

This Week In Torah *Tetzaveh*

A gentle reminder: be very conscious and deliberate when using the pronoun “I.” The use of it can have a desirable effect—being assertive in conviction. But it could easily distract another from the message by focusing on the messenger. Being aware of its presence can create a self-modulating tool of humility—knowing who one is in relationship to the external presence of another. Without that care--- the self-trappings of arrogance and hubris can become primary... or at the opposite end of the spectrum, self-deprecation and diffidence can be visible. In the *Mussar* tradition [that school of Jewish thought which focuses in on spiritual ethics], humility/*anavah* has fluidity— one’s mindfulness can perceive an individual’s presence in relationship to external forces and thus, knowing when to assert greater presence or creating a space where another can be.

Enter now into the realm of our weekly *parasha*. Torah is about to reveal most of the 90 verses dedicated to the priestly garb—the vestments, the tunic, the *ephod*, the breastplate, the *urim and turim*. All of which creates a strong sense of authority for the *kohanim*, for Aaron and his sons. It could be so easy for this ornate priestly attire to go to their heads. Assuming greater self-importance than necessary, they can see themselves as not only separate than the rest of the Israelites but better than the rest of them. Perhaps this is one of the catalysts that lead to Aaron’s sons Nadav and Abihu offering up a strange fire as described in the Book of Numbers. The sense of power lead to an entitlement that bred arrogance that lead to thinking that they could do whatever they wanted in the presence of God.

The classic Biblical commentator RaSHI noted that in the constructing of sacred space, the attire of the priests is in the third tier of Divine commands. First is the collection and the construction, then the furnishings and the incense, and finally the priestly garments. For RaSHI, it is the communal need to be centralized and then [and only then] the role of the individual. A collection of 12th and 13th scholars who are published together in an analogy known as the *Da’at Z’khanim* noted that Aaron’s sons need to be singled out by

name as to show them that they were selected by God and not by who their father was as they prepared for their roles as *Kohanim*. 20th century scholar Umberto Cassuto noted that 3 times the text reminds us that *l'kohano l'i*—they are to be priests to serve God and to be present as God has commanded them to do. This is not about their sense of self as special, but their sense of service to God.

That is one end of the emotional spectrum—knowing when not to be too full of the self. But what about the shyness, diffidence, and lack of self-confidence?

The 19th century Ukrainian Rabbi, known as the Malbim, has an interesting perspective on this. He wrote that Aaron needed such elaborate garments so that his inner self can ascend to meet the responsibility of the priesthood. If his clothing was ornate and with great significance, the Malbim asserted, then his soul will rise up to meet the challenge. Let's extrapolate that— meeting an external challenge requires one to dig deep within the self to find the courage/strength/*koach* to address it. Aaron's garb is a perfect metaphor for that!

And that brings us back to the beginning: knowing the self... and knowing what surrounds us. That mindfulness inspires us to have a fluid *anavah*/humility—a true understanding of how much space we should occupy in a conversation and/or in our presence. Our awareness of the use of the pronoun “I” at such moments is the key to our ability to be our truest, holiest self!