

## Is Dressing Well Important?

In this week's Torah portion, *Tetzaveh*, God gives Moses very detailed instructions on how to make the special clothes the kohanim had to wear -- the *bigdei kehunah*, or “priestly vestments”:

You [Moses] shall make holy garments for your brother Aaron, for honor and glory... [so] that he may serve Me [as a kohen]: ...

Make a choshen, an ephod, a robe, a tunic of checker work, a cap, and a sash... Make the ephod of gold, blue, purple, and crimson wool, and twisted fine linen, the work of a master weaver. It shall have two connected shoulder straps at both its ends ...

And you shall take two shoham stones and engrave upon them the names of the sons of Israel... and put them upon the shoulder straps of the ephod...

You shall make settings of gold, ... a choshen of judgment, the work of a master weaver... It shall be square [and] doubled; its length one span and its width one span. And you shall fill into it stone fillings, four rows of [these specific stones]... set in gold in their fillings, for the names of the [twelve] sons of Israel...

For Aaron's sons, you shall make tunics and sashes and high hats for honor and glory. And make for them linen pants to cover the flesh of [their] nakedness ... from the waist down to the thighs.

These [garments] shall be worn by Aaron and his sons when they enter the Tent of Meeting or when they approach the altar ... It shall be a perpetual statute for him and for his descendants [the kohanim] after him. [Ex. 28:2-43]

Something is strange here. Did God tell Abraham, Isaac or Jacob to dress in a particular way when He spoke to them, or ever? No. Did He tell Moses? No. In fact, God told Moses to *remove* his shoes at the burning bush. Did God tell the 70 elders who assisted Moses to wear anything special? Again, no. It doesn't seem to matter to God what people look like.

So why, of all the “special” people in the Torah, who could dress any way they wanted, only the kohanim had a dress code?

God created Adam and Eve naked. It's only when they ate the forbidden fruit that they were ashamed of their nakedness and hid it with fig leaves and aprons. In fact, God says to Adam:

Who told you that nakedness is shameful? [Gen. 3:11]  
Nevertheless, before expelling them from the Garden of Eden, God  
...made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them. [Gen. 3:21]  
probably to give them protection from the elements, something they would  
not have had to worry about in the Garden of Eden.

Jews don't do uniforms. Jews don't do appearances. We do the real work.  
Others do uniforms. To wit, when Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of Egypt,  
he immediately dressed him in gold and linen and had him ride in a chariot.  
When Ahashverosh wanted to honor Mordechai, he dressed him in royal  
garments and paraded him through the streets on a fine horse.

In fact, there is a problem with clothes. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out  
that clothes can be used to deceive:

- Jacob wears Esau's clothes to deceive his blind father Isaac.
- Jacob's sons stain the cloak of their brother Joseph with the blood of  
a goat, to make Jacob believe that Joseph is dead.
- Tamar puts on a veil so Judah won't recognize her.
- Potiphar's wife keeps Joseph's robe to prove that he tried to rape  
her.
- Joseph uses his regal clothes to hide his identity from his brothers,  
who don't recognize him.

In the Prophets, God gives more evidence He is not interested in looks.  
For example, God tells the prophet Samuel that one of Jesse's eight sons  
will be king. [1Sam 16:1] When the first son, Eliav, is presented to Samuel,  
God tells Samuel:

Pay no attention to [Eliav's] appearance or his stature, for I have rejected him.  
For I, the Lord, do not see as man sees. Man sees only what is visible, but I see  
into the heart. [1Sam. 16:7]

Forty years earlier, Samuel had anointed Saul king. Saul was described as  
follows:

[Saul was] a young man in his prime. No one among the Israelites was  
handsomer than he. He was a head taller than any of the people. [1Sam 9:2]

But, in spite of his regal appearance, Saul failed as a king, and Samuel had  
to replace him.

Clothes do not make the man.

So, back to our question: Why were the priests singled out for special clothing?

One answer is reported by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, based on work by others, which I find fairly convincing.

In a nutshell, many individuals in our history were unique and charismatic, and did not need special clothing to assert their authority. This was true for the patriarchs, for Moses, for the elders, for the prophets and for our great rabbis.

This is true for the bad guys as well. In our time, Hitler did not wear, nor did he need, any special clothing. Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, Castro, or the Nasser I grew up under, did not wear special clothing. They wore the same clothes worn by most people around them.

But the priesthood, being a hereditary position, a birthright, could not guarantee that each and every priest through the generations would have the required presence, bearing and charisma. Many priests needed the special clothing to retain the peoples' attention and their following. They *needed* to make an impression, and did not have that natural capability. And to avoid having to make a painful assessment of each and every individual priest, the Torah found it best to order the same special clothing for all priests.

Now, let us ask, what *is* the position of Judaism on clothing? First, the Talmud says that your clothes should not be dirty:

-Rabbi Aḥa bar Abba said in Rabbi Yohanan's name: From where is it derived that [having the right] clothes is a display of honor? It is stated [in Leviticus]:

[When the priest removes the ashes of the sacrifice, and in so doing soils the clothes he wore for the holy service at the altar,] he will remove his clothes and wear other clothes. [Leviticus 6:4]

-The school of Rabbi Yishmael taught [likewise]: The Torah taught you etiquette. The clothes in which [a servant] prepared food for his master [which got them dirty] should not be worn to pour wine for his master [at the table].

-Rabbi Ḥiyya bar Abba said that Rabbi Yoḥanan said: It is disgraceful for a Torah scholar to go out to the marketplace in shoes that have patches on them... And a Torah scholar with a stain of fat on his clothes deserves death... [because he causes people to hate the Torah by creating the impression that those who study Torah are unclean]. [Shabbat 114a]

Obviously, “deserves death” is just an expression of disapproval, not to be taken literally.

Maimonides sums it up in his Mishneh Torah:

The disciple of the wise should wear becoming and clean clothes. It is forbidden for him to have a spot of grease or anything unclean on his clothes. [On the other hand], he should not wear clothes fit for a king, such as trimmed with gold or purple, which attract everybody's gaze, or wear the clothes of a pauper, which put the wearer to shame. He should wear average garments of becoming style.  
[Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Human Dispositions 5:9]

So there you have it. No, God does not particularly care about special clothing. God cares far more about the inside than the outside. But nevertheless, your clothing should be clean, modest, and presentable; should not put you to shame; and should be neither too garish nor too humble.

Shabbat shalom.