



Discourses in Clothing: From Priestly Garments to Common Garb

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Our *parashah* details the design and materials of the priestly garments of Aharon and his sons. In these descriptions, the purpose of the garments is summed up in two words—“for honor (*kavod*) and beauty (*tiferet*)”:

Shemot 28:2, 40

²You shall make sacred clothing for your brother Aharon, for dignity (*kavod*) and adornment (*tiferet*, JPS translation)... ⁴⁰And for Aharon’s sons also you shall make... make for them, for dignity and adornment.

These verses compel us to try to understand the significance of dealing with clothing and how these garments operate within the stated goal of “honor and beauty”, “adornment and dignity”. I’d like to argue that this designation is not only relevant to the clothing of Aharon

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and his sons but is actually the function of clothing in general. Moreover, these verses provide templates of how to speak about clothing, which we can follow in our own discussions about this topic. I would like to focus on four

main principles that emerge from these verses: the need for closeness, a requirement to be God-fearing, the importance of freedom, and finally, a distancing of the discourse from being about the body.

1. Closeness

The priests would serve the Holy One in the holy, and they are considered in many senses to be the closest to God. However, the verse that opens Shemot, chapter 28, the chapter dealing with their clothes, emphasizes a different kind of closeness, that of Moshe:

Shemot 28:1

You shall bring forward/closer your brother Aharon, with his sons, from among the Israelites, to serve Me as priests: Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, Elazar and Itamar, the sons of Aharon.

This verse essentially commands a closeness between Moshe and Aharon and his sons, which is a critical component of Moshe's involvement in their clothing. These verses claim that the framework that allows for Moshe to work with the clothing, is his closeness to those who are being clothed by him. First Moshe is commanded to bring them close. Only after this step is he provided with the details of how to dress them.

How can we understand this demand of closeness? The priestly garments constitute and concretize the encounter between the individual and society, the personal and the communal. On the one hand, they are the external appearance of those who run the communal institution that is the Temple. At the same time, perhaps because we are dealing with something on the body, there is some aspect of intimacy, of dealing in the realm of the individual. Clothing occupies a liminal place, it marks boundaries

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and also places of connection between the individual and the group. Markers of boundaries and of encounter can often be frightening on occasion, or sensitive. The verses offer a basic intermediary for this liminal contact, of entering this boundary space—closeness. So the verses demand that those who are engaged in the delicate work of navigating the expression of someone's public and external identity, while at the same time touching a person's most private and intimate self, should make sure that they have a foundation of closeness.

2. Fear

As we mentioned, the goal of the priestly garments is to create or achieve “honor and beauty.” The verses don't merely order this but they also provide the conditions for constructing garments that could be successful:

Shemot 28:3

Next you shall instruct all who are skillful (*hakhmei lev*), whom I have endowed with the gift of skill (*ru'ah hokhmah*), to make Aharon's vestments, for consecrating him to serve Me as priest.

The chapter points to the need for those who are engaged in constructing the garments to be “skillful,” literally, “those of a wise heart”, and “endowed with the gift of skill,” literally, “filled with a wind of wisdom.” What is common to these expressions is that the construction needs to be done with wisdom (*hokhmah*), not necessarily of the intellect, but of the heart, a spiritual wisdom. The Ha'amek Davar comments on the interesting expression of “wisdom of the heart”:

Ha'amek Davar, commentary on Shemot 28:3

“To all those of a wise heart”—The location of wisdom is not in the heart, but in the mind! So every time it says “those of a wise heart” the meaning is fear of God which is the highest wisdom and is located in the heart, as is known.

The Ha'amek Davar bases his interpretation on a verse from Psalms, “The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord, all who practice it gain sound understanding, praise of Him is everlasting.” (Psalm 111:10). This essentially argues that the heart’s wisdom is a kind of primeval wisdom, it is the fear of God. Thus, engaging in the construction of the clothing demands fear, the fear of God. It appears the people charged with dressing others must fear God is because they are ultimately dealing with the image of God. Their goal is to honor and dignify a person, an image of God. When you deal with others who are the image of God you need to call upon your own fear of God.

3. Freedom

The concept of “wisdom of the heart” also intrigued R. Samson Rafael Hirsch. He hones in on the fact that the construction and furnishing of the mishkan doesn’t focus on the need for this type of wisdom:

R. Samson Rafael Hirsch, commentary on Shemot 28:3

“To all those of a wise heart that I have filled with a spirit of wisdom”—This is only said here regarding those who make the clothing, but regarding the construction of the mishkan, the need for wisdom appears only in chapter 31, regarding the appointing of Betzalel and Oholiav.

Rav Hirsch investigates the essential difference between the clothing and the furniture which would account for the difference in the qualifications of the people who make them. His explanation:

It appears that this is the reason: constructing and furnishing the mishkan was entirely dependent in its guidelines and details on the template that God showed to Moshe. However, regarding the clothing there was more freedom of activity.

Rav Hirsch claims that the construction of the *mishkan* was essentially an act of copying—God showed Moshe a template which was followed by the various workers and artisans. This was not the case regarding the clothing of Aharon and his sons, there the artisans were given more creative latitude.

Clothing requires some amount of freedom in bringing them from the potential to the wearable.

Perhaps the reason for this greater freedom when it comes to the garments is due to the nature of clothing—it has to fit the one who wears it. So the ones who make the clothing need to have some more creative and intellectual space,

somewhere for a bit of individuality. We can see that the intuition regarding clothing, even the official priestly garments, even though they are described rather specifically in the verses, is that clothing requires some amount of freedom in bringing them from the potential to the wearable.

4. The body

Surprisingly, though we know that clothing is designed for the human body, there is no real engagement in this chapter with the body on which the clothing is placed:

Shemot 28:4

These are the vestments they are to make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a fringed tunic, a headdress, and a sash. They shall make those sacral vestments for your brother Aaron and his sons, for priestly service to Me.

The focus of the verses again and again is on the clothing, rather than on the body being clothed.

Yet there are two noteworthy exceptions to this. First, the placement of the breastplate on

the heart of Aharon:

Shemot 28:39-30

²⁹Aharon shall carry the names of the sons of Israel on the breastpiece of decision over his heart, when he enters the sanctuary, for remembrance before the Lord at all times. ³⁰Inside the breastpiece of decision you shall place the *Urim* and *Tummim*, so that they are over Aharon's heart when he comes before the Lord. Thus Aharon shall carry the instrument of decision for the Israelites over his heart before the Lord at all times.

The heart is, of course, an internal organ. So essentially the body here is still somewhat abstract, we still have no reference to the visual and tactile body.

The second exception is found in the verse that deals with covering. It focuses on the function of the clothing in covering or concealing nakedness:

Shemot 28:42

You shall also make for them linen breeches to cover their nakedness; they shall extend from the hips to the thighs.

The Hizkuni clarifies that this covering is not a part of the framework of “honor and beauty” as he says:

Hizkuni, commentary on Shemot 28:42

“Linen breeches”—Since it says regarding them that they are to cover naked flesh, “honor and beauty” was not said regarding them.

This close reading of the Hizkuni highlights that the covering of the body that is about concealing nakedness is not connected to “honor and beauty.” The Hizkuni isolates this

verse from the others in this chapter. To him, this verse is exceptional because it only refers to the sexual organs of the body. Additionally, perhaps this is the reason that this is the only verse that describes the function of the clothing as one of covering. Aside from this none of the verses relate to covering the body at all.

It is not only that the verses don't describe the function of clothing as to conceal the body, they actually describe their function as marking and calling attention to the presence of Aharon in the Temple, in the vicinity of the holy. Their goal is to accentuate, even to draw attention to a person—the person despite his body, but also through his body, doing work and existing within the Temple, within the holy:

Shemot 28:34-35

... ³⁴a golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, all around the hem of the robe. ³⁵Aharon shall wear it while officiating, so that the sound of it is heard when he comes into the sanctuary before the Lord and when he goes out—that he may not die.

Clothing is designed to accentuate a person, to mark him and his presence. They are not at all about concealment.

What emerges from reading this chapter is that clothing is designed to accentuate a person, to mark him and his presence. They are not at all about concealment.

Ultimately, it is possible to read our *parashah's* description of clothing, “you shall make sacred clothing... for honor and beauty” and really all of Shemot narrowly, as describing only the clothing of the High Priest and the others who serve in the Holy, them and their direct descendants. However, I would like to suggest that the words of the chapter can be applied to clothing and codes of dress in general.

What these verses first teach us is that the goal of clothing is to bring “honor and beauty”

and they illustrate a few guiding principles for designing clothing and discussing clothing with that goal in mind. We have dealt with four of them. First, dealing with this type of clothing must happen within a context of closeness. Second, this discourse requires a fear of God and recognition of the image of God in each person which the clothing is designed to dignify and glorify. Third, even if there are guidelines to this discourse, they need to be applied freely when the clothing is actually made. Lastly, it is to make clear that what we are talking about is clothing and not covering the body. Clothing is about honoring and marking people, drawing attention to them, having their “sound heard” when they “come and go.”