Office had written to Buckingham Palace to say that the Queen and the Prime Minister were to attend the same event the following week. They would be grateful to know what the Queen would be wearing so that their clothing would not clash. The reply from Buckingham Palace was "Oh, that won't be necessary: Her Majesty never notices what other people are wearing."