

Torah Thoughts Tetzaveh

5779

What is the proper way to dress for Shabbat services? We are careful to remind b'nei mitzvah families that modest dress, including the covering of shoulders and legs, is a standard expectation on Shabbat. In addition, we sometimes have a 'casual Shabbat' during summer months, when jackets and ties for men, for example, might be left at home.

Our appearance connects to our context; how we dress reflects what we feel about the occasion at hand. When we wear our finest clothing to a wedding, we are making a statement about the importance of those occasions. When we dress casually around close family or friends, or at a sporting event, we emphasize our familiarity and comfort with one another. Likewise, when the kohanim of the biblical period performed their tasks in the *mishkan*, the ancient sanctuary, their clothing also reflected the importance of their tasks and their role in performing those tasks.

In the first aliyah of parshat Tetzaveh this week, the Torah details the ornate priestly finery, which was even more ornate for the Kohein Gadol, the High Priest. Beyond being made of intricately woven fine cloth, the Kohein Gadol's garb included two precious stones, each with the name of half of the tribes of Israel inscribed on it, which were sewn into the fabric of the shoulder-pieces. In addition, the breastpiece had on it individually incised stones for each of the twelve tribes. In this way, the Kohein Gadol would appear before God as the representative of the entire people, bringing tribute from them and seeking forgiveness on their behalf. His clothing was not just beautiful. It was a kind of official uniform that displayed the symbols of the tribes he represented before God.

Our appearance does matter, not because we should try to impress one another but because of the message our appearance sends about who we are and how we see our role at a given moment. Over- or under-dressing for a given occasion indicates that we are not attuned to our relationship to other people, to the moment, or to God. Giving thought to how we dress is therefore an important element in an integrated approach to Jewish life. Just as our words, our time and what we eat all communicate elements of our identity, our clothing on Shabbat shows that we understand the importance of that day, the blessings of rest, study, and family that they provide. Through our dress, we display our understanding of that sacred time, separate from the other days of the week.

Shabbat shalom