

## **Tetzaveh: From *Bagad* to *Beged*, Betrayal to Beauty** **Sarah-Beth Neville, Class of 2027**

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In *parshat* Tetzaveh, God commands Moshe to coordinate the creation of garments for Aharon for the purpose of serving as High Priest. Until now, the Torah has paid little attention to what its leaders look like and wear, yet now, in Tetzaveh, an entire chapter is dedicated to elaborate descriptions of clothing. Furthermore, until now, many of the most significant garments featured in the Torah were used as instruments of deception and betrayal. To give just a few examples:

- Rivkah clothes Yaakov in Esau's garments in order to trick Yitzhak into giving him his birthright;
- A veil is used to trick Yaakov into marrying Leah instead of her sister, Rachel;
- Yosef's brothers dip his tunic in blood to convince Yaakov that he has been killed by an animal;
- Tamar removes her widow's garment and covers herself with a veil in order to seduce Yehudah; and
- Potiphar's wife attempts to use Yosef's garment as evidence to frame him for attacking her.

The challenging relationship between human beings and clothing appears to be woven into the very fabric of their existence. After eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve realize that they are naked and sew the first clothes out of fig leaves. When God appears to Adam, one of His first questions is "*Who told you that you were naked?*" (Genesis 3:11). Becoming clothed is part of the initial undoing of paradise, the distancing of man and God, and the original relationship between humans and sin. It should therefore come as no surprise to us that the Hebrew words for "garment" and "betrayal" share the same root: בגד, *BeGeD*.

In *parshat* Tetzaveh, God instructs Moshe as follows: "Make holy garments for your brother Aharon, for honor (*kavod*) and splendor (*tiferet*)" (Exodus 28:2). The idea of creating "holy" garments for the purposes of "honor" and "splendor" feels a far cry from the articles of deceit and betrayal familiar to us from the book of Bereshit.

Surprisingly, the particular term used in Tetzaveh for “splendor” (*tiferet*), is one of only three times this word appears in Torah. The term is used a second time to describe the garments to be created for Aharon’s son (Exodus 28:40) and is separately used to describe the name that Hashem will create for *Bnei Yisrael* (Deuteronomy 26:19). It seems that despite humans’ initial problematic relationship with clothing and its misuse throughout the book of Bereshit, at this point in Torah, garments offer a unique opportunity for glory and beautification. The commentators offer numerous possible explanations for the connection between these priestly garments and splendor.

### 1. *Garments as a form of revelation rather than concealment*

In a number of the stories mentioned in the book of Bereishit, garments are used as a means of concealing the wearer’s identity for the purpose of deception. In stark contrast, a number of commentators highlight the importance of the priestly garments for the purpose of revealing aspects of both the High Priest’s identity as well as God’s.

Medieval commentator Sforno explains that these garments are intended to “render honor and glory” to God and to “inspire awe among the Israelites.” Aharon would wear the names of all the tribes engraved on his garments opposite his heart when he wore them while serving in the Temple (Sforno on Exodus 28:2:1-2). Likewise, both Ramban and the Netziv consider the garments as a vehicle for distinguishing Aharon in his role as High Priest. Ramban compares the garments to those of royalty and the Netziv suggests that they distinguish Aharon so that the people would know that God had chosen him to the “throne” of the *Shekhinah*.

Until now, the role of clothing has been to conceal or obscure the identity of the wearer. However, *parshat* Tetzaveh teaches us that garments created and worn with the correct motives and motifs can act as a means of revealing holy leadership and a connection to God. While Yosef’s coat of many colors represented a separation between him and his brothers, for example, the colors of the High Priest’s breastplate signify the inclusion of each tribe in the High Priest’s heart in order to inspire them.

### 2. *The role of garments in biblical sibling rivalry*

In the book of Bereshit, we see garments being used as a tool for trickery in the context of sibling rivalry. In the book of Shemot, God’s commandment to Moshe to anoint Aharon as High Priest presents a ripe opportunity for destructive sibling rivalry to rear its ugly head again. Particularly as, according to a *midrash*, Moshe was originally

intended to be the High Priest but was denied after he hesitated at the burning bush. We might have expected Moshe to be slighted by this, much like we might have expected Aharon to resent the prophetic leadership role bestowed on his younger brother. However, the *midrash* in Shemot Rabbah teaches us that Moshe and Aharon “each rejoiced at the other’s greatness” (Shemot Rabbah 5:10). Instead of resenting one another’s leadership, Moshe and Aharon provide the first example of a supportive and collaborative sharing of different powers (prophetic and priestly) between siblings.

For Shemot Rabbah, the garments being prepared for Aharon act as reward for his magnanimous behavior towards Moshe: “Let the heart that rejoiced in the greatness of his brother be vested with the *Urim* and *Tumim*” (Shemot Rabbah 3:17). For the Or HaChaim, the garments indicate Moshe’s generosity toward Aharon: “A person who only carries out a directive under duress, does not go to the trouble of constructing such splendid garments for the person who replaces him...” (Or HaChaim on Exodus 28:2). The very same material building blocks which can be used for the purposes of destruction can also represent acts of repair (*tikkun*).

### 3. *Garments as a physical representation of the internal*

A number of commentators consider that the garments’ true “splendor” is found in their impact on the wearer. The Or HaChaim cites Erchin 16a, which teaches that each of the High Priest’s eight garments confer atonement for a specific type of sin. Likewise, the Torah Or states that Aharon, as High Priest, symbolized the “rehabilitation of a man who had become distant from God as a result of Adam’s sin.” It seems that the creation of the original clothing in the Garden of Eden (in breach of God’s commandment) created distance between human beings and God and now, the creation of clothing in compliance with God’s commandment acts as repair (*tikkun*) in the relationship, creating the preconditions needed for closeness in the *Mishkan*.

Malbim focuses on the power of external beautification to bring about internal beautification. He states: the garments “really indicate inner clothes that the priests of God should make – to clothe their souls with thoughts and traits and proper tendencies, which are the clothes of the soul... meaning to teach them how to refine their souls and traits, in such a way they will wear majesty and splendor upon their internal souls.” For Malbim, the external garments are not intended to reveal or conceal the internal, but, the opposite. The external material and physical world can be used as a tool to cultivate inner splendor.



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#### 4. *Creating our own splendor*

*Parshat Tetzaveh* rehabilitates the role of clothing in Torah by taking clothing from the realm of betrayal to the realm of beauty. It teaches us that the same physical articles that can be used as tools for deception, betrayal, concealment and sin are also available to us for the purposes of revelation, atonement, inclusivity, relationship-building, and inspiration. Our tradition offers varied ways of ensuring that our interactions with the material world can place us in the realm of splendor. We can focus on the material world as a means of revealing God's glory and our most regal inner qualities. We can use the material world to further supportive relationships and collaborative leadership. Finally, we can use the material world as means of bringing ourselves closer to God and refining our souls and inner traits.

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*Sarah-Beth Neville grew up in Edinburgh, Scotland and read Law at the University of Cambridge. After graduating from university, Sarah-Beth moved to London and spent a year working as a youth movement worker and informal educator for Noam Masorti Youth UK. Sarah-Beth then trained as a lawyer at an international corporate law firm and began practicing as an employment law specialist. In 2021, Sarah-Beth moved to Jerusalem, studying at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem. She is a member of Maharat's Core Semikha Class of 2027.*