

Tetzaveh 3/7/20
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I seem to have given d'vars on this portion several times; I guess I'm often in town this time of year. (Other than enjoying the repeated phrase "a bell and a pomegranate," I can't say that this is a favorite parsha of mine.)

In past d'rashes on this portion, I've discussed how we need inherently arbitrary rules to create the meaningful distinction between the sacred and the profane, and about the way that dress (and dress codes), in particular, can signify important demarcations – and what might be given up if (or as) we lose such markers.

But this time reading the parsha, I was struck by something somewhat different – the way the parsha thinks about leadership, and conveys that philosophy through the design of the priestly vestments. Aaron literally dons the mantle of leadership – and he does so in public. It wouldn't have to be that way – some of Aaron's critical priestly duties are outside of the public eye – but the Torah has the priests take on their roles in a very public ritual. This is about imbuing leaders with legitimacy.

The first aspect of the priestly costume that registered with me was that Aaron literally has to carry the names of the tribes on his shoulders, and to display them symbolically on his chest. While the overall garments were designed to set priests apart, the names of the tribes would visibly and palpably connect the priests to the people. The priests were to be simultaneously of the people and separate from the people – yet another case of the Jewish tendency to hold ideas in tension – and that duality was embodied in their clothing.

As the text provides more details of the priests' garb, it becomes clear that there are a number of audiences in mind. What Aaron is wearing is supposed to send a message to the people, to Aaron himself and to G_d. For example, the words on Aaron's head – "Holy to the Lord" – are a visible reminder of his special role – a reminder to the people of his stature, a reminder to Aaron of his responsibilities; and a reminder to G_d of his role. That is to say, an effective leader needs to be seen as legitimate to those he represents, to himself and to those to whom he appeals. He has to play his role for, and be held in check for, and by, all three.

It's interesting that this is all laid out in the only parsha after Genesis in which Moses is not named. It's as if the parsha is preparing the people for a new, more "normal" form of leadership than that of Moses, who has a unique relationship with G_d.

While the model of leadership laid out in this parsha may be seen as applying just to a kind of ancient spiritual leader (though priests headed more than just the spiritual realm in the Israelite theocracy), it's a model that, in many ways, continued through time. In the West, monarchs were both set apart from the people (with their divine connection) and, at the same time, were seen to quite literally embody the body politic (hence the royal "we").

In our own democracy, we want a leader who is of, by and for the people, but also perhaps someone who is above and beyond us. Traditionally, we have admired our greatest leaders – say, Washington, Lincoln, FDR – not because they were just like us, even when they had the common touch or common flaws, but because of the ways they seemed to transcend that. Notably, even as the musical “Hamilton” turns Alexander Hamilton into a popular figure, it also makes him extraordinary – and ever aware of his relationship to the people, to himself and to Washington.

So some questions: Does the Torah’s apparent philosophy of leadership still apply? Do we still signify those traits in some emblematic way? Do we need to?

TWO ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS (after the discussion):

- It’s interesting that the Torah first describes the building of the mishkan and only then gets to the leaders. We might have done it in the opposite order, as religious buildings seem somewhat irrelevant to us. But the leaders are subservient to the structure of the religion and the ritual, and that’s what the text on the mishkan was effectively setting out for the time.
- Aaron’s deficiencies as a leader become clear in the next parsha with the Golden Calf incident. Is this because Aaron loses the balance between being of the people and being separate from them? Does everything go wrong because he loses the sense of the legitimacy he is supposed to garner simultaneously from the people, himself and G_d? Presumably, Aaron is not wearing his vestments as the people pray to the calf.