



Clothes Don't Make the Man

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Yosef's story is one of extreme and often abrupt transitions. From beloved son to despised brother, from abject powerlessness and poverty to the authority of a prominent Egyptian household, Yosef moves in and out of favor, in and out of prison. He is constantly shifting in his status and his relationships to others. In Parashat Mikeitz, we see the most dramatic of these twists of Yosef's fate when he is freed from prison and invited into Pharaoh's house. There, he interprets Pharaoh's dreams and becomes his second in command. One common thread woven through Yosef's story is the way that the characters in it denote his status by giving him clothing, noting his clothing, and sometimes even taking it away. Why is the role of clothing so prominent in Yosef's life and what does it tell us about his character?

When Yosef first leaves the prison and approaches the palace, even though Pharaoh is so vexed and his servants communicate that the situation is one of urgency, Yosef decides¹ that before he approaches Pharaoh he should take the time to shave and change his clothes:

בראשית מא:יד

וַיִּשְׁלַח פַּרְעֹה וַיִּקְרָא אֶת יוֹסֵף וַיְרִיצֵהוּ מִן הַבּוֹר וַיַּגְלַח וַיַּסְלֵף שְׂמֹלֵתוֹ וַיָּבֵא אֶל פַּרְעֹה.

Bereishit 41:14

Pharaoh sent and summoned Yosef and they rushed him from the prison. Yosef shaved and changed his clothing and came to Pharaoh.

One way of reading this choice on Yosef's part is to understand that he felt that he needed to change his clothes, to present himself honorably to the king.² However, there is also

¹ It is possible that he received instructions to this effect, but there is no textual evidence of outside influence causing Yosef to take this action.

² This is the view of Radak.



significant boldness in this choice; Yosef feels that he *can* change his clothes. Yosef is confident that he can go to the king and have the king see him not as he is now, a desperate prisoner, but as who he could one day be—an advisor to the king. Yosef's changing of his clothes reflects and signifies his understanding that he is able to change his status. Because he believes that he can be taken seriously, he projects the self-esteem and ambition he needs to present himself and his plans to the king.

Pharaoh, too, sees Yosef's leadership potential and elevates him to a position of power through dressing Yosef a certain way:

בראשית מ:מב

וַיֹּסֶר פַּרְעֹה אֶת טַבַּעְתּוֹ מֵעַל יָדוֹ וַיִּתֵּן אֹתָהּ עַל יַד יוֹסֵף וַיַּלְבֵּשׁ אֹתוֹ בְּגָדֵי שֵׁשׁ וַיַּשֶּׂם רֶבֶד הַזָּהָב עַל צַוְאָרוֹ:

Bereishit 40:42

Pharaoh removed his ring from his own hand and placed it on Yosef's. He clothed him in royal linen³ garments and placed a gold ornament around his neck.

Of course, Pharaoh is not the first one to see Yosef as special and dress him in royal clothing accordingly. The first person to do this is his own father, Ya'akov:

בראשית לז:ג

וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶהָב אֶת יוֹסֵף מִכָּל בְּנָיו כִּי בֶן זִקְנִים הוּא לוֹ וַעֲשָׂה לוֹ כְּתֹנֶת פָּסִים:

Bereishit 37:3

And Yisrael loved Yosef the most out of all of his children for he was a precocious child⁴ and he made a fine cloak⁵ for him.

Of course, this coat that Ya'akov made for his favorite son made an impression on his brothers and became the focal point, if not the cause of their resentment of him.

בראשית כז:כג

וַיְהִי כַּאֲשֶׁר בָּא יוֹסֵף אֶל אָחִיו וַיַּפְשִׁיטוּ אֶת יוֹסֵף אֶת כְּתֹנֶתוֹ אֶת כְּתֹנֶת הַפָּסִים אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו:

³ Most commentaries understand that שֵׁשׁ בְּגָדֵי are fine linen only available in Egypt. This fabric was very expensive and wearing it denoted royal status.

⁴ Or "a child of his old age." זִקְנִים could refer to the chronological age of Ya'akov or to the maturity of Yosef. Rashi prefers the former explanation, whereas Onkelos translates the phrase as "אָרִי בֶר חֲכִים הוּא לֵיהּ", for he was a clever son to him" understanding זִקְנִים as a reference to Yosef's sagacity.

⁵ Rashi understands that this cloak was made of linen, R. Sa'adya Gaon thinks it was silk, the Ibn Ezra thinks it was embroidered, and Radak thinks that it was striped.

Bereishit 37:23

When Yosef came to his brothers, they stripped Yosef of his cloak, the fine cloak that was upon him.

To Yosef's brothers, this coat symbolized all that was contemptible about Yosef; they could not think of Yosef without thinking of his coat, and could not relate to the coat without thinking of their hatred of Yosef. Yosef himself, however, related to this article of clothing completely differently and it also reflects the way that he felt about his treatment at his brothers' hands. There is an odd redundancy in the way that the verse talks about this garment, **אֶת כְּתֹנֶת הַפָּסִים אֲשֶׁר עָלָיו, his cloak, the fine cloak that was upon him.** The *ketonet passim* is referred to both as "**his**" that is as belonging to Yosef and as "**upon him**" in a more happenstance way. The verse's double characterization of the coat reflects the attitudes of all of the brothers to the coat. As far as his brothers were concerned, this coat was Yosef's in the most complete way, it was **his**. This coat fully belonged to Yosef and completely defined his identity. Because his brothers saw him exclusively through the lens of his status as the favored son, as a coddled, precocious child and the object of their resentment they were willing to kill him in cold blood. Yosef, on the other hand, had a much more casual relationship to this coat. He thought of it as being merely **upon him**, not as fully *belonging* to him in any real way, let alone constituting who he was. Just as a coat could be put on today and taken off tomorrow and worn by any number of people, Yosef didn't take his status as favorite son too seriously... perhaps at his own peril.

This mentality of Yosef, his seeing things as circumstantial rather than essential, helps us understand how he was able to eventually reconcile with his brothers. Yosef could have blamed himself for what happened to him and for how he was treated. He could have thought, with or without self-pity, "There is something about me that makes my brothers hate me. I am annoying, unloveable, and irredeemable. My own brothers can't stand me. What will I amount to in life?" But Yosef does not blame himself for the behavior of his brothers. He also does not slip into thinking of his brothers as being irredeemably cruel and hate-filled. We see both of these elements clearly expressed in the way that Yosef tests his brothers upon their arrival in Egypt.

When all of his brothers, including his full-sibling Binyamin, come to his house, Yosef seats them in the order of their age. He seats Binyamin next to him and gives him five times the amount of food that the other brothers receive. According to Seforno's⁶ commentary, this display of favoritism is being strategically employed by Yosef:

⁶ R. Ovadiah ben Ya'akov Seforno, 1475-1550, Italy.



ספורנו בראשית מג:לד

ותרב משאת בנימין. לראות אם יקנאו בו:

Seforno Bereishit 43:34

He increased the lot of Binyamin. To see if they would be jealous of him.

Yosef gives Binyamin preferential treatment because he wants to see if his brothers would treat Binyamin in the same way that they treated him—with disdain and enmity. And he then frames Binyamin for theft, planting his own goblet in his brother's sack for a similar purpose:

ספורנו בראשית מד:ב

תשים בפי אמתחת הקטן. לראות איך ימסרו עצמם עליו כדי להצילו:

Seforno Bereishit 44:2

Put [the goblet] in the opening of the sack of the youngest. To see if they will give of themselves in order to save him.

According to the Seforno, Yosef's maltreatment of Binyamin serves the same purpose as his earlier spoiling of Binyamin—to see how his brothers will react to this situation. This test, designed to teach Yosef about his brothers' character, in fact teaches us something critical about Yosef himself. He clearly does not think that his brothers' hatred and maltreatment of him is intrinsically tied to him; he recognizes it as the reaction of the brothers to feeling slighted by their father. He then understands that it's therefore possible for them to treat Binyamin the same way that they treated him if the circumstances are allowed to repeat themselves. Yet, he also does not think of his brothers as being somehow intrinsically evil at their core. He devises this ruse because he thinks it is possible, maybe even likely, that they have matured, that they have changed. He believes that this time they can treat Rachel's children better. He believes that his brothers can redeem themselves.

We can see how Yosef looks at the behavior of his brothers, as separate from his feelings about them “as people,” by the way he speaks to his brothers after their eventual reunion and the passing of their father, Ya'akov. Yosef's brothers are concerned that now that Ya'akov is gone, Yosef might choose to take his revenge. Therefore they tell him that their father has asked Yosef to have compassion on them.⁷ Yosef responds that this is unnecessary and that he has no ill will in his heart towards them:

בראשית נ:יט-כ

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם יוֹסֵף אֵל תִּירְאוּ כִּי הִתַּחַת אֱלֹהִים אָנִי: וְאַתֶּם חֲשַׁבְתֶּם עָלַי רָעָה אֱלֹהִים חֲשָׁבָה לְטָבָה
לְמַעַן עֲשֶׂה כִּיּוֹם הַזֶּה לְהַחֲיֹת עִם רַב:

⁷ Bereishit 50:15-19.



Bereishit 50:19-20

Yosef said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I instead of God?! You intended evil towards me; God intended it for good, in order to create this day and sustain numerous peoples.”

Earlier in the story, when they first meet Yosef and he briefly imprisons them, his brothers say about themselves, **וְאַתֶּם חָשַׁבְתֶּם עָלַי רָעָה, אֲנַחְנוּ אַשְׁמִים** **we are guilty**,⁸ but here Yosef says, **וְאַתֶּם חָשַׁבְתֶּם עָלַי רָעָה, You intended evil towards me**, focusing on their plan—what they *did*, not who they *are*. This critical distance enabled him to forgive his brothers. He doesn’t view them as guiltless as far as their behavior—Yosef doesn’t disregard that his brothers have wronged him and he acknowledges that they wanted to harm him—but he doesn’t view them as inherently evil. He could imagine them behaving better in different circumstances and he can see himself being in relationship with them. Just as a person can change their clothes, so too a person can change their actions.

According to the Ramban, Yosef’s clothing and the way that it is connected to his status and stature is reflected in the clothing that is worn by the priests, the Kohanim **לכבוד ולתפארת, for honor and glory**.

רמב"ן שמות כח:

שיהיה נכבד ומפואר במלבושים נכבדים ומפוארים...כי אלה הבגדים לבושי מלכות הן, בדמותן ילבשו המלכים בזמן התורה, כמו שמצינו בכתונת (בראשית ל"ג) **ועשה לו כתונת פסים...**

Ramban Shemot 28:2

That [the priest] should be honored and glorified through honorable and glorious raiments...for these clothes are royal garments, and kings in the time of the Torah wore clothes just like them. Like we saw in the cloak [of Yosef], **and he made him a fine cloak** (Bereishit 37:3).

And one of the most critical elements of the *bigdei kehunah*, the priestly garments, is that they reflect this attitude of Yosef: they are intended to be put on and then to be taken off.

תלמוד בבלי זבחים יז:

אמר רבי אבואה אמר רבי יוחנן ומטו בה משמיה דרבי אלעזר ברבי שמעון דאמר קרא **וחגרת אותם** **אבנט אהרן ובניו וחבשת להם מגבעות והיתה להם כהונה לחקת עולם** (שמות כ"ט). בזמן שבגדיהם עליהם כהונתם עליהם אין בגדיהם עליהם אין כהונתם עליהם.

Talmud Bavli Zevahim 17b

R. Abuha said in the name of R. Yohanan, and it has also come in the name of R. Eliezer b. R. Shimon, that which the verse says: **And you shall gird Aharon and his sons with a belt,**

⁸ Bereishit 42:21.



and you shall dress their heads with turbans and the priesthood shall be for them (an everlasting law) (Shemot 29:9). At the time that their clothes are upon them, their priesthood is upon them, when their clothes are not upon them, their priesthood is not upon them.

Just like Yosef's *ketonet* and the other clothes he wears do not belong to or define him, the priestly garments do not belong to the Kohanim; they are worn by them, they are “upon”⁹ them. Even Kohanim, who we think of as bearing the most intrinsic status, based entirely on pedigree and lineage, must acknowledge that priest is a role that one plays. You step into being a Kohen when you dress as a Kohen, and when you take off your uniform, your status changes.

We tend to equate people with the roles that they play, and we tend to equate people with their behaviors. We make this mistake both about ourselves and about others. We lock ourselves into thinking that we are “good” people and thereby blind ourselves to our failings. Or, we lock ourselves into thinking that we are “bad” people and prevent ourselves from seeing our own potential. We also inhibit others by saying that if a person has done a certain behavior, it makes them into an “x” type of person. Sometimes that is true—a rotten character does produce rotten behavior—but often it is not true, and we cut ourselves off from one another and from one another's abilities in a way that isn't necessary. If we saw ourselves and others like Yosef saw himself and his brothers, as people who have taken on identities that can be cast on and off, we'd open ourselves up to realizing greatness in ourselves and in those with whom we come into contact.

Yosef doesn't think of himself as a beloved son or as a hated brother, as a prisoner or as a prince. Yosef sees himself as Yosef. Sometimes he is wearing the rags of a powerless man, and sometimes he is wearing Pharaoh's ring. Regardless of how he is dressed at any given moment, he is able to look at what comes and who he becomes as being transient. He doesn't define himself by who he is at any given moment, and it allows him to see that who he is now is not who he must be forever, enabling him both to interpret the dreams of others and to realize his own.

Wishing you a Shabbat of dressing well.

⁹ Note that “**upon him**” was the way that the verse describes how Yosef was clothed in his *ketonet passim*.

