

Why Should We Dress Nice for God?

Parashat Tetzaveh



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This week's Torah portion begins with God's commandments regarding the priestly garments:

“Make sacred garments for your brother Aaron to give him dignity and honor.” – Exodus 28:2 [NIV]

This reading focuses on weaving and embroidery, breastplates and the ephods, robes, breeches, tunics, filigree settings, shoulder pieces, as well as buckles and stones. It discusses a variety of colors and fabrics such as blue, purple, scarlet yarn, and fine linen. If someone came in off the street while this Torah portion was being read in a congregation, he might think that he had mistakenly walked in on a sewing class.

“Clothes Make the Man”

These passages are filled with very detailed descriptions of the vessels and colors of the Tabernacle, including the priestly garments. All of which create

for us a tremendous symphony of majesty and splendor, as is fitting for the House of God.

I suppose that the idea behind the design was so that the people would not be indifferent, but rather that their spirits would be lifted, and they would feel a sense of inspiration when they came into the House of God.

This portion leads to the following question: What's the point of an entire Torah portion that talks about clothes? There is a well-known saying that goes, "Clothes make the man."

There's an interesting story about an employee who works in a telemarketing company. For many years he would come to work dressed in very simple clothes. The huge advantage about working in phone sales was that customers do not care how the seller looks nor what he or she is wearing.

One day, however, the employee started to notice that the most successful salespeople were those who came to work every day wearing business clothes – a suit and tie. He decided to try out this business style for himself and he came to work wearing a pristine suit and tie.

Suddenly he found himself talking on the phone with greater self-confidence, sitting more upright in the chair, and communicating with the customers in a much more professional way. The clothes might not have been seen, but their presence was evident.

I suppose that this is the reason why the Torah emphasizes the garments of the priests, to make sure that the priests would be willing to serve the public and serve God in the most honorable way.

In Judaism, we are familiar with the idea of Shabbat clothes. What's behind this idea? Does God really care about the clothes we wear? In a certain way, I believe He does.

I gleaned from this parasha, that whenever a person comes to the congregation, to be a part of the group, to stand and pray before God, he or she must be clean and dressed in respectable, fine clothing. The saying, "Clothes make the man," proves to be true.

Is Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder?

God's instructed accuracy and symmetry for the Tabernacle, the priests, the sacred vessels, and everything else that belongs to Him, create something luxurious and beautiful. Despite this, the word "beauty", or anything similar, hardly appears.

Why does biblical thinking ignore the human enjoyment found in beauty?

Beauty is a subjective concept, it is by no means objective. There are no scientific laws or rules of logic that we can use to determine the criteria of what is beautiful.

A common understanding of what is beautiful is bound to a society in a certain place and time. A fact proven to us in that, throughout history, the concept of beauty has changed drastically. Even today there are different concepts of beauty amongst various nations and people groups.

Again, this is because beauty is illogical and you cannot prove that something is beautiful or not. Yet there is nothing that attracts us more than beauty. It's on this that all of our consumer economy is based. Almost everything we buy must first be attractive. Only after the product passes the beauty test do we think about the effectiveness of it.

We live in a time that is especially known for consumer culture, and as such we use beauty to promote sales. Designers strive to design consumer goods from shoes and clothes, to furniture and cars, in order to stimulate an aesthetic experience for the consumer.

The Struggle Against Externalism

One of today's modern problems is that we have become like vessels in which only the outside is seen and valued – the external beauty and design of an object or person.

The Bible describes the problem with beauty. For example, in the story of Adam and Eve, the Tree of Knowledge is described as being beautiful, "...The fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye..." (Genesis 3:6) This was a major factor in the attraction to the fruit and in the subsequent rebellion against God.

The beauty of the “daughters of humans” is also considered to be a stumbling block, as is seen in the prelude to the flood: “...The sons of God saw that the daughters of humans were beautiful...” (Genesis 6:2)

The “Virtuous Woman” (Proverbs 31) comes against man’s externalism, “Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting,” in comparing it with man’s internal beauty, “...But a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.”

So here is the time to stop and ask, is external beauty important? Or does only internal beauty matter? The answer is, of course, yes to both. Beauty – the cover of the book – is important. However, the contents are just as important as well. The right thing to do is to put the important things in a respectable external frame.

How to Dress for Holiness

Aesthetics are desirable and even important when they are in the service of the holy. This is evident with the Temple, the priestly garments, the Tabernacle, and the sacred vessels, as we learned today from this week’s parasha.

The plain sense of the Bible teaches us that the priestly garments are for “dignity and honor”, for two main reasons:

The first reason is to foster a sense of respect and honor in the assembly. Worship requires a separation between the holy and the profane, and for this the priests are dressed and adorned in a unique way. In fact, in every religion one can identify the prayer leader, the rabbi, the priest – because they are typically dressed differently from others. At first glance of the prayer leader, you can see that clothes make the man.

Clothes create a distance, they are indicative of reverence. A person who is well-dressed is seen as one who is elevated higher than the rest of the people, much more than if he were not to be dressed in luxurious clothes.

The second reason is for the priest himself, the prayer leader, to treat his status with respect, to take his role and status seriously and honorably. When we dress out of respect for the Sabbath and the community, we are honoring the status and the dwelling place of God.

Yet on the other hand, Yeshua despises our efforts to look good, and asks us why we care about clothing. Yeshua takes us to a field of flowers:

“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.” – Matthew 6:28,29 [NIV]

But nevertheless we are told to dress nicely and modestly:

“I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety...” – 1 Timothy 2:9a [NIV]

In the Bible, sometimes clothes are connected with a spiritual state, or a state of sin, for example, Zechariah 3 presents a vision of Joshua the priest standing before the throne of judgment:

“Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord... Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes [meaning he was filthy from sin] as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, ‘Take off his filthy clothes.’ Then he said to Joshua, ‘See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.’” – Zechariah 3:1a,3,4 [NIV]

Clothes can also indicate salvation:

“I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness...” – Isaiah 61:10a [NIV]

Yeshua teaches us the Parable of the Great Banquet in Matthew 22. The parable is about the Kingdom of Heaven, in which God the King prepares a wedding feast for His Son, Yeshua.

Many were invited to this wedding feast, but few showed up. The King sent out His servants to bring in any person they could find to come and participate in the wedding. In the end, many guests attended the wedding,

but one passage is particularly jarring to the ears:

“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, ‘How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?’ The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’” – Matthew 22:11-13 [NIV]

In this parable, the wrong clothes represent sin, as in the previous example from Zechariah 3. This man had not given his life to Yeshua and did not receive the forgiveness of sins through Yeshua the Messiah. Therefore, that person was not suitable for the wedding feast in the Kingdom of Heaven.

In conclusion

I am convinced that we need to be dressed in dignity and honor when we come into the House of God or congregation. This will show respect to the people around us as well as psychologically cause us to take more seriously the status of the House of God.

Another famous saying goes, “Don’t judge a book by its cover.” This can cause us to miss the point. People will always judge the book by its cover, therefore we have the obligation to put content that is sacred behind a beautiful and dignified cover.

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