

## The Priestly Garments and Their Authors

Parshat Tetzaveh

Anshe Sholom B'nai Israel Congregation

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If you were writing a book what would you title it? Yes, I am aware that there are people in this room who have written books, or are in the process of writing books. So let me ask a related question: if you were writing a book of commentary on the Torah, from your own life experience and interests, what would you title it?

I haven't written any books of commentary on the Torah and don't have any plans to write one at the moment, but I might title such a work, "lechem kodesh", the holy bread, taken from a verse in Shmuel, "I have no ordinary bread on hand; there is only holy bread." Such a title would allude to my love of baking bread for Shabbat and perhaps to the inordinate amount of work writing a book or commentary would require. (Ideally, the title would have Aharon's name in it, but I haven't found a phrase or pasuk which directly combines bread and my namesake.)

When I was in yeshiva, whenever my chevruta Rabbi Gabe Greenberg and I were stuck, he would say to me, "let's see the "Mishbetzos..." literally "the Golden Embroidery", referring to the monumental analysis by the 18th century Rabbi Yosef Te'umim.

Rabbi Yosef Te'umim was a fascinating and entertaining rabbinic personality: The story is told that when Rabbi Yosef Te'umim, better known as the Pri Megadim was forty, he spent three years in Berlin to focus on his writing in solitude. When he was discovered and many people started to come to ask him questions he realized he would not be able to accomplish what he had set out to do in Berlin under these circumstances. He pretended not to understand people's questions, asking the litigants to review it many times and then at the end he would issue a Psak that clearly showed he didn't understand what they were talking about. This actually worked as people stopped coming to him!

In yeshiva, we would also study the "Tur", shorthand for the *Arba Turim*, "the four columns" and even the occasional *Keztos*.

In fact, many of the greatest rabbinic works of *halacha* took their names from this week's parsha which describes the priestly garments. This morning, I want to explore our parsha through this historical trend. A few examples of this phenomenon include:

1. *Urim v'Tumim*, "The Oracle Stones" by Rav Yonatan Eibeschutz (1690-1764)

2. *Ketzot HaHoshen*, “The Edges of the Breastplate,” by Rabbi Aryeh Leib HaCohen Heller (1745-1812)
3. *Mishbetzot Zahav*, “The Golden Embroidery,” by Rabbi Yosef Te’umim, also known as the Pri Megadim (1727–1792)
4. And then there is the most famous legal code that *first* took its name from the priestly garments, and likely inspired many who followed: the *Arba Turim*, “The Four Columns,” by Rabbi Yakov ben Asher (1269-1343).

Some of our greatest rabbis used imagery taken from the priestly vestments when choosing titles for their books. Who were these Rabbis and why did they, starting with the Tur, name their halakhic works after the priestly garments?!

To answer these questions, let’s focus on two priestly wardrobe items: the Ephod and the Choshen. The Ephod was a kind of apron/skirt woven out of turquoise, purple, scarlet wool and linen. It had shoulder straps (imagine the back side of overalls) that would connect to the breastplate, the Choshen, and a belt to tie it closed in the front. Torah tells us (Shemot 28:9-14)

*Take two shoham stones [some translate this as Lazuli, a deep and bright blue] and engrave on them the names of the children of Israel: six of their names on one stone, six of them on the other...Having bordered them with frames of **golden embroidery**, attach the two stones to the shoulder pieces of the ephod, as stones of remembrance of the Israelite people, whose names Aaron shall carry upon his two shoulder-pieces as a remembrance before the Lord.*

The Kohen Gadol wore the names of all twelve tribes on his shoulders. The names were etched into piercingly beautiful blue stones, set in a golden embroidery. Whenever the high priest would wear the Ephod, he *would remember Bnei Yisrael and recall that his service to God was for their benefit. The tribes would be literally and spiritually on his shoulders.* It is an amazing image and we can think about which names we wear on our sleeves and shoulders when we pray or do any other kind of mitzvah.

This may also explain why Rabbi Yosef Teomim chose “this golden embroidery” as the title for his work. He wrote in his introduction:

*"There is no grandeur in my work. I am like a beggar who was granted permission from kings and ministers to go into their courtyards and palaces during mealtime to collect a few leftover crumbs. Because I spent time with them, I merited to understand their hints and references and enjoy their company. Every now and then I found a precious stone on my way. I took from them small*

*scraps of expensive material and wove myself a nice multi colored garment...  
What else would I sleep with if not for the little Hashem granted me to collect  
from their words..."*

The golden settings for the shoulder shoham stones were a small detail, in a much larger project. The Pri Megadim must have felt this way about his book as well: his work was a small but critical piece "woven from small scraps of expensive material", serving God and holding in place the children of Israel.

I want to share a bit about two other rabbis whose monumental collections were taken from the pesukim around the Choshen, the breastplate that the high priest would wear. The Choshen had *"four rows of stones...corresponding to the names of the children of Israel, twelve, they shall be engraved like seals, each with its name. On the breastplate, make braided chains of gold...make two rings of gold at the end of the breastplate."*

In Hebrew, the loop where the gold rings connect the breastplate to the cords and the Ephod - these were called the *ketzos hachoshet*, the edges of the breastplate. In the great European yeshivas, and even today in the Haredi community, you can't learn certain halakhic topics without discussing what the "Ketzos" has to say.

The Ketzos, Aryeh Leib HaKohen Heller, was born in 1745 in Galicia into a situation of dire poverty, which continued into his adulthood. As a very young rabbi, Rav Aryeh Leib was appointed Rav of Rosiantov. His table purportedly consisted of a board held up by two barrels. It was there that he wrote his famous work the Ketzos HaChoshen. It was so cold in his dwelling that he used to keep the ink under a pillow as he wrote so it wouldn't freeze.

The story is told that after completing his commentary at the age of 40, Rav Aryeh Leib went to Rav Tzvi Hirsh Boshka for a *haskama*, a rabbinic approbation. Skeptical that this young scholar could add anything novel to what the renowned Rav Yehonoson Eibushitz wrote in his sefer Urim V'Tumim [the Oracle Stones], the rabbi asked him to leave the sefer and come back the next day.

The next day before mincha, Rav Aryeh Leib heard an announcement that there will be Sefer Torah dedication that evening with the procession going from the rabbi's house. During the procession Rav Aryeh Leib came near the torah hoping to have a chance to carry it. As he came up to the Torah, the rabbi lifted the cover of the torah and lo and behold underneath was not a Torah but the manuscript that Rav Aryeh Leib gave the rabbi the night before. While the Ketzos was a prominent critic of the Hasidic movement, he was held in high esteem even by the Hasidic leaders in deference to his

extraordinary Talmudic acumen and his works became widely disseminated throughout Europe, a rarity at the time.

Finally, let us go back in time and return to the Arba'ah Turim, named for the four columns of stones what were on the Choshen, the breastplate. Rabbi Yakov ben Asher lived toward the end of the 13th century, mostly in Spain. The Tur, when it came to halakha was not just an authority but a visionary. He reorganized all of Jewish law into four categories, alluding to the four columns of stones of the Choshen. Up until this point Jewish law had been mostly glosses on the Talmud (albeit with some notable exceptions like the Rambam who created his own system as well).

The Tur was such a monumental book that a rabbi named Yosef Caro, wrote a commentary on it called the Beit Yosef, paving the way for Caro's later work, the Shulchan Aruch, considered the foundational book in the Halakhic canon.

So why did Rabbi Yakov (whom we have come to call, after his book the "Ba'al HaTurim") decide that the breastplate was worthy of invocation when he chose a name for his book of laws? And why did so many others follow in his footsteps in referencing the clothes of the priest?

In his commentary to the Torah, the Ba'al HaTurim notes that the Choshen is specifically called the "breastplate of judgment" because *the breastplate atones for the sins of judgment*. He is alluding to a passage in the Talmud (in *Zevachim 88b*) that sees each piece of the priestly garments as symbolically atoning for a different sin. And the breastplate, says the Talmud, atones for the sins that judges commit when they render incorrect decisions.

Perhaps then the Tur and the other authors saw themselves reflected in the various priestly garments because they too were deeply engaged in divine service. And, like the priests, they were doing their best, trying to serve God but extremely aware of their fallibility and their humanity.

So many authors saw their own contribution to the Jewish people as a small detail, perhaps imperfect, within the larger realm of divine service. One author was the golden embroidery, another the sockets, another named after the *tzitz*, the diadem worn by the high priest.

To conclude, let me repeat my question from earlier: if you could author a commentary on the Torah what would it be?

If you love to bake and learn Torah, maybe it's called Lechem Kodesh, The "Holy Bread". If you're a medical professional, you might call it, "V'chai b'hem", you shall live

with them. My sister Rachel, who works as a therapist, is here visiting this Shabbat, and maybe her commentary would be called “eitzah tova”, good wisdom.

These rabbis saw their lives and their work as part of a much larger project: to bring Torah into the world and bring their insights to Torah, *L’chavod u’letifaret*, in order to glorify God and serve the Jewish people.

While most of us might not write a commentary on the Torah, we can see each of our lives as a commentary, a holy tapestry that we weave in service of God and our community.