



Self-Transcendence • Parshat Tetzaveh

In *Parshat Tetzaveh* we are introduced in great detail to the vestiture of the High Priest. His eight garments function, according to the *Sefer HaChinuch*, to inform and remind the High Priest of the Divine service that he performed. The *Sefer HaChinuch* invokes his famous principle that people's thoughts and intentions are affected and transformed by means of external actions and circumstances. If the High Priest looked at his own clothing, "he will immediately remember and be inspired to serve" God.

Malbim also highlights the internal psychological effects of the Priests' outer layer of clothing. The priests don vestments of "dignity and adornment" (Ex. 28:2), thereby clothing "their souls with thoughts and traits and proper tendencies, which are the clothes of the soul." This "spiritual uniform" was meant to transform the priests' inner dispositions, refining "their souls and traits, in such a way they will wear majesty and splendor upon their internal souls." Internal growth seems woven into the very fabric of each of the garments.

Two of the eight of the High Priest's garments stand out textually and thematically as the only ones to have explicit associations with requiring constancy and continuity—indicated by the word "*tamid*." The breastplate, known as the *choshen*, had the names of the tribes of Israel etched upon each of its stones, and was placed over Aaron's heart, "as a remembrance before the Lord at all times (*tamid*)" (Ex. 28:30). Similarly, the *tzitz*, a plate of pure gold with the engraving "Holy to

the Lord" was worn "on his forehead at all times (*tamid*)" (Ex. 28:36-38).

Rashi notes that this cannot possibly mean that the *tzitz* is always literally on the High Priest's head; when he was not in the process of serving in the Temple, he did not wear the headplate. Rather, when the High Priest wore the *tzitz* in the act of service, he was constantly and consistently mindful and attentive to its presence and message. Despite the awe-inspiring setting and the presumed piety of the High Priest, such focus was a psychological challenge. He was mandated, according to a view in the Talmud, to touch the *tzitz* every often to remind him of God's presence.

Rabbi Haim Sabato, in his *Rest for the Dove: Reading for Shabbat*, elaborates on the significance of these two garments. The *tzitz* on the head, symbolized thought. The engraving "Holy to the Lord" primed the High Priest's thoughts towards God. The *choshen*, placed over the heart that incorporated the names of the Tribes of Israel, symbolized the High Priest's emotions and prayers, encouraging him to channel those emotions and prayers towards his brethren.

Despite the potential for internal and external distraction, the High Priest's job demanded vigilance. External reminders helped him then and can help us now. In an age when mindfulness and attentiveness are so elusive, perhaps we can turn to the *tzitz* and the *choshen* for guidance on how to stay focused and driven by purpose and mission. We can achieve self-transcendence when

we direct our focus, vitality, and energy outward. It is when we are preoccupied with our own ego and problems of the self that we are driven to distraction. By focusing our attention to the

Divine and caring for others, we can transcend the confines of our ego and the limitations of our own scatteredness.

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Character Challenge: Meditate on God's presence with intention or focus intently on the well-being of others. Try to hold your attention and concentration for as long as you can.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt"l: "Moses must show the people – and Aaron himself – that he has the humility, the *tzimtzum*, the power of self-effacement, needed to make space for someone else to share in the leadership of the people... It takes a special kind of character to make space for those whom one is entitled to see as rivals. Early on, Aaron showed that character in relation to Moses, and now Moses is called on to show it to Aaron. True leadership involves humility and magnanimity. The smaller the ego, the greater the leader. That's what Moses showed in the parsha that does not mention his name" ("Leadership Means Making Space," *Covenant & Conversation*)