



Dressing for Prayer: Being Held by God

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How is one meant to prepare for a direct encounter with God?

This is perhaps one of the most important questions of prayer, and we will have occasion throughout the year to consider this from different angles. In VaYishlah, one possible answer emerges from a simple statement of Ya'akov to his family and followers. After hearing God tell him to leave Lavan's house and return to Beit El, Ya'akov says the following:

Genesis 35:2-3

“...Remove the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves, and **change your clothes**. Then we will arise and go to up to Beit El, and I shall make an altar there to the God who answered me on the day of my distress and was with me on the way that I went.”

בראשית לה:ב-ג

הִסְרוּ אֶת־אֱלֹקֵי הַנֹּכַר אֲשֶׁר בְּתִכְכֶּם
וְהִטְהַרוּ וְהַחֲלִיפוּ שְׂמֹלֵתֵיכֶם: וְנִקְוָמָה
וְנַעֲלֶה בֵּית־אֵל וְאֶעֱשֶׂה־שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַאֲלֹהִים
הָעֹנֶה אֹתִי בְיוֹם צָרָתִי וַיְהִי עִמָּדִי בַדֶּרֶךְ
אֲשֶׁר הִלְכְּתִי:

Ya'akov is preparing to encounter God directly through sacrifice, an analog to our experience of prayer.¹ It has been decades since Ya'akov actually encountered God in this way, and now

¹ See Bavli Berakhot 26b.



he is preparing for this transition back into direct relationship. Critically, Ya'akov prepares by asking everyone to purify themselves and to change their clothes. What is the significance of changing clothes?

While most commentators read “change your clothes” as a reference to removing any trace of idol worship in that specific moment, Ibn Ezra² understands this to impact our current practice of prayer:

Ibn Ezra to Genesis 35:2

From this place we learn that when Israel goes to a set place to pray the Amidah, their body must be clean and their clothes must be clean.

אבן עזרא על בראשית לה:ב

מהמקום הזה נלמוד שחייב כל ישראל כאשר ילך להתפלל למקום קבוע להיות גופו נקי ומלבושיו נקיים:

Indeed, the phrase “changing clothes” is fairly uncommon in the Bible, but each time it comes, the person changing their clothes is about to encounter God or a king. Joseph changes his clothes before meeting Pharaoh (Genesis 41:14), and King David changes his clothes after mourning his son, to bow before God (II Samuel 12:20). Finally, the children of Israel wash their clothes before encountering God at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:10,14).³

Apparently, what we wear helps us prepare to meet God, in the context of prayer. What is the deeper connection between clothes and prayer?

On one level, clothes are an expression of respect. One would not show up to meet a king in rags, and similarly, one does not stand before God in prayer in tatters. However, the required

² R. Avraham ibn Ezra, 11th-12th century.

³ While there the term is וַיִּכְבְּסוּ (wash) not וַיַּחֲלִיפוּ (change), note that Targum Yerushalmi (Neofiti) translates both terms the same way: וַיַּחֲוִירוּ (cleanse). See also Bekhor Shor to Exodus 19:10.



clothing for prayer is not out of the ordinary. In fact, most of the halakhic discussion around clothing and prayer seems to center on the clothes being one's regular dress.⁴

Tosefta Berakhot 2:14, ed. Lieberman, p. 9

תוספתא ברכות (ליברמן) ב:יד

One may not pray the Amidah unless one's chest is covered
(i.e. fully dressed).⁵

לא יתפלל עד שיכסה את לבו

The requirement in saying the Amidah is to cover one's chest, but not, significantly, to wear fancy clothing or special garments.⁶ Uri Ehrlich notes: "[The approach of the rabbis to clothing in prayer] overtly rejects a prayer practice imitative of the special cultic attire of the Temple priests.⁷ This decision by the rabbis is in harmony with their broader conception of prayer as a popular way of worshiping God, shared by all."⁸

But perhaps the most moving reason why we wear clothing to pray is one that reconceptualizes the view of clothing entirely. The Tosefta, in discussing how one should cover one's body when praying or saying Shema, claims that standing naked is not

⁴ While today, wearing a *tallit* is a big part of prayer clothing, in the talmudic age, *tallitot* were not necessarily required of all in prayer (and not directly connected to the *mitzvah* of *tzitzit*). See Uri Ehrlich, *Nonverbal Language of Prayer: A New Approach to Jewish Liturgy*, trans. Dena Ordan (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), pp. 146-147.

⁵ For a full discussion, see Ehrlich, pp. 136-138. This requirement for the Amidah is in contrast to saying the Shema, which requires less covering and/or other materials. See Tosefta Berakhot 2:14 and Bavli Berakhot 24b.

⁶ See the example in Bavli Shabbat 33b, where R. Shimon bar Yohai and his son wear their regular clothes to recite the Amidah; no special clothing is mentioned. There were higher standards for the prayer leader (see Mishnah Megillah 4:6 and Tosefta Megillah 3:30, ed. Lieberman, p. 362), but even that standard mainly forbade inappropriate clothing which was too short; see Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta Kifshuta* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1962), vol. 5, pp. 1211-1212. Later, a girdle seems required (see Bavli Shabbat 9b-10a), although this appears only in Babylonian sources (probably influenced by Persian cultural practices), and is a relatively simple requirement: a belt that holds up one's pants. See Ehrlich, pp. 140-142.

⁷ Ehrlich points to the explicit rejection of a requirement to wear only white clothing—clothing associated with the priests—when leading the Amidah in Mishnah Megillah 4:8. For other understandings of this *mishnah*, see Shmuel Safrai and Ze'ev Safrai, *Mishnat Eretz Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Lifschitz, 2010), Moed vol. 9, p. 398.

⁸ Ehrlich, p. 155. It is true this approach became more specific over time. See, for example, Rambam, Mishneh Torah Hilkhhot Tefillah 5:5, based on the individual practice of Rav Yehudah reported in Bavli Shabbat 30b.



praiseworthy for a person. Why? Because when God created people, God made them with clothing. This seems counterintuitive to our understanding of birth! But this is how the clothing is described:

Tosefta Berakhot 2:14, ed. Lieberman, p. 9

It is not praiseworthy for a person to stand naked. When the Holy Blessed One created Adam, [God] did not create him naked, as it says: “When I made clouds his garment, and thick darkness his swaddling band” (Job 38:9).

“When I made clouds his garment”—this is the fetal sac;
 “thick darkness his swaddling band”—this is the placenta.

תוספתא ברכות (ליברמן) ב:יד

אין שבחו של אדם להיות עומד ערום
 שכשברא הקדוש ברוך הוא אדם לא
 בראו ערום שנ' בשומי ענן לבושו
 וערפל חתלתו

בשומי ענן לבושו זה השפיר
 וערפל חתלתו זה שליא

In this conception, our clothing is synonymous with the protective and nourishing parts of the mother's body, guarding and feeding the fetus. When we are born, we are “clothed” by these elements, and emerge into the world with this sense of safety and security. This vision of creation is, of course, in stark contrast to the story of Adam and Havah in Genesis, who are created naked, realize their nakedness, and cover themselves with temporary clothing made of fig leaves. In that view, clothing shields us from the embarrassment of standing naked in front of others.

But in this interpretation of Job, clothing is more than a covering: it is a point of connection. If God clothed humans with the fetal sac and the placenta, then to stand before God clothed might conjure up similar feelings of being held and fed. Based on this interpretation, clothing functions as a swaddle more than a screen.

Part of the vision of prayer is a deepened connection between God and the worshiper.

Perhaps when we dress for prayer, we might have in mind this image of clothing: the idea that



God, from the moment of our birth, swaddled us in protective and nourishing covering. In my own prayer life, I long for a feeling of being held by God, protected and covered. Even when I don't enter a prayer moment with that sense of God's protection, I try to move in that direction. Experiencing the warmth and tactile nature of my clothing sometimes helps push me there.

What might “changing one's clothes” mean, then? It could mean changing into clothes that conjure respect for the other party. But it could also offer an opportunity to contemplate the ways in which God continues to nourish and protect, as in the “clothing” of the newborn. Coming to prayer with this consciousness can, perhaps, change the experience of prayer. I am not just facing the King with proper attire,⁹ but I am also dressed in the protective and life-giving aspects of God's love and care. As we move through the world, we may not always feel this sense of closeness or protection. In fact, we often feel exposed and at risk. But perhaps the understanding of God holding us, as felt through the simple act of wearing our normal clothing in prayer, can offer the beginning of a journey toward feeling closer to a God who shields us.

⁹ See Rashi on Bavli Berakhot 25a, s.v. *aval le-tefillah*.

