

By Rabbi Ruhi Sophia Motzkin Rubenstein

Tetzaveh: The bling and the burden:

28:6-13

They shall make the ephod of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, worked into designs.

It shall have two shoulder-pieces attached; they shall be attached at its two ends.

And the decorated band that is upon it shall be made like it, of one piece with it: of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen.

Then take two lazuli stones and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel:

six of their names on the one stone, and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, in the order of their birth.

On the two stones you shall make seal engravings—the work of a lapidary—of the names of the sons of Israel. Having bordered them with frames of gold,

attach the two stones to the shoulder-pieces of the ephod, as stones for remembrance of the Israelite people,

וְנָשָׂא אֶהָרֹן אֶת־שְׂמוֹתָם לְפָנַי יְהוָה עַל־שְׁתֵּי כְּתָפָיו לְזִכְרוֹן :

and Aaron shall carry their names upon his two shoulder-pieces before Hashem for remembrance.”

It then described the golden chains that bind the ephod to the shoulder pads, the twelve gemstones, each inscribed with the name of one of the sons of Israel set into the breastplate, and the intricate rings and fasteners that attach the ephod all together, closing the instructions on the ephod with verse 29:

וְנָשָׂא אֶהָרֹן אֶת־שְׂמוֹת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּחֹשֶׁן הַמִּשְׁפָּט עַל־לִבּוֹ בָּבֵאוּ אֶל־הַקֹּדֶשׁ לְזִכְרוֹן לְפָנַי יְהוָה תָּמִיד :

Aaron shall carry the names of the sons of Israel on the breastpiece of decision over his heart, when he enters the sanctuary, for remembrance before יהוה at all times.

Reading this this year, I was struck by how heavy this all would be: literal stones on the shoulders and chains wrapping around them. Even a golden chain is still a chain.

And these inscribed stones serve a particular purpose: before God, a remembrance:

Rashi teaches that this is, “so that the Holy One, blessed be He, will see the names of the tribes written before Him and He will remember their righteousness.”

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But when I think about the behavior of all of the children of Israel, I wonder: the 12 sons of Jacob were not paragons of righteousness.

I suspect that the carrying of the names of the Israelites serves more as a reminder for Aharon himself of what he is doing. As Rabbi Dr. Erin Leib Smokler has written,

“The High Priest, on this view, is charged to carry bnei yisrael on his shoulders as an act of concern and protection. But, as any parent of small children knows, shoulders that offer rides time and again tend to hurt, and it would seem that Aharon's shoulders were to carry a whole lot of weight too. He was to bear the burdens of his people--their complaints, their doubts, their sins, their secrets. He was tasked to take upon himself the heaviness of their hard lives, lightening their loads, but also no doubt complicating his own. The holy work of the High Priest involved carrying a lot of other people's messes. That too is part of lifting a people onto your shoulders.”

The high priest's job was a dangerous one, as we are reminded in several weeks, in parashat Shemini, when Aharon's sons Nadav and Avihu die after bringing a sacrifice in an improper manner. The High Priest had to care about the people, and also to confess on behalf of their people, their sins, so that the people could be forgiven.

The priest is also a metaphor for the whole Jewish people, as Hashem says in Exodus 19:6- you shall be for me **קְדוֹשׁ וְגוֹי קְדוֹשִׁים** – a kingdom of priests and a holy people.

Through reconstructionist Jews officially reject chosenness, and officially reject hierarchies, I do think that even we carry stories of the specialness of the Jewish people, a certain idea of moral exceptionism. That can be a beautiful story, as beautiful as the garments of the High Priest, but like the garments of the High Priest, it's also heavy, and it comes with certain responsibilities: to confess the truths about when we fail, and to recognize that we are all implicated with each other when we do when and when we fail. We don't get to reject the “bad Jews.” – but neither do we ignore the harm that we and our fellow Jews cause. May we hold each other on our shoulders and our hearts and may we share the burden together.