

Shabbat Zakhor / Tetzavveh 5783

שבת זכור  
תצוה תשפ"ג

## The Meaning of Aaron's Holy Garments

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Parashat Tetzavveh continues God's instructions to the Israelites for building the Tabernacle in the Wilderness—the central concern of the previous week's parashah (Terumah) and the next three as well (Ki Tissa, Va-yakhel, and Pekudei). Altogether, the Tabernacle and its accoutrements are the most prominent subject matter of the entire last section of the book of Exodus, comprising chapters 25 through 40. These portions cover many details, the precise explanation for many of which remains somewhat uncertain to this very day.

In this commentary, I would like to focus on some of the vestments of Aaron that he wore in his capacity as *kohen gadol* (High Priest). At the beginning of [Exodus 28](#), the Torah commands that the Israelites who are skilled artisans should prepare a specific list of items for Aaron and the priests to wear. These include the breastpiece, ephod, robe, fringed tunic, headdress, and sash.

Let us take a closer look at the way in which the Torah describes how Aaron must function vis-à-vis the “clothing items.” First, the “ephod” (a garment):

They shall make the ephod of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, worked into designs . . . Then take two lazuli stones and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel . . . attach the two stones to the shoulder-pieces of the ephod, as stones for remembrance of the Israelite people, *whose names Aaron shall carry* upon his two shoulder-pieces for remembrance before the LORD. ([Exod. 28:6-12](#))

Thus, Aaron is to “carry the names” of the Israelites “for remembrance before the LORD.” Later, we shall return to the question of what “carrying” might mean. Secondly, let us examine another of the items, the “breastplate”:

You shall make a “breastpiece of decision” (*hoshen mishpat*), worked into a design; make it in the style of the ephod . . . Set in it mounted stones, in four rows of stones . . . The stones shall correspond in number to

the names of the sons of Israel: twelve . . . On the breastpiece make braided chains of corded work in pure gold . . . *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 the LORD at all times. 30 Inside the breastpiece of decision you shall place the Urim and Thummim, so that they are over Aaron's heart when he comes before the LORD. *Thus Aaron shall carry the instrument of decision* for the Israelites over his heart before the LORD at all times. ([Exod. 28:15-30](#))

Once again, Aaron is described as “carrying” (in these instances, the names, again, and the [breastpiece of] decision). Finally, let us look at the “frontlet” (*tzitz*) that Aaron is to wear on his headdress:

You shall make a frontlet of pure gold and engrave on it the seal inscription: “Holy to the LORD.” 37 Suspend it on a cord of blue, so that it may remain on the headdress; it shall remain on the front of the headdress. 38 It shall be on Aaron's forehead, *that Aaron may carry any sin* arising from the holy things that the Israelites consecrate, from any of their sacred donations; it shall be on his forehead at all times, to win acceptance for them before the LORD. ([Exod. 28:36-38](#))

Here, too, as in each of the other cases, the Torah describes Aaron's function as “carrying” the item, using the Hebrew verb *נשא* (*nassa*). However, in the first series of commands, the items that Aaron is to carry are physical objects (e.g., stones on the ephod) that function in some unspecified way “on behalf of the Israelites,” whereas in the last case Aaron is to carry the sins of the Israelites. Thus, the Torah uses figurative language (a metaphor) to describe sin as though it is a physical burden that is “carried.” As it happens, imagining sin as a “burden” is the most typical way in which the Torah describes sin; in later biblical passages, as well as in the vast preponderance of

rabbinic literature, sin is imagined as a “debt that must be repaid.”<sup>1</sup>

What might the Torah mean that the “frontlet” (or “blossom”) on the headdress would enable Aaron to “bear” or “carry away” the sins of the Israelites—an act that is reminiscent of the function of the “scapegoat” on Yom Kippur (see [Leviticus 16:22](#): “Thus *the goat shall carry* on it all their iniquities to an inaccessible region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness”)?

Rashi had offered the conventional wisdom of the talmudic Rabbis: the frontlet expiated sins that the *kohanim* may have committed when performing the sacrificial service. However, while Rashi does see that Aaron bears/carries the burden of the sin that had formerly “rested on” the holy things, the phenomenology of the frontlet itself is not as clear in Rashi’s explanation: “Aaron lifts the burden of the sin and (somehow) it follows that the iniquity is dispelled (*nimtza mesulak ha-avon*).”

Rashbam, Rashi’s grandson, goes out of his way to distinguish his explanation from that of his illustrious predecessor—and from every other interpretation that had been offered. He writes: “My grandfather explained [this portion]. I, too, will explain the items in ways that were never explained before” (Rashbam’s comment on [Exodus 28:6](#)). In his comment on [Exodus 28:38](#), Rashbam attempts to explain the way in which the frontlet functioned:

**Aaron will take away any sin through the sacrifices:**

According to its contextual interpretation (*peshat*), the verse does not speak about the impurity of sacrifices [offered in an incorrect manner]. Rather this is its explanation: whatever sacrifices the Israelites might bring—whole-burnt offerings, purgation offerings or guilt offerings—to atone for their sins, the frontlet will help, together with the sacrifice, to cause them to be remembered before the Holy One, for receiving favor on

behalf of the Israelites and as a remembrance for them, so that they will realize atonement.

Now, to be sure, the idea that a specific priestly implement or tool might “help God,” as it were, to “remember” the Israelites during the moment of sacrificial worship, and thereby actually work to create the conditions necessary for their atonement—this idea seems antithetical to the way that most of us think about God. So, however superior Rashbam’s contextual reading of the Torah portion might be to that of Rashi, neither reading may speak to our religious sensibilities, the *drash* that we need to *carry* within ourselves (!) when we engage the Torah with religious yearnings in our hearts.

Perhaps another way in which both the Bible and subsequent Jewish tradition have understood the Hebrew verb נָשָׂא (*nassa*) may help us out of our predicament—even if it does not *precisely* fit the language of our Torah portion. For this verb, that we have translated “to carry” or “to bear a burden,” may *also* mean “to be lifted up,” in the sense of “to exalt” or “to be exalted.” In the case of our Torah portion, as in the case of many of the Jewish rituals we perform to this day, and the Jewish ritual objects with which we adorn ourselves and our homes and dining tables—we know that these implements are not totems or actual “power-containing” tools that will “work” on their own. To believe this literally (whether with regard to mezuzot, *tefillin*, or any other ritual object) is to commit idolatry; or in the Bible’s own language, “to worship gods of wood and stone.” Ritual objects are not “sacred” in and of themselves—they are only “sacred” if they remind us to perform mitzvot, to become better human beings, to be more compassionate and sensitive towards our fellow human beings, and to be more truly worshipful of the One True God. To invoke an ancient midrash on one of the Levitical tasks (see [Deuteronomy 10:8](#)): the Levites may have been the ones charged with *carrying* the Ark—but it was the Ark that *exalted* the Levites. There are many implications of this alternative definition of the verb *nassa*, but perhaps the most prominent one for now is: we should try our hardest to make sure that the burdens we carry will exalt us instead of weighing us down.

*A version of this commentary appeared in 2010.*

<sup>1</sup> For detailed explanation of the figurative language Judaism and Christianity have employed to describe sin, see the wonderful and readable book by Professor Gary Anderson of Notre Dame University, *Sin: A History* (Yale University Press).