



## The Parsha in Practice

### Try it On!

I've had a few awkward costumes in my time. These divrei Torah are google-able for all I know (I hope the pictures aren't), and so I'll leave them to your imagination. It's remarkable what we choose to become when offered the opportunity to change how we look.

Dressing up isn't new to Purim. This week's Parsha describes the special clothing worn to "costume" the Kohen Gadol. He would dress in these deeply symbolic items to relate all sorts of messages about his stature as a Kohen and the lessons that these various items were meant to teach.

I remember the first time I wore a tie during the week. Ties had been an accoutrement of Shabbat for most of my life, even as I spent informal time in schools learning with and tutoring students. Then I became a "rebbe," and a "rebbe" wears a tie (at least in that school). I recall wondering "What else does a rebbe do?" That question consistently hung from my collar as I walked the halls with my new-found ensemble.

What we wear informs a lot of how we think of ourselves and when we change that clothing, that simple act can lead ourselves and others to look at us differently. A well-known study by Kellogg School of Medicine found that students did better on certain types of tests when wearing a white lab coat. Apparently, presenting as a person versed in the medical sciences improves a person's likeliness to succeed in those areas. Why?

I'm no social scientist, nor do I dress like one, but I would assume that rather than the uniform delivering special powers, more likely, it's something about the act of imagining ourselves to be something different that reveals the powers we already contain within. It's never the uniform or the external presentation that changes us, it's the uniform that inspires us to change.

So many of Purim's themes remind us of this lesson.

Esther, a simple girl unexpectedly thrown into the game of thrones, must somehow become the leader who will carry the weight and expectations of her people's survival on her shoulders. After her dramatic conversation with Mordechai, she hatches upon a plan, and other than the fasting that she



and the Jews of Shushan do in prayer and solidarity, we read of only one more act of preparation that she performs. Immediately before entering the king's chamber uninvited, the pasuk relates:

וַיְהִי אִ בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַתִּלְבַּשׁ אֶסְתֵּר מַלְכוּת וַתַּעֲמֹד בַּחֲצַר בֵּית-הַמֶּלֶךְ הַפְּנִימִית נֹכַח בַּיִת הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּלֶךְ יוֹשֵׁב עַל-כִּסֵּא מַלְכוּתוֹ בְּבַיִת הַמֶּלֶךְ נֹכַח פְּתַח הַבַּיִת:

*On the third day, Esther put on royal apparel and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, facing the king's palace, while the king was sitting on his royal throne in the throne room facing the entrance of the palace.*

Of course, she had to dress the part, but the emphasis on her "suited up" for the encounter reminds of this principle. Sometimes, to boost ourselves to levels and actions previously thought impossible, all we can do is create an external impetus that might draw from resources we had yet to discover that can elevate us to a new level of courageousness or performance. It certainly worked for Esther.

Dressing like and elevating herself as an equal to Achashveirosh causes him to offer עֲדֵהֲצִי הַמַּלְכוּת וַיִּנָּתֶן לָךְ, "Even to half the kingdom, it shall be granted you." She appears as an equal, and he immediately perceives her as such.

The Sefer HaChinuch famously expresses: אחרי הפעולות נמשכים הלבבות, "our hearts are motivated by our external acts." It is sometimes the things we do superficially, at a skin deep, or even at a wardrobe level, that can elevate us to greater sincerity.

Purim has a unique rule relating to the mitzvah of Matanot l'Evyonim, gifts for the poor, that expresses this idea as well. The Yerushalmi teaches that כל הפושט יד נותנים לו, we are obligated to provide anyone who puts out their hand to ask for alms. We might not be giving sincerely, we might not be giving a lot, but on one day a year, we are all meant to involve ourselves in the superficial act of giving a little in the hope of seeing ourselves as givers.

The idea of costumes or presenting ourselves in a way other than we generally do offers us the opportunity to recognize that the outside, the superficial, is sometimes entirely the point. We often tell ourselves that this or that behavior "isn't where we are at" religiously, and we want to be "true to ourselves" but who really knows? What if "trying it on" might awaken an inner desire or stimulate a sensation that brings us the sort of satisfaction we might ultimately choose to adopt? What if the outfit surprisingly fits?

Purim is about putting on that costume, imagining we can be someone else, engaging in the behaviors that might not currently match our insides, but... who knows? Imagine Esther looking at herself in the mirror before entering the palace or the Kohen Gadol doing the same before entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. Perhaps they had originally felt like imposters, but eventually, they felt like they belonged.

Where do we belong, and what do we need to "try on" to get there?

Shabbat Shalom,

Shmuel Ismach