

Purim and Tetzaveh 5781: Aharon and Mordechai's Clothing

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Purim has in some ways been transformed to a week-long celebration, as children (and perhaps some willing adults who teach them) have been dressing up all week to celebrate. While one of the most emphasized aspects of the holiday, it is not explicitly alluded to in the *megillah* or even in most of the halachic literature. While there is a meaning behind costumes, it perhaps gives us an opportunity to think not just about costumes for fun but also other kinds of clothing people wear for an expressed purpose. Tanach understands that people filling certain roles have to wear special clothing. What can we learn from the “dress-up” that some of our leaders have to undertake?

When reviewing Parashat Tetzaveh earlier this week, my mind shifted to the Megillah. As the parasha discusses the clothing of the *kohanim* (priests), I was reminded about the clothing of another individual: Mordechai. After Haman is defeated and his decree reversed, Esther and Mordechai are recognized as the heroes of the Jewish people. Mordechai further takes Haman's political place in serving Achashveorsh. We then encounter one of the verses that the whole congregation reads aloud:

וּמֹרְדֵכַי יָצָא מִלְּפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּלִבוּשׁ מַלְכוּת תְּכֵלֶת וְחֹזֶר וְעִטְרָת זָהָב גְּדוּלָה וּמִתְכַרֶּיֶה בּוּץ וְאַרְגָּמָן וְהָעִיר שׂוֹשֵׁן צְהֵלָה וְשִׂמְחָה:
Mordecai left the king's presence in royal robes of blue and white, with a magnificent crown of gold and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool. And the city of Shushan rang with joyous cries (Esther 8:12).

Mordechai's garments have some resemblance to the garments of the *kohanim*, represented first and foremost by Aharon:

(ד) וְאֵלֶּה הַבְּגָדִים אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשׂוּ חֹשֶׁן וְאַפֹּדֶרֶת וְיָמְעִיל וְכֹתֶנֶת תְּשֻׁבֵץ מִצָּנָפֶת וְאַבְנֵט וְעִשׂוּ בְּגָדֵי קֹדֶשׁ לְאַהֲרֹן אָחִיךָ וּלְבָנָיו לְכַהֵנוּ לִי: (ה)
וְהֵם יִקְחוּ אֶת הַזָּהָב וְאֶת הַתְּכֵלֶת וְאֶת הָאַרְגָּמָן וְאֶת תּוֹלַעַת הַשָּׁנִי וְאֶת הַשֵּׁשׁ:

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; they, therefore, shall receive the gold, the blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and the fine linen (Shemot 28:4-5).

We see similar colors and materials: gold and linen; *techeilet* and *argaman* (shades of blue and indigo, respectively). On the one hand, the parallel is not entirely perfect; on the other hand, there is obviously some comparison to be made between Aharon and Mordechai. While we should not necessarily define an entire person by the clothing they wear, their roles do seem to be represented by their garments. What do the similarities and differences between the

vestments of Aharon and Mordechai teach us? The truth is, while they seemingly serve very different roles, they emerge worthy through similar traits and accomplishments.

There does seem to be a fundamental difference between the nature of the Aharon's garments and Mordechai's garments. Aharon, as the Kohen Gadol, wears clothes that serve as the uniform of the spiritual realm. They serve *לכבוד ולתפארת* - for honor and glory (28:2). But these are not for his personal glory. As the Netziv (in Ha'amek Davar) explains, the clothes mean to demonstrate that Aharon is on a different spiritual plane than others by virtue of his spiritual leadership. He must act with greater piety and discretion than others, and only through his different appearance can that be understood by all. Meanwhile, Mordechai's garments are specifically labeled as "royal" garments. Mordechai parades around Shushan as a political dignitary.

Yet, both really represent both aspects of political and spiritual royalty. Ramban writes that the clothing of kohanim was chosen specifically because that was what royalty wore in the times of Tanach. Perhaps this could be seen as a foreshadowing of the time when the Hasmoneans, who were priests, became the monarchs after the defeat of Antiochus and Seleucids. Ironically, Ramban writes disapprovingly of the Hasmonean monarchy, but Rambam (Mishneh Torah Megillah u-Chanukah 3:1) celebrates the reestablishment of Jewish sovereignty brought by the Hasmoneans. At the same time, Mordechai was not just important politically. He not only plays a leading role in preserving the national survival of the Jewish people but also its spiritual survival. The story of Purim takes place at a time of great assimilation. Jews took part in Achashverosh's banquets, despite their halachic and moral shortcomings; they were getting a bit too comfortable in exile. Haman comes in and demands exclusive loyalty and submission. While this may have arguably not been Avodah Zarah, nobody seems to stop and be concerned about complete submission to this individual, until Mordechai comes along. Mordechai still had a strong sense of his own Judaism. In fact, before we even learn his name, he is an *Ish Yehudi*, a Jewish man. His entire leadership is not just about his guiding Esther towards saving the Jewish people from genocide, but it is rooted in a mission to preserve Judaism altogether. And we see this in his clothing, as the Vilna Gaon says each of the words in chapter 8 verse 15 describe a different Jewish garment. *Levush malchut* (royal garment) = a tallis; *techeilet* = *techeiles* of *tzitzis*; *chur* = white part of *tzitzis*; *ateret zahav gedolah* (big golden crown) = tefillin of the head; *tachrich butz* = leather straps; and *argaman* = tefillin of the hand. While Mordechai may appear to be dressed like a Persian dignitary, says the Vilna Gaon, he is really representing the majesty of Judaism.

From the overall presentation of their clothing, Aharon and Mordechai teach us how intertwined our national and religious identities are. We are simultaneously committed to *Torat Yisrael* and *Am Yisrael*. As religious Zionists, we value both our political sovereignty and the spiritual character expressed through the State of Israel. When someone tells a "joke" on Saturday Night Live to call out Israel by targeting Jews in a libelous fashion, [we speak out](#).

Likewise, when a TV show on that same network creates a caricature of a religious Jew, [we speak out](#). We are proud of our identities as Jews and our identification with Judaism.

There is also one aspect of the uniform itself that brings together Aharon and Mordechai: that which is worn on the head. Aharon is supposed to wear an item called “tzitz”: וְעִשִּׂיתָ צִיצִי, זָהָב; קֹדֶשׁ לִיקוּק עֲטֹרַת זָהָב גְּדוּלָה (Shemot 28:36). Mordechai also wears an magnificent crown of gold. What is the significance of the crowns?

There are three crowns in Judaism, says Rabbi Shimon in Pirkei Avot (4:13):

רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן אוֹמֵר, שְׁלֹשָׁה כְּתָרִים הֵם, כְּתֵר תּוֹרָה וְכְתֵר כְּהֻנָּה וְכְתֵר מַלְכוּת, וְכְתֵר שֵׁם טוֹב עוֹלָה עַל גַּבְיָהֶן:

Rabbi Shimon said: There are three crowns: the crown of torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of royalty, but the crown of a good name supersedes them all.

Rabbeinu Yonah tells us that any Jew who wants to achieve the crown of Torah can do so; that is for all Klal Yisrael. The crown of the priesthood obviously pertains to Aharon and his descendants. The *keter kehuna*, crown of royalty is obviously not up for grabs, but Mordechai is dressed in royal garb, including a crown. (Ironically, he is a descendant of Shaul, whose monarchy is extracted from him). Perhaps Mordechai has the *keter malchut*.

But there is also the *keter shem tov*, the good name, that can come in tandem with the other crowns. The Bartenura explains that someone who earns this crown possesses good character traits and has a good reputation. I think both Aharon and Mordechai are exemplars of the Keter Shem Tov along with their own *ketarim*. They both carried superior reputations, especially when it comes to bringing peace. Aharon, according to Pirkei Avot (1:12), was known as אוֹהֵב שְׁלוֹם וְרוֹדֵף שְׁלוֹם, he loved peace and pursued peace; yet it is not just that he was a diplomat. His entire reputation is that of peace, it is what he is known for. Hillel says you should be like Aharon because of this. Aharon is also known as the model mediator, bringing compromise (Sanhedrin 6b). He did not bring about peace in a way that was untruthful; he found a way to bring people together in an honest fashion. That is a *keter shem tov*. Mordechai, also, possesses this trait. The end of the Megillah tells us:

כִּי מְרַדְּכֵי הִיְהוּדִי, מִשְׁנֵה לְמַלְךְ אֲחַשְׁוֶרֶשׁ, וְגָדוֹל לִיְהוּדִים, וְרָצוּי לְרַב אֲחֵיו--דָּרַשׁ טוֹב לְעַמּוֹ, וְדָבַר שְׁלוֹם לְכָל-זֶרְעוֹ.

For Mordecai the Jew ranked next to King Ahasuerus and was highly regarded by the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brethren; he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare (shalom) of all his kindred.

Mordechai was someone who had the *keter malchut*, he got the pomp and circumstance through wearing the royal garb, but he took his job seriously and worked to ensure that his people survive, and once achieving that, he worked to ensure that his people thrive. The Keudshas Levi says Mordechai wore the royal garb solely for the purpose of the higher kingdom, the *malchut shamayim*, but he gained nothing personally from this. We can see a

major contrast here to Achashverosh. Interestingly, at the beginning of the first chapter, Achashverosh also has similar fine materials - על-גלילי כֶּסֶף, וְעֵמֹדֵי שֵׁשׁ - “[There were hangings of] white cotton and blue wool, caught up by cords of fine linen and purple wool to silver rods and alabaster columns” (1:6). But we are told from the beginning that for Achashverosh, this was about himself. He wanted to show off his wealth אֶת-עֹשֶׁר כְּבוֹד בְּהַרְאֹתוֹ, וְאֶת-גְּדוּלְתוֹ; מַלְכוּתוֹ, וְאֶת-יְקָר, תַּפְאֲרַת גְּדוּלְתוֹ; “he displayed the vast riches of his kingdom and the splendid glory of his majesty” (Esther 1:4). He is further manipulated by those around him; we see no evidence of leadership traits or any sort of active effort. Achashverosh retains a reputation of insignificance, while Mordechai merits the *keter shem tov*.

Finally, a similarity in clothing is the linen. While linen was part of the Kohen Gadol’s garments on a regular weekday, it seems to be the exclusive material used for his clothing on Yom Ha-Kippurim. Mordechai, too, wore linen. Many are observant of the fact that Yom Ha-Kippurim could be translated as the “day like Purim.” Perhaps in the usually inverted sense of Purim, Yom Ha-Kippurim and Aharon’s garments on that day are rooted in what would eventually become Mordechai’s hallmark. On Yom Ha-Kippurim, the Kohen Gadol goes into the holy of holies on behalf of the Jewish people, seeking atonement so that they may live another year and to reaffirm their spiritual vitality. Linen is a fine fabric that adds to the dignity of the person who wears it. Just as Mordechai sought the welfare of the people with dignity, so did Aharon, and so will the future Kohen Gadol. While it is chronologically inaccurate for Yom Ha-Kippurim to be modeled on Purim, perhaps there is a prayer for the future that a future Beit Ha-Mikdash and its Yom Ha-Kippurim service will serve the purpose of bringing the yearly peace and welfare of the Jewish people, both physically and spiritual.

While these thoughts are an attempt to link Parashat ha-Shavua and Purim, we come out with profound lessons from model leaders, Aharon and Mordechai, who cared for both the spiritual and political welfare of the Jewish people, did so with integrity and unimpeachable character, and they did so with great dignity. While it was their clothing that seems to provide the basis for connecting them, the clothing is just a starting point. They wore their clothing to their missions seriously, but not themselves. They faithfully wore the uniforms that enabled them to bring salvation to the Jewish people and establish an everlasting future that we celebrate today.