

Drashah Tetzaveh 5770 – Holy Clothes, Holy Voices

Our society, encompassing both our religious tradition and the secular culture in which we partake, gives us mixed messages about the importance of appearance. From childhood, we are instructed not to judge a book by its cover. This concept echoes the words of the rabbis in Pirkei Avot: אל תסתכל בקנקן אלא במה שיש בו—do not look at the jug; rather at what it contains. Our literature is filled with stories about the evils of looking down on someone based on his or her appearance. One of my favorites has Rabbi Elazar followed home by an ugly man, who then gathers the people of the town together to berate him for his unkind comments about the latter's appearance. Many of our treasured traditions about the mystical figure of Elijah the Prophet have him appearing in the guise of a poor man in rags, disfigured, dirty, and unpleasant to look at. Only those people who can see past his outer appearance receive the reward that comes from an encounter with Eliyahu.

At the same time, our tradition also teaches us about the importance of appearance. We are instructed in the principle of *hiddur mitzvah*, which enjoins us to enhance our performance of mitzvot with beautiful, well-crafted ritual objects. Even during times

when we are not meant to be concerned about appearances, they come into play. If one who is in the 12 months of *aveilut*, mourning, for a parent is told that he looks messy, he may shave or cut his hair in order to avoid appearing unkempt. The focus on appearances reaches a high point in our parashah this morning. Parashat Tetzaveh gives us a lengthy description of the various garments worn by the *Kohen Gadol*, the high priest during the course of his service. We learn about the materials, the dyes, even the manufacture methods for each of these pieces of clothing. It seems that—at least when it comes to the *Kohen Gadol*—appearances are of the utmost importance.

And it is the clothes that I want to focus in on for a moment. The Torah calls them בגדי קדש, holy garments, which is an ambiguous phrase—are they holy because of the function they serve or are they intrinsically holy? Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra comes down on both sides of this issue. In his comment to this verse, he explains that they are called קדש both because the priests will wear them during their service in the Mishkan, the sacred place, and because the garments themselves impart holiness to those who wear them. These clothes serve a dual purpose, then: by having the right clothes

for the occasion, the priests affirm the sanctity of the space in which they serve and the priests themselves are also transformed by the garments; they somehow become more holy when wearing their priestly vestments.

While we no longer make use of these kinds of garments in our worship (although check out the work of the 3rd Temple Institute in Jerusalem, which is producing the vessels and other ritual items of the *Beit HaMikdash* in preparation for the rebuilding of the Temple), the garments we do use have a bit of the same quality. I'm thinking here specifically of the tallit. The tallit is a garment that is understood as a representation of a number of things—all of which you can see in the verses we recite both before and after we put it on (see page 62 in the siddur): light, the embracing wings of God's immanent presence, sustenance, God's *hesed*, and more. When we wear a tallit, we are transformed by those images—we somehow are made more aware of God's presence, more holy, if you will, when that cloth rests on our shoulders. We also reserve the use of the tallit for when we pray, when we are present in the sacred space of *tefillah*. Like the garments of the *kohanim*, the tallitot we wear both affirm the

sanctity of the space we create with our prayer and enrich us with the sanctity they impart.

That is why it troubles me deeply that the wearing of a tallit, particularly by women, has been a source of controversy, pain, and discrimination when done at the Western Wall, a place that is described in our tradition as unequivocally holy.

We have spoken a number of times this year about the outrageous occurrences surrounding Women of the Wall, a group of women who come together to daven at the Wall every Rosh Hodesh. In November, Nofrat Frenkel, a medical student from Be'er Sheva (and active member of the Masorti Movement) was arrested for the crime of wearing a tallit at the wall. In January, Rabbi Anat Hoffman was interrogated by the Jerusalem police for hours, accused of a felony, and threatened with prosecution. And just a couple of weeks ago, when WOW came to the Kotel again to pray on Rosh Hodesh Adar, they were verbally assaulted by men calling over from the other side of the mehitzah—to the point that they had to be protected by police.

I find this most recent instance of abuse of women absurdly ironic, as Adar is a month that is supposed to bring joy—משנכנס אדר

מרבים בשמחה—but knowing that this intolerable discrimination continues leaves me saddened. I wish I could say that this kind of behavior directed against women fulfilling the mitzvah of tzitzit, gathering for prayer, is new, but, while it has escalated of late, it is not a recent development. Women of the Wall have been meeting for over 2 decades, and they have been persecuted throughout. When I lived in Israel, I would try to daven with them whenever I could. I remember how one month, we were forced to daven Shaḥarit and read from the Torah up in the old burned out hostel at the top of the plaza—because women in tefillin and reading from the Torah would surely cause a violent riot. Only for Musaf, after our tefillin were taken off and the Torah put away, did we descend to the Kotel, many of us covering our tallitot with jackets and sweaters. Even then, the other women who stood nearby us in the women's section made sure to hiss at us for having the audacity to daven out loud, and men stood on chairs by the mehitzah so they could look over at us and tell us that we were worse than the Nazis, that we were not really Jews.

What took place this month, it seems, was not all that different. Rabbi Barry Schlesinger of Kehillat Moreshet Avraham, a Masorti

congregation in Jerusalem, wrote a description of what he witnessed from the men's side of the mehitzah that morning:

“Since it is the first day of the Hebrew month of Adar, the Woman of the Wall and their supporters congregated at the entrance to the Women's Section, far from the actual Wall. The women prayed and sung quietly and modestly.

Police guarded the women.

At around 7:15 am, a man in Ultra-Orthodox garb stood up on a chair and yelled from the Men's Section over the dividing wall-demanding that the woman stop praying and remove their *tallitot* (prayer shawls), which some of them had donned. This gentleman came and went a number of times and then at around 7:25 am, another man came dressed in *tallit* and *t'fillin* and started lecturing the women, yelling at them and telling them:

1. They will not succeed in what they are doing.
2. They will not undermine the tradition of Moses from Sinai and that they should cease and desist all activity at the Wall.

This man went on for about six minutes, and then about 50 more Ultra-Orthodox men gathered at the corner area of the Men's Section that borders the area in the Women's Section where the WOW were praying. The men started yelling: *Gevalt; Amalek; Nazis; Go back to America; You caused the Holocaust; You are worse than Goyim.*

The main speaker was handed a megaphone to continue his vicious diatribe against all those who came to daven and or show support to the WOW.

The peace at the Kotel was indeed disturbed, but not by the WOW. The peace was disturbed by the rowdy men who gathered at the Kotel to yell, scream and insult anyone and everyone who engage in Jewish prayer in a manner contrary to their own belief and religious expression. [...] What could have been a lovely morning of prayer

and celebration of the new Month of Adar, turned into a major desecration of God's name and enmity between Jews.”

We cannot ignore the irony that this most recent incident of abuse happened on Rosh Hodesh Adar, the month of Purim, a holiday that lauds the heroic actions of a woman, Esther, to secure freedom for her people. One of the founders of Women of the Wall, Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman, wrote in a response to this most recent incident at the Kotel: “Like Esther, Women of the Wall are oppressed by violations of human dignity. Like Esther, Women of the Wall seek to secure a vibrant future for Judaism and the Jewish people. Like Esther, Women of the Wall exhort to repeal repressive edicts against Jews. Like Esther, Women of the Wall honorably appeal for justice and empathy before the court and lawmakers of our day. Unlike Esther who lived in exile under a bombastic foreign ruler, Women of the Wall live in a democratic Jewish society, where one of the basic justifications for the existence of the State of Israel is to enable full Jewish expression.” The tallit is a garment that is both set aside for use in holy spaces and which brings a measure of holiness to one wearing it—how shameful that in the State of Israel, at the Kotel of all places, other Jews are allowed to desecrate that Kedushah people

coming together in celebration and prayer with verbal abuse and physical intimidation.

As a woman who has davened with Women of the Wall, and who has experienced many different kinds of intimidation and abuse for wearing my tallit—not just at the Kotel—I feel the beauty of my tallit and the sanctity of my experience violated whenever I even hear about such incidents. It's as though the sacredness of our ritual garments, and of the space in which we wear them has been ripped away. The ongoing nature of this situation is therefore very upsetting. At the same time, the confluence of this most recent incident with Purim gives me hope, in the form Esther's example. In chapter 4 of the Megillah, when Mordecai is exhorting Esther to use her position (and risk her life) to plead the case of the Jews before the king, he says to her: וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם לַעֲתָה כִּזְאֵת הִגַּעַת לְמַלְכוּת, "And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis." (4:14) Inspired by his words, Esther springs into action, inviting the King and Haman to a feast during which, as we know, she reveals Haman to be a scoundrel and secures the King's support for her people.

While most of us have not attained a position of influence and power like Esther, we do have the ear of someone who has— Ambassador Michael Oren. I urge us all to contact Ambassador Oren and register our outrage that this kind of discrimination and abuse is allowed to continue. The Kotel belongs to all Jews, and all Jews should have the freedom to express their prayers to the Holy One without fear of intimidation or victimization. In your Shofar (the Shabbat handout) you'll find a suggested template of a letter to Ambassador Oren. It is also available on our website. Please take it home with you—feel free to amend it to add any personal sentiments—and send it. I for one will be attaching a copy of my words today with my letter.

As you might imagine, these continued incidents at the Kotel have resulted in many online conversations among rabbis and other concerned Jews who care about Israel and freedom of religious expression. In the course of participating in those conversations, I have heard an important challenge raised—and I want to share that challenge with you. The argument goes something like this: This is certainly an appalling problem, which deserves to be addressed. At the same time, Israel and the Jewish people face vital threats that are

perhaps far more encompassing. Between the growth of global anti-Semitism, Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, and Hamas, and the increasingly scary potential of a nuclear Iran, Israel is fighting for her very existence. Once we have that a little more under control, then it would be more appropriate to devote our attention to this.

Yes, those other threats are terrifying and deserve our awareness and action. However, if the Israel we're busy trying to save from those threats is a place where religious persecution, police intimidation, and threats of violence against vocal non-Orthodox Jewish women are allowed to exist, we will have much more to fight for in the future. So yes, be concerned about those external threats, and yes, take action. For that reason, the other side of the sheet folded inside your Shofar comes from the JCRC and lists a number of ways we can help ensure Israel's security from threats like a nuclear Iran. AND yes, make sure that the Israel we're trying to save from external threats is one that embodies the fullness of our tradition.

When ALL who wish to come before God in prayer and celebration can do so without fear of discrimination, we will again be clothed in garments of holiness, and be standing in a place of sanctity. As we prepare to enter Purim, I pray that we will be inspired

by the actions of Esther, our heroine, to secure a vibrant future for our people, a safe environment at our holy places where women's voices can be heard offering songs and praise, so that the prayers of all who wish can ascend before God. *Kein y'hi ratzon*—so may it be God's will.