

We move from Purim directly into Parashat Tetzaveh. Parashat Tetzaveh usually falls as Shabbat Zachor, the shabbat before Purim, but so many things are wonky this year, and this is another: with Purim leading into Parashat Tetzavah, I notice this year a thread the two have in common – which is, in fact, thread!

By which I mean clothing, and a certain preoccupation with appearance.

On Purim, we dress up in costumes or disguises. More than that, the megillah text is full of descriptions of clothing, including abrupt clothing reversals. Mordechai is dressed in sackcloth and ashes in Chapter 4; in Chapter 6 he is dressed in the king's own clothes, and in Chapter 8, he is given his own royal garments.

And in Parashat Tetzaveh, we read or hear an extended description of priestly clothes. Exodus 28:4 lists 6 particular garments sacred to the High Priest: a choshen (Breastplate), ephod (some sort of apron-like overgarment that held the choshen), me'il (robe or coat), a kutonet tashbetz (quilted tunic), mitznefet (turban) and, avnet (sash). All 43 verses of chapter 28 then deal with the details of these clothes.

Our commentary tradition makes a link between the Purim story and the priestly garments:

In Esther 8:15: *And Mordechai left the king dressed in royal fineries, blue and white, with a great golden crown, and a wrap of fine linen and purple wool,*" - and this 'wrap' is the robe (*me'il*), that he wrapped himself in. – Nachmanides (so when Mordechai wears a "me'il" it is not just a me'il," , but "*the me'il.*")

This cannot be, since Mordechai was not a priest. But it points to another common theme between Tetzaveh and Esther; the threat of mortal danger:

Verse 35: Aaron shall wear it while officiating, so that the sound of it is heard when he comes into the sanctuary before the LORD and when he goes out—that he may not die.

Verse 43: They shall be worn by Aaron and his sons when they enter the Tent of Meeting or when they approach the altar to officiate in the sanctuary, so that they do not incur punishment and die. It shall be a law for all time for him and for his offspring to come.

These verses remind us that the Kohen had a terrifying job, as the intercessor on behalf of the Jewish people. He had to step into the Holy of Holies with all of the care of someone working the heart of a nuclear reactor. And the clothes were part of the uniform to protect him.

Rashi commenting on Chapter 35: From what is included in this negative statement you may infer the positive: if he has these garments on him he will not incur death; consequently if he enters the Sanctuary lacking one of these garments he incurs death at the hands of God.

As Rabbi Amy Bernstein points out in her sourcesheet on Tetzaveh and Purim: What seemed like mere ornamentation turns out to be a protection against the overwhelming and potentially lethal power of God's inner sanctuary. These bells are a way of sounding a warning and thereby gaining divine permission to enter and exit. The terror of this work becomes clear, but so, too, does the willingness of these priests of Hashem to undertake the danger on behalf of the people.

And that is where Nachmanides again sees a connection to a scene in the Book of Esther. The bells on the priestly robe, he writes, are meant:

So [the priest] can go in before his Master, as if taking permission, for one who comes into the king's house is subject to death at the order of the king, as we see with Achashverosh.

Rabbi Bernstein continues: "Just as the High Priest, sanctified though he is, fears death when he walks into the Divine King's home, so does Esther, intimately

familiar though she is with King Achashverosh, still fears the consequences of treading into his personal space without permission.”

And yet, as Rabbi Bernstein notes, Esther does take that brave step. And the text of the megillah says that when she approached the King, she dressed in *malchut*, literally, in royalty. And the Cohanim did, time and again, don sacred vestments to step into the Holy of Holies and intercede on behalf of the Jewish people.

Rabbi Penina Geller writes that Purim invites us to set aside a time in which we completely reverse our wardrobe, which in turn reverses our identity. It is an invitation to...cross and reverse all the other dichotomies and uniforms of our lives as well. On Purim we are using clothes against themselves, to deny their power to box us in, and simultaneously to redeem us from needing redemption...Purim...makes us wonder if there is an "authentic self" at all, or whether it is all just endless masks upon masks.

She is right. Our celebrations of Purim and remind us of the absurdity of clothing – ultimately, we can say, it is the courage and integrity of Esther and the High Priests that we should aspire to, not the clothes they wear.

At the same time, our celebration of Purim marks the approximate anniversary of when our community began to lock-down due to Covid. Purim is the last holiday that we celebrated as a large collective in person. And after a year of COVID, we know too well that it is still the case the proper clothing, knowing when to mask and unmask, can mark the difference between safety and mortal danger, between courage and foolishness.

I bless us all to find the appropriate clothes and masks – metaphorical and literal - for the challenges ahead, and may we look forward to a day when, without fearing mortal danger, we can approach each other unmasked.