

## Tezaveh: Our “New” Color

Moshe Taragin

Clothing is an important form of self-expression. The clothes we wear reflect our personal tastes, preferences, and identity. Likewise, clothing often manifest our cultural and communal values. For Jews, clothing has always served as a cultural identifier. Chazal stress that, despite our religious collapse in Egypt, and while living under duress, we still maintained a distinctly Jewish form of dress, enabling us to preserve a robust Jewish identity.

Many sects of Orthodox Jews still employ clothing as a cultural insulator to preserve traditionalism. Hasidim in particular, punctiliously preserve clothing styles of the past to more strongly anchor themselves to tradition and to fend off the seductive impulses of modernity.

Though we express ourselves through clothing, we also view dress as a manner of protecting personal modesty. Tzniyut is not a dress code for women, but an overarching attitude, or a general pattern of behavior, which applies to *both men and women*. Tzniyut urges us not to call too much attention to ourselves and not to aggressively promote personal accomplishments. Dressing modestly is just one expression of proper manners and of understated deportment.

In stark contrast to general Jewish dress codes, the uniform of the Cohen Gadol was eye-catchingly stunning. He wore dazzling jewels in the *choshen* plate on his chest, and carried large gemstones or *avnei shoham* on his shoulder pads. He placed a shimmering gold sheet across his forehead (known as the *tzitz*), fastening it to his head with glistening strings dyed in the royal blue color of *techelet*. On top of his general clothing he sported an lavish topcoat called the *me'il*, which was trimmed with pomegranate-shaped ornaments and miniature baroque-style bells.

For a culture which discourages ostentation and flashiness, the attire of the Cohen Gadol seems aberrant. His glittering clothing clashes with our overall inclination to dress quietly and discreetly.

The Institution

The flashy clothing of the Cohen Gadol wasn't "personal". The Torah itself recognizes that this splendor was meant to arouse deeper reverence for Hashem, while evoking כבוד and תפארת - honor and glory for the Mikdash. As the central figure of the Mikdash, the Cohen Gadol symbolized an institution much larger than himself. His regal clothing imbued the Mikdash with a majestic ambience and with ceremonial gravitas. As he represented a national institution, the Cohen Gadol's clothing didn't violate codes of modesty. His royal garb didn't call attention to *himself*, but connected *us* with something larger. He was a connector, not a self-promoter.

### Broken Cohanim

Twice during Jewish history, Cohanim misused their office, deeply damaging the larger institution of the Mikdash which they were meant to honor. During the era of "the Judges" two children of Eili, the serving Cohen Gadol, mistreated women who visited the Mikdash to deliver their postpartum korbanot. This corruption of power wasn't just flagrant moral hypocrisy by public officials. Their scandalous behavior weakened public trust in institutions in general. Suspicion is contagious, and once it gains footing it spreads to other elements of society. Their abuse of power destabilized general institutions of authority, forcing Hashem to reboot society by launching Jewish monarchy.

Hundreds of years later, during the second Mikdash era, the Sadducees gained control of the office of the Cohen Gadol and regularly sabotaged the solemn Yom Kippur ceremonies in the inner sanctum. They didn't just erode public trust of Cohanim but wrecked social attitudes toward the "Establishment". Sadly, the second-Mikdash era was derailed by vicious social strife and violent civil wars. Trust in the public institutions which could have unified us, had completely eroded. Without these unifying national institutions, we fell into social chaos and disunity.

By dressing in regal attire, the Cohen Gadol preserves the dignity of the Mikdash as an institution and as a unifying symbol. Despite natural differences of background, religion and orientation, the entire country rallied around the Mikdash, pilgrimaging to Yerushalayim three times a year. The dazzling colors and glistening gold of the Cohen Gadol's clothing were national symbols of glory.

## A New Color

Over the past few months, we have been unified by a different uniform and a very different color. Sadly, we haven't yet rebuilt the Mikdash, and our eyes have yet to behold its vibrant colors and the uniform of the Cohen. For us, though, the color green has become a unifying symbol of Jewish hopes and dreams. After we were viciously attacked on Oct 7<sup>th</sup>, our Jewish army valiantly battled to restore our borders and to purge Azza of homicidal murderers. Their green uniforms haven't left our hearts or our imaginations. We have prayed for our soldiers' welfare while also burying heroes who sacrificed their lives for our people, our country, and our future. We pictured soldiers living in their uniforms for weeks at a time, facing deranged murderers and braving harsh weather conditions. We stood at weddings and sat in shiva homes next to soldiers released for just a few hours, who didn't have ample time or opportunity to change into civilian clothing.

Their IDF fatigues are not as resplendent as the uniform of the Cohen Gadol. Their sandy shoes aren't as polished as the metallic sheen of the Cohen's headplate. Their chests are safeguarded with ceramic plates rather than bedecked with precious stones. Their heads are covered with protective helmets rather than with stately caps. They string weapons and not gemstones over their shoulders. The color of this uniform may be drab, but they resonate with our collective hopes for recovery, security, and sovereignty. They have become modern day versions of כבוד and תפארת. Standing next to Jewish soldiers has infused us with pride, strength, patriotism, and mesiras nefesh. It is our honor to witness our children, our brothers and sisters, and our husbands and fathers wearing this uniform of Jewish pride.

## Evil Soldiers

It wasn't always this way. For centuries, the image of a soldier had sinister connotations. Soldiers could easily torture, murder, and rape Jews with impunity. Many illuminated Hagaddot portray the four sons of Pesach with suggestive avatars. Invariably, the wicked son was depicted as a soldier: a Roman soldier, a Greek Soldier, a Spanish soldier, a Persian soldier, or a Russian soldier. For centuries, soldiers represented horror and dread, and their uniforms and military symbols were both repugnant and terrifying.

Jewish history is undergoing a revolution, as Jewish soldiers have become national symbols of hope, strength and, in the past few months, of Jewish resilience. What made Oct 7<sup>th</sup> so traumatic was, in part, the belief that our Jewish army could completely defend us in our homeland. We thought that a Jewish army would protect us against the savage crimes perpetrated against us in the past. Pogroms against defenseless Jews, we believed, were a relic of a time when we didn't possess a Jewish army to defend us. We were wrong, and in the aftermath of this war we will thoroughly investigate how this tragedy occurred and why our army failed to protect us.

Despite this letdown, and perhaps because of it, our identification with the IDF hasn't waned and, if anything, the Israeli army has become the most powerful national symbol of pride. The army has become *the* institution which has united Jews from across the world and from across the ideological spectrum. The color green wasn't central to the Mikdash, but has become a compelling modern symbol. As we return to Israel, the palette of Jewish history changes.

## Afterword

As we navigate the war and contemplate maintaining our national unity it is crucial to ponder how we treat *other* national institutions and national symbols. Modern culture encourages questioning authority and challenges traditional power structures. Institutions, which in the past unified society, are now regularly subjected to scrutiny and skepticism. Over the past year in Israel, petty politics, social strife, and ideological debate paralyzed our society and prompted this calamity. In recovering our social fitness, we must be more careful not to deride public institutions or symbols such as government, the Supreme Court, and the police. We may disagree with a particular policy but assailing Jewish institutions does far more damage than whatever policy we are threatened by.

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