

Garments of Light

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Last week, we read God's orders to Moses for the construction of the Tabernacle and its accoutrements. This week, our parashah continues on the subject of the Tabernacle and the preparations for starting the sacrificial cult, focusing on the Tabernacle's personnel: the priests—particularly their vestments and the rituals for the priests' consecration. These subjects will return, for after a week devoted largely to the story of the Golden Calf, the Torah will repeat the account of the Tabernacle nearly verbatim, not in the form of instructions for things to be made but as a narrative of their making. Nor is this the end of the matter; in Leviticus, the consecration of the priests' returns as a narrative of how the consecration rituals commanded in this week's parashah were actually carried out. Because they occupy four weekly parashiyot in Exodus and the better part of a fifth one in Leviticus, it is clear that the construction of the Tabernacle and the consecration of the priests, as dry as they may seem to us, are among the Torah's important concerns.

That God should have commanded the construction of the Tabernacle might seem like a natural development, for we are accustomed to having structures where holy objects are housed, where worship is conducted, where a religious community assembles, and where the divine presence is felt to be concentrated. What may come as a surprise is the amount of attention paid to the garments of the priests, especially those of the high priest. It seems out of harmony with the Rabbinic admonition to concentrate on the wine rather than the vessel that holds it. Our religious sensibilities find ostentation incongruent with reverence. Yet the Torah seems fascinated with the garments of the High Priest, enumerating eight items of dress, all made of precious fabrics colored with precious dyes, sparkling with gold thread and

golden ornaments, glittering with precious stones, and collectively known as the golden garments.

How our ancestors loved the High Priest's glittering garments! Writing around 200 BCE, the wise Ben Sira, an eyewitness to the Temple service, wrote of the High Priest Simeon ben Yoḥanan (Ben Sira 50:5–7, 11):

How splendid he was when he peered from the tent,

Emerging from behind the curtain!

Like a gleaming star among the clouds,

Like the full moon on a festival night,

Like the sun shining on the king's palace,

Like the rainbow appearing in a cloud . . .

When he donned the robes of honor,

Wore his splendid garments.

The Letter of Aristeas, a possibly fictional first-century BCE account of a visitor's impressions of the Temple, echoes this fascination with the vestments of a high priest named Eleazar (Aristeas 96, 100):

We were struck with great astonishment when we beheld Eleazar at his ministrations, and his apparel, and the visible glory conferred by his being garbed in the coat that he wears and the stones that adorn his person . . . The total effect of the whole arouses awe and emotional excitement.

The poets who wrote descriptions of the Temple's Yom Kippur service for the synagogue liturgy were likewise entranced by the high priest's robes. Like Ben Sira and the

author of the Letter of Aristeas, they waxed eloquent in describing the precious stones of the breastpiece. But like the Rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash, the synagogue poets were less interested in the vestments' luminousness than in their moral symbolism; they enumerated, in verse of a rather didactic style, each garment and the sin for which it was designed to atone. They reserved their more ecstatic effusions for the high priest himself, who is described as follows in an anonymous poem in the Ashkenazi *maḥzor*:

Like the	did the priest appear.
rainbow within a cloud	did the priest appear.
Like Venus in the	did the priest appear.
eastern sky	did the priest appear.
Like a lamp shining	did the priest appear.
through windows	did the priest appear.
Like the sunrise over the	did the priest appear.
earth	
Like Orion and the	
Pleiades	

No mention here of the golden garments, for this is a Yom Kippur hymn; and on Yom Kippur, the high priest wore the golden garments only for the rituals that are performed on weekdays and ordinary festive days—the twice-daily offering of a lamb, or renewing the lamps in the lampstand, for example. For the rituals specific to Yom Kippur, such as entering the Holy of Holies or selecting and sending forth the scapegoat, he wore four white garments, containing no gold and adorned with no jewels, and for this reason called the linen garments. The high priest's radiance as he emerged from the Holy of Holies is thus not ascribed to his garments but to his person and is entirely metaphorical: he glowed not with the gold of the diadem, the gold thread in the fabric of his robes, the flashes from the twelve gems on the breastpiece, or the gems' gold settings, but with the radiance of contact with the divine.

In truth, the glitter of the golden garments and the dazzle of the linen garments were only pale substitutes for the

luminescence that God intended for all mankind when He bestowed garments of light on Adam and Eve.

The Psalmist says that God wears light as a garment, and the Midrash, in its hyperbolic way, expands that one garment of light to ten. When God drove Adam and Eve out of paradise, he dressed them in some of His own garments of light, at least according to one of the sages of old. Perhaps He did this to console Adam and Eve for their loss of Eden and to protect them from the dangers of the natural world now that they were reduced from their original enormous size (for no wild beast would dare approach the divine radiance). But more likely, He intended His gift as an assurance that they would continue to enjoy the proximity of His divine presence and to partake in His divine nature, if only in a reduced way.

Time passed; Adam and Eve's progeny multiplied and scattered. Man went about his ways, and God's light in him dimmed. Then God decided to establish His presence among mankind by demanding that His nation of priests construct Him a dwelling—the Tabernacle. By vesting the priests in garments of light, God's intention must have been to remind men that they had once worn His own garments of light and that His light had radiated consolation, protection, and a divine character that was their very own. Perhaps in the priests' luminous garb, men would glimpse the divine light in mankind and strive to deserve its restoration in full.

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