

Sermon | Parshat Tetzaveh
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Why did I choose to become a rabbi? When I was finishing rabbinical school and interviewing with various synagogues, I had my stock answer to the question. I am sure that I gave that answer to Rabbi Safra and the search committee when I sat with them in the austere tenth floor conference room at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York City. I have not had to answer the question all that often these past five years. That is, until I met with Reverend Tim Warner and Reverend Jennifer Fenner a few weeks ago. They asked me the question, and I have been thinking about it ever since. This morning we are joined by the Confirmation Class of the Greater Gaithersburg Youth Ministry, representing three church communities. You may have had the opportunity to hear Pastor Tim Warner address our congregation last year for Racial Justice Shabbat, and he has brought this group to be with us to learn about Judaism. It is particularly fitting that this group of middle school students, their parents, and their clergy joins us on Teen Shabbat, when we honor the teens in our community who read Torah and Haftarah and lead us in prayer. These teens are the future of our communities, the ones who will lead and serve. To all of you, I ask a similar question: Why have you dedicated yourself to serving the congregation and community? Looking at this week's Torah reading, Parshat Tetzaveh, from the Book of Exodus, I believe that we find an answer.

For those who were following along during the Torah reading, you will know that this week's *parsha* includes the instructions for making the garments of the *kohanim*, the priests of Israel who served in the Tabernacle. They will wear these garments when they are inducted as *kohanim*, priests, and they will wear them whenever they serve in the Tabernacle, and later on

in the Temple of Jerusalem. The Torah teaches us, “You shall instruct all who are skillful, whom I, God, have endowed with the gift of skill, to make Aaron’s vestments, for consecrating him to serve Me as priest, לְכַהֵנֹנִי לִי.”¹ That last phrase, לְכַהֵנֹנִי לִי, is difficult to translate—to function as a priest for Me, to be a priest for Me, to serve Me as a priest. There is no single word in English which captures the meaning of the original Hebrew. The most well-known rabbinic commentators on the Torah, Rashi, teaches that the expression connotes service or ministry: God is instructing Moses to fashion the priestly garments so that Aaron and his sons can wear them when they *serve* God, when they minister on God’s behalf. Being a *kohen*, a priest of Israel, a descendant of Aaron, is to be a servant of or a minister for God.

In the biblical period, the *kohanim*, the priests of Israel, served God by performing the sacrificial duties in the Tabernacle and then in the Temple. They were the intermediaries between the Israelites and God, performing the rituals which enabled Israel to give thanks to God, to atone for wrongdoing, and to celebrate the festivals. The priests were functionaries, but very important ones, for they were the conduit through which the people would connect with God. To serve as a priest meant to exist beyond the self, to serve the interest of another rather than one’s own self-interest. The priests existed to serve the community, and in so doing, enable God’s Divine Presence to be brought into the world and made manifest in our daily lives. That is precisely the instructions given to Moses in last week’s Torah reading: to construct a sacred dwelling place so that God might dwell amongst us.

Nearly two thousand years ago, when the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed, the Jewish people set aside the sacrificial system and today the priests no longer occupy such a prominent

¹ Exodus 28:3.

role in Jewish worship. No longer will you see any Jewish denomination offer sacrifice, and the priests no longer don the sacred vestments described in this reading. Today, we worship God through prayer and sacred deeds, without an intermediary. What, then, is the role of the *kohanim* today? They are given certain honors in the community, but the last vestige of this ancient role as servants of God is when we invite them to ascend the *bima* on the holidays to bless the congregation with the threefold Priestly Blessing. In that moment, they stand before us as the vehicle through which God's blessing is bestowed upon the community.

But *why* did the priests serve God? What called them forward to be the ministers of God's Presence in the world? One answer to the question is found in the commentary of the *Sefer HaChinnukh*, the Book of Education, which comes from 12th century Spain and explains all 613 commandments of the Torah. There it is taught that our external actions influence our inner intentions; how we conduct ourselves externally influences who we become internally.² The priests did not choose to become priests in response to an inner calling. Rather, they became priests because God designated them for this service and placed upon their shoulders this obligation to serve. Perhaps some of them were uninterested! Perhaps some preferred to do other things with their lives rather than serve in the sacred precincts of the Tabernacle and Temple! And *that* is why they had to wear these special garments. They had to behave in such a way that would transform them from the outside in. They wore these ornate and expensive garments to make them think and feel differently about their role. Their external behaviors transformed their internal character. They served because they were obligated to do so. They

² *Sefer HaChinnukh*, #99.

wore the garments because they were obligated to do so. And in so doing, they cultivated within themselves a deep inner intention to be servants of God.

I admit that it all seems counterintuitive. Shouldn't I feel the drive within me first, and then decide that I will serve? In this week's Torah reading, we learn that the opposite may be true. To be a servant of God and the community is born of an obligation to behave in such a way that ultimately transforms who we are within. We are conditioned to serve and to become ministers for God.

I share all of this with you to answer that difficult question: Why did I choose to become a rabbi? What called me to this sacred work? Truthfully, I am not sure I was called at all, and as I told my Christian colleagues when we spoke, the language of "being called" is not often invoked by Jewish clergy. We as rabbis do speak about what brought us to the rabbinate, but we often do so in the language of service: Why did we choose to serve the Jewish community in this particular way. I chose to serve because of the environment in which I was raised and the expectations set upon me by my family and my community. My parents raised me within the Jewish community. We went to synagogue on an almost weekly basis. I was sent to Hebrew school and then Hebrew high school. I was sent to participate in youth group events. We celebrated Jewish holidays with family and friends in their homes and ours. My calling to be a rabbi was about being cultivated and conditioned to see that serving the community is an opportunity to do what the ancient priests of Israel did thousands of years ago: to transform that which is mundane into that which is sacred, and to thereby sense God's Divine Presence in the world. I will admit that there must have been a small spark hidden within me about which I

was, for a long time, unaware. But it was these external forces that uncovered that spark, that turned it into a fire, and which led me to where I stand today.

But that spark is not only found inside clergy and future clergy. On the contrary, I strongly believe, and our tradition affirms, that this sacred spark is embedded within each and every human being in our world. All of us were placed on this earth to serve in some capacity. All of our teens who we honor today, and all who visit with us, all can go on to serve their families, their communities, and the world. Each and every one of you has a spark that is waiting to be ignited. Some teens will continue their high school education, some are college-bound, some will enter the workforce, and some will find other meaningful ways to act in the world. You will chart your own course and choose how to live your life. And remember that how you act outwardly in the world ultimately transforms who you are inside. I pray that those experiences and actions will be the means through which you cultivate your inner drive and ignite your sacred spark.