

February 10, 2022
Rabbi Wexler - *Tetzaveh*

In this week's Torah portion, Tetzaveh, the role of the priests (kohanim) in the service of the Mishkan (Tabernacle) takes center stage. Tetzaveh serves as an instruction manual for how to operationalize the Mishkan as God details how to sanctify the priests and offer sacrifices during the seven days of inauguration in the Mishkan. It also describes in detail the priestly uniform.

One central element of the clothing of the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) was the *hoshen mishpat*, the Breastplate of Judgment. This special breastplate had four rows of stones, twelve stones in total, each corresponding to one of the tribes of Israel. The text says (Exodus 28:29):

וַיִּשָּׂא אֶהָרֶן אֶת־שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהֶשֶׁן הַמִּשְׁפָּט עַל־לְבוֹ בְּבֹאֹו אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ לְזִכְרוֹן לְפָנָי תָּמִיד

“Aaron shall carry the names of the children of Israel on the breastplate of judgement over his heart, when he enters the sanctuary, for remembrance, before God at all times.”

As I think about the breastplate and specifically the embedded stones, I am struck by what they represent. You see, each stone represents a unique story, or perhaps a series of stories, about real people with futures that depended on the proper actions of the priest. The Kohen Gadol is given the important task of bringing all of these stories forward in sacred service. In fact, the text tells us that the priest is to “carry” these stones and stories forward. The Hebrew word used for “carry” is *nasa*, which literally means “to raise up.” The priest is to lift up the stories of each individual Israelite in his moment of encounter with God.

Even more, the text could have simply said that the priest wears the breastplate on his chest, after all, that is where ones wears a breastplate. However, the text states that the priest is to wear the breastplate *al libo*, “upon his heart.” We hold our sacred stories as well as those of others, in our hearts.

And finally, the verse describes this action of wearing the breastplate “as a remembrance,” because when the kohen wears the breastplate, he thinks of the people. He is reminded of the people affected by his actions and his important and consequential role in representing them.

The Torah teaches that we are a kingdom of priests. This means that we each have the opportunity to hold our stories and the stories of others *al libo*, upon our hearts and in remembrance of those who came before us.

On March 5th our TBS community will participate in HIAS Refugee Shabbat. We will do so by welcoming Cathryn Miller-Wilson, the Executive Director of HIAS Pennsylvania. Cathryn will speak on the important work that HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) does in our community and throughout the world. She will also offer tangible action steps for how we can support HIAS and recent refugees in South Jersey and Philadelphia. We are grateful for Terri and Zach Oppenheimer, and the entire TBS Social Advocacy Committee, for making Cathryn's visit possible. In addition, to mark Refugee Shabbat, and to lift up the stories of our community, we want to invite you to share your family's story of immigration. How did you, or your parents, or

your grandparents (or perhaps even previous generations) arrive in this country? What is your family's story? **Please send your family's story (300 words or less) to tbssocialadvocacy@gmail.com by Sunday, February 27th.** We will compile the stories and share them with the congregation as part of Refugee Shabbat.

Your story is sacred. Our stories are sacred. May we carry these stories *al libo*, on our hearts, and in doing so, may we lift one another up and may our community go from strength to strength.

Shabbat Shalom.