

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

(Portion of Tetzaveh)

“Dayeinu.” Such a powerful word: ‘*Enough!*’ We sing it every year on Passover, but the song is rather puzzling. If you take a careful look at the words, they are challenging, to say the least.

“If we had only been taken out of Egypt, without all the miracles, Dayeinu! It would have been enough...”

“If G-d had split the Sea, but not led us through it on dry land, Dayeinu!”

“If He had brought us to Sinai, but not given us the Torah, Dayeinu! ...”

What does this mean? How could it have been enough to come to Sinai without receiving the Torah? What would the point have been? And how could it have been enough to split the Sea without going through it? This question is of course the theme of this song, which leads us to its conclusion:

“Al Achat Kamah Ve’Kamah...”

“How much more so are we thankful, seeing all that G- d has done for us....”

Not only has Hashem split the Sea, but took us through it as well, and so on.

Consider how thankful we would have been if G-d had indeed taken us out of Egypt, and then left us to figure it out; we would have been the shortest-lived nation in history, since the Egyptian chariots would have wiped us out!

And of course, if G-d had left us at the foot of Sinai without giving us our beloved Torah, we would have disappeared long ago....

This song is really about learning to love all the pieces of the puzzle. I recall learning this lesson all over again in the most unlikely of places, a surgical waiting room.

Many years ago, my wife and I found ourselves in a special surgical waiting room, waiting while our youngest daughter, Adi Calanit (shetichyeh’) underwent surgery. There really are no words to describe what it was like to sit there, waiting to hear the outcome.

There was a woman sitting across the room with her husband, obviously playing the same waiting game....

I hadn’t paid much attention to Karen; her blue jeans and jacket and disheveled blonde hair seemed to place her in a very different world. But she definitely noticed us, or perhaps more accurately, she saw the tears brimming in my wife’s eyes, and came over. I wasn’t in much of a mood for conversation, wanting to concentrate on the Torah study and prayers I was in the midst of, and I had assumed my wife, in the middle of saying Psalms (Tehillim), wouldn’t much be in the mood either, so when I saw Doreet close her Tehillim and talk to this woman, I thought it was either her being polite, or wanting to help someone else.

But Karen had a lot more to give than she needed to receive. In truth, she was our inspiration.

Her daughter, born with a congenital heart disorder, was not originally expected to make it past her first year. She had more surgeries and operations in her first two years than most entire families experience in a lifetime. By the time she was two years old, she had been resuscitated from clinical death seven times. And through it all,

this woman decided this was the gift G-d had given her to grow from and was determined that it be the source of what both she and her daughter would have to give back to the world.

Seven years later, she was back with her daughter to check the valves in her daughter's heart and ensure everything was in working order, and in the course of recounting her story she shared with us a moment that had tears stream down my cheeks.

The doctors told her that she could not let her baby cry. Whatever she could do, including medications, breastfeeding, pacifiers and the like, to keep her baby from crying, was of the utmost importance, because this little baby's heart could not handle the stress of crying, so for two years this woman could not afford to let her baby cry. Can you imagine?

At age two, after an emergency medi-vac to Boston, her daughter had a successful surgery which proved to be the last surgery on the path to good health and Karen was finally able to bring her daughter home.

Before leaving the hospital, in her last meeting with the doctor, she asked if her baby could cry, and was told that she could at last let her baby cry.

In most normal homes, when a baby starts to cry, the mother comforts the child and tries to get the baby to stop crying. But that night, when the baby started to cry, Karen didn't pick her up right away, taking a moment to appreciate the gift of a child's tears. And as her daughter cried, she cried along with her; she said she finally understood the meaning of the expression 'tears of joy'. And she said that for her, every tear her daughter would ever cry would be a tear of joy....

Love, you see, is in the details. We so often get so caught up in the big picture; we forget to enjoy the details.

This week's portion, *Tetzaveh*, is an example par excellence. Most of the portion deals with the clothing of the *Kohanim*, the priests who serve in the Tabernacle, the *Mishkan* (and later the Temple, the *Beit HaMikdash*).

Pants and shirts, overcoats and vestments, scarves and head dressings; all the tapestries that befit a Priest who will serve in the holy Temple. One wonders whether there seems to be a bit too much attention to detail.

The Torah this week takes an enormous amount of time to describe not only the type of material and nature of the clothing the priests will wear, but even the color dyes that must be used. Indeed, Maimonides points out (*Hilchot Bait HaMikdash* 5:2) that any service done by a Kohen without any of the articles of clothing prescribed in the Torah is completely invalid.

Imagine! If Aaron himself were offering up the incense exactly as prescribed, on Yom Kippur, and the forgiveness of the entire Jewish people depended on the proper ritual, even with the highest intentions and purest thoughts, if he were missing a few bells on his coat, or if the jacket was green instead of sky-blue, the entire service would be completely invalid!

Why such an emphasis on clothing? And why so many details? After all, shouldn't what really matters be what is underneath, and not the coat that covers it?

How often do we fall prey to all the trappings of this world; does the hat & coat really make the man? Is this the message of the *Mishkan*? Why such an emphasis on externalities?

It is interesting to note, not incidentally, that this week's portion always falls in Adar, in the vicinity of the holiday of Purim. And one of the stories contained in the scroll (*Megillah*) of Esther, is very much about clothing.

Mordechai, one of the heroes of the story, has recently saved the life of the Persian King Achashverosh from an assassination attempt, and it has come to the King's attention that Mordechai was never properly repaid for his service. The reward? Mordechai is led through the streets on a horse, dressed in 'royal garb worn by the king', while someone calls out before him:

"So shall be done for the man whom the King desires to honor..." (Esther 6: 8-11)

One wonders, reading the Megillah of Esther: this is the great reward? To wear the king's clothes? To be paraded on a horse wearing royal robes? Couldn't anyone come up with something a little more valuable than that? Especially from the ruler of the known world! The opening verses of the book of Esther point out that Achashverosh ruled a kingdom of 127 provinces; he had inherited the entire Babylonian empire, and yet the reward to the one who had saved his life was 'a day as a movie star'?

This story is reminiscent of another piece of clothing that seemed to play a rather important role in our history: the cloak of many colors given to Joseph by his adoring father Yaakov. There too, one wonders why Yaakov has chosen a piece of clothing as a symbol of his love for his son.

In fact, one of the customs of Purim, central to the experience of our children, is to dress up in costumes... again, the clothing... When Mordechai, upon hearing of Haman's evil intention to destroy the Jews, wants to make a statement, he goes to the gates of the palace and puts on sackcloth, again, *changing his clothes*. Does clothing really make the man? What is the message behind what we wear?

Imagine it is the evening of your son's bar mitzvah, and you announce that you have a special gift for him on this special evening. Full of expectation, he comes forward to the front of the hall, and you unwrap for him... a colored bathrobe! Or perhaps as a gift for your wife in appreciation of all that she does and all that she is to you, you surprise her with ... a mink coat! Where is the spiritual significance? Is this the message I want to give my children? Is the item I view as the pinnacle of appreciation on this special evening is a coat? A piece of clothing?

What are Yaakov, the book of Esther, and our portion of *Tetzaveh*, trying to say? And what is the message of the Priestly clothing?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh, in his masterpiece on Jewish philosophy, *Chorev*, points out, that every mitzvah, every commandment, contains symbols which are really the vehicle to understanding what any particular mitzvah is all about. Sometimes ideas that are abstract are very difficult to communicate, so we use symbols to get the idea across.

For example, when the committee for road safety had to create road signs that would communicate a message to drivers of various nationalities and languages, it was no accident that they decided to make stop signs the color red. Any driver approaching an intersection receives a powerful subliminal message: slow down here, there is danger, and stopping for a moment could avoid bloodshed, hence the color red.

Every item, every detail, of the clothing of the Kohen contains incredibly deep messages and meanings, but we do not always take the time to explore them. It is no accident that according to Jewish tradition one of the three things that allowed the Jewish people to survive the exile in Egypt for two hundred years was that they kept their Jewish clothing. The externalities are really the first thing we see, and they are the first vehicles for any message we choose to communicate. Every morning we clothe ourselves in our Jewish clothing, our *Tefillin* and *Tallit*. The first symbol we wear as a sign of marriage are the wedding rings on our fingers; often the external clothing we have is a sign of some much deeper commitment we choose to make.

But even deeper, clothing in this world is not only of cloth. We also wear a different type of clothing. Mystically, our actions are what really clothe us. The **Sefer HaChinuch** points out that the clothing was also a

message to the Kohen that people are influenced by everything about him that they see. The priestly vestments were also meant to influence the state of mind of the person wearing them. Do we really realize how much we are influenced by what we see, including the clothes we, as well as those around us, wear?

Entire articles in business magazines are devoted to what a person should wear when going on that all important job interview. Companies, understanding that the clothes of their employees influence the clients they come in contact with, devote an enormous amount of time to developing policies for just what their employees should and should not wear. And like it or not, we all make choices in how we view ourselves, and how we want others to view us, when we decide what we will clothe ourselves in on any given day.

Judaism believes that ideas, as valuable and powerful as they may be, are never enough. They need to constantly be reinforced by what we do. It is not enough, for example, to recognize that gratitude is one of the key ingredients to a meaningful life. We are reminded through the blessings we make to re-experience that gratitude every time we eat, every day upon waking, and even every time we use the bathroom, through what we say and what we do.

And clothing, suggests the **Sefer HaChinuch**, is no different. Every day, when we don our attire, we have the opportunity to re-experience the importance of the things in this world that really clothe us: our actions and the way they, too, affect the world around us.

I remember so well when our daughter wore a very different type of clothing, of needles and tubes, and hospital gowns; when her priestly turban was the high swath of bandages that crowned her head, and her me'il, or coat of many colors, was a hospital gown.

Perhaps the coat of many colors Yaakov gave his son, Joseph was really a message that Joseph needed to hear. Joseph, according to the narrative in the Torah (Genesis 37:2) brought the tales of his brothers, especially the sons of the handmaidens, to Yaakov his father. He was a tale-bearer. So perhaps Yaakov was trying to teach Joseph that it takes many different colors to make a beautiful coat. Maybe that was a message Joseph needed to figure out; if Yaakov had told him directly, it would have been a lesson heard, but not necessarily learned. Tragically, it took Joseph twenty-two years and much pain, to learn this lesson.

Perhaps the Jews of Shushan, who according to the book of Esther were more Persian than the Persians, needed to learn a similar lesson. They all came to Achashverosh's Persian feast, wearing their Persian clothes and impressed by (Esther 1:4-7) all the trappings of Persian royalty. And they later saw Mordechai wearing the Royal robes. But seeing the cloth is not valuable if you don't seek its message. Finally, Mordechai wears sackcloth, understanding that we are influenced by what we see, and not just by what we hear.

We live in a society that places so much emphasis on what we wear. 'Clothes make the man' is the saying, and there is a message behind all this. The question is, do we choose to see it. We all live to some degree, in "America", and make no mistake about it, even in Jerusalem, America is everywhere. America is the Persia of today, and she rules all the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces with her influence. And we wear our American clothing so well, we are often more American than the Americans. How many Jews today are readily recognizable as Jews? Have we disappeared in our costumes, into the landscape of western society?

Purim comes to remind us that our clothing is in the end a costume. An important one, with many messages, to be sure, but a costume, nonetheless. The holiest garb of the High Priest was worn one day a year, on Yom Kippur. Every other day he was the same person, just with different clothes. But that clothing carried an awesome message. Its colors all symbolic; the white of purity, or the blue of the heavens, meant to remind a Kohen, even as an adoring people paid him the highest honors, that he was, in the end, a messenger of G-d and not a replacement.

There is an amazing story of **Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev**, which I actually read to our daughter in the hospital, in the Intensive Care Unit:

“Everybody knows that the great and holy Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev and Rav Baruch of Medzibozh were complete opposites.

Rav Baruch was very civilized. When he prayed, he hardly moved. When he sat with his family at the Shabbat table, he was regal; he was King of the world.

But when Rav Levi Yitzchak prayed he jumped from one end of the room to the other. He would dance, turn around, and even fall to the ground. At his table, one had to be very careful. You never knew what to expect. In the middle of Kiddush, he might suddenly go absolutely wild; throw his cup in the air... You could end up with your Kiddush all over your lap.

Rav Levi Yitzchak wanted so much to spend a Shabbat with Rav Baruch, the Baal Shem’s grandson, that he finally invited himself.

Rav Baruch said: “You can come, but you have to behave my way. Especially at the table, with my family, you must be very proper.

Rav Levi Yitzchak thought about it.

“The only way I can behave is if I don’t open my mouth. I won’t even pray, except to say ‘Amen’. Because the minute I pray I’m not myself anymore, and the ecstasy carries me away...”

So he said to Rav Baruch: “When we’re making Kiddush, don’t ask me to say a blessing. Let me be absolutely silent, because it’s the only way I can control myself.”

The two Rebbes agreed, and Rav Levi Yitzchak came to Rav Baruch for Shabbat. All through the prayers he only answered ‘Amen’. The prayer went beautifully. But everyone was sure that by Kiddush Rav Levi Yitzchak wouldn’t be able to hold it together, and he’d start jumping on the table. But Rav Baruch made Kiddush, and again, Rav Levi Yitzchak just answered ‘Amen’.

Now everybody knows that there is a custom to eat fish on Friday night. But some start with sour fish and some start with sweet fish. Rav Baruch was very civilized, so he had one of his Chassidim, acting as a waiter, bring around the fish and ask everyone if they would like some fish.

The waiter came to Rav Levi Yitzchak and asked him: “Do you like sweet fish?” And that was all the poor Chassid had to ask. Rav Levi Yitzchak heard the question and began to yell: Do I like fish? Do I love fish? I love Hashem! I love only G-d! That was all it took for him to reach a state of spiritual ecstasy, and he jumped up on the table, grabbed the platter of fish and threw it up on the air. The fish hit the ceiling and began to drip on Reb Baruch’s Tallit (prayer shawl).... (In those days the great Rebbes wore their tallit on Friday night at the table.)

Everyone was aghast. Everyone, that is, except Rav Baruch, who for all his civilized behavior would never wash his Tallit after that feast, because, he said, the stains were very holy. “These stains were made by a Jew who really loves G-d. How can I ever wash them out?”

After Rav Baruch’s death, the Tallit was passed down from one Rebbe to another to wear on Shabbat, but never washed. During this century it became so precious that the Rebbes only wore it on Yom Kippur.

The holy Munkatcher Rebbe, the last to possess it, wore it only for Neilah, the final prayer of Yom Kippur. He must have foreseen the destruction that would be coming into the world with the Holocaust; his last wish was to be buried in Rav Baruch's Tallit, covered with the stains caused by one who loved only G-d.

There are many different types of holy clothing, but they are all ultimately meant to clothe what is really valuable: the person who lies beneath. And as with all things we come in contact with, they hide the deepest and highest meanings of the things that are truly valuable in this world.

Finally, it is interesting to note that this week is the only portion in the entire Torah from the beginning of the Book of Exodus where he is born, that Moshe's name is not mentioned. Not accidentally, this occurs in proximity to the seventh day of the Jewish month of Adar, when Moshe left this world 3,200 years ago.

The **Lubavitcher Rebbe** points out, the opening words of the portion: "*Ve'Atah Tetzaveh*" - "*And you shall command*", allude to Moshe, getting beyond his name. "*Atah*", "*You*", refers to the essence of who Moshe really was.

A name too, in a way, is a form of outer clothing. It serves as a function to everyone else to identify us. But we ourselves don't actually need our own names for ourselves. Because we are in touch with the essence of who we are, that our names only allude to. A name, therefore, is like the clothing that covers and alludes to the reality that lies beneath. Our challenge is to remember that all these symbols are valuable tools to uncovering the deepest depths of reality that lie hidden beneath the surface.

Sometimes, Hashem blesses us to be privileged to take a peek into that window of reality that is hidden in this world, but lies just beneath the surface, waiting for us to uncover it, if we will only look.

Beneath the clothing of sinew and bones, tissue and limbs that are our bodies, lies the soul, that indomitable fire of joy and light that is who we really are.

This Adar, may Hashem bless us all with a glimpse beneath the 'cloak' that often hides us from each other, so that we can better appreciate the inner beauty of all those around us, and all people everywhere.

Shabbat Shalom,

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