

Parshat Tetzaveh: *Simeni Kachotem al Libecha: On Carrying a People*

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Parshat Tetzavah details much about the holy articles and rituals of the *mishkan* (tabernacle), including the oil of the *menorah*, the priestly garments, the daily *tamid* offering, and the incense altar. It also describes the inauguration of the first High Priest and his cadre of priests, placing the spotlight on Aharon. I would like to focus on two aspects of his ornate uniform, two aspects that subtly shed light on his new role more generally.

Among the vestments of the High Priest were the *ephod*, a multi-colored apron wrapped around the back and waist, and the *choshen*, a breastplate bearing twelve precious stones. Of the *ephod* we are told:

11 [Similar to] the work of an engraver of gems, [similar to] the engravings of a seal, you shall engrave the two stones with the names of the sons of Israel; you shall make them enclosed in gold settings. 12 And you shall put the two stones upon the shoulder straps of the *ephod* as stones of remembrance for the sons of Israel, and Aaron shall carry their names before the Lord upon his two shoulders as a remembrance. (Exodus 28: 11-12)

יא מעשה חרש אבן פתוּחֵי חֹתֶם תִּפְתַּח אֶת שְׁתֵּי
הָאֲבֹנִים עַל שְׁמֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִסִּבַּת מְשֻׁבָּצוֹת
זָהָב תַּעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם: יב וְשִׁמְתָּ אֶת שְׁתֵּי הָאֲבֹנִים עַל
כְּתֹפֶת הָאֶפֶד אֲבֵי זָכָרֹן לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנָשָׂא אֹהֶרֶן
אֶת שְׁמוֹתֵם לִפְנֵי ה' עַל שְׁתֵּי כְּתִפָּיו לְזָכָרֹן: (שְׁמוֹת
כח:יא-יב)

The beautiful *ephod* of blue, purple, gold, and scarlet yarns was to be adorned with two special stones, etched with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel and fastened on either side of the High Priest's shoulders, so that "Aaron shall carry their names before the Lord...as a remembrance."

Similar language appears in the description of the *choshen*:

29 Thus shall Aaron carry the names of the sons of Israel in the *choshen* of judgment over his heart when he enters the Holy, as a remembrance before the Lord at all times. 30 You shall place the *Urim* and the *Tummim* into the *choshen* of judgment so that they will be over Aaron's heart when he comes before the Lord, and Aaron will carry the judgment of the children of Israel over his heart before the Lord at all times. (Exodus 28: 29-30)

כט וְנָשָׂא אֹהֶרֶן אֶת שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּחֹשֶׁן
הַמִּשְׁפָּט עַל לְבוֹ בָּבֹאוּ אֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ לְזָכָרֹן לִפְנֵי ה'
תְּמִיד: ל וְנָתַתְּ אֶל חֹשֶׁן הַמִּשְׁפָּט אֶת הָאוּרִים
וְאֶת הַתֻּמִּים וְהָיוּ עַל לֵב אֹהֶרֶן בָּבֹאוּ לִפְנֵי ה'
וְנָשָׂא אֹהֶרֶן אֶת מִשְׁפַּט בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל לְבוֹ לִפְנֵי
ה' תְּמִיד: (שְׁמוֹת כח:כט-ל)

The names of the twelve tribes were also to be inscribed onto the bejeweled breastplate and placed over Aharon's heart so that he would "carry the names of the sons of Israel...as a remembrance before the Lord at all times."

Two sets of names. Two remembrances before the Lord. Two places on the body marked for carrying, the shoulders and the heart. What function did these strange clothes play? What exactly was Aharon tasked to carry? And for whom?

Focusing on the "*zikaron*," the acts of remembrance mentioned, Rashi suggests the engraved names were to serve as reminders to God.

So that the Holy One would see the tribes written out before Him and remember their righteousness. (Rashi on Exodus 28:12)

שְׂיֵהָא רוּאָה הַקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת הַשְּׁבֵטִים כְּתוּבִים לְפָנָיו
 וַיִּזְכֹּר צְדָקָתָם. (רש"י על שמות כח: יב)

As an emissary of the people before God, the High Priest would offer sacrifices and prayers. The listing of names, references to the ancestral tribal leaders, would awaken God's memory of who His people had been and thereby stir mercy for who they might yet be. The *ephod* would elicit God's forgiveness through the merit of the righteous.

Rashi's perspective on the significance of the names does not address their location, however. For that, and for an altogether different perspective, let us turn to Rabbi Chaim Tyrer of Czernowitz, the *Beer Mayim Chayim*, who focuses his attention on Aharon's repeated acts of carrying ("וַיִּשָׂא אֶהָרֶן אֶת שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל"):

. . . [The text indicates that the carrying] was on his shoulders specifically, and not somewhere else, to teach through this image that Aaron had to carry the Israelites on his shoulders like a person who gives his child a ride on his shoulders to protect him, to save him from all harm, from wild animals, from stumbling upon stones or pot holes. . . (Beer Mayim Chayim, Tetzaveh, chapter 28)

. . . דוּקָא עַל כַּתְּפָיו וְלֹא בַמְּקוֹם אַחַר לַהּוֹרוֹת
 הַדְּמִיוֹן הַזֶּה שְׁצָרִיךְ לִישָׂא אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל כַּתְּפָיו
 כְּאִם שְׁמַרְכִּיב אֶת בְּנוֹ עַל כַּתְּפָיו לַהֲגִין עֲלָיו
 וְלֹהֲצִילוֹ מִכָּל רַע מַחִיָּה רַעָה וּמֵהַכְּשֵׁל בְּאֲבָן
 וּבְבוֹר תַּחְתִּיּוֹת. (ספר באר מים חיים - פרשת
 תצוה - פרק כח)

The names of the tribes were not a reminder to God, but to the High Priest, to prod him toward a particular relationship with the members his community. Like a father, he must love them, hold them, raise them, and shield them. Like a parent playfully and protectively carrying his baby to keep him out of harm's way, Aharon must embrace his children, keeping them high above the fray that threatens them.

The High Priest, on this view, is charged to carry *benei yisrael* on his shoulders as an act of concern and protection. But, as any parent of small children knows, shoulders that offer rides time and again tend to hurt, and it would seem that Aharon's shoulders were to carry a whole lot of weight too. He was to bear the burdens of his people--their complaints, their doubts, their sins, their secrets. He was tasked to take upon himself the heaviness of their hard lives, lightening their loads, but also no doubt complicating his own. The holy work of the High Priest involved carrying a lot of other people's messes. That too is part of lifting a people onto your shoulders.

And what of carrying them (or their names) on the heart? This was Aharon's charge through the *choshen*--

Thus shall Aaron carry the names of the sons of Israel in the *choshen* of judgment over his heart

וַיִּשָׂא אֶהָרֶן אֶת שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּחֹשֶׁן הַמִּשְׁפָּט
 עַל לְבָבוֹ

This too both described and prescribed his relationship to his people. The *Beer Mayim Chayim* continues:

Aaron was like the heart [of the people] and for this reason he carried their judgement on his heart. . . He had to carry them to protect them and to save them from all evil. It is known that pain from any one of the limbs is felt first in the heart. Similarly, [Aaron] would

וְאֶהָרֶן הָיָה בְּבַחֲיִנַת הַלֵּב וְעַל כֵּן נָשָׂא אֶהָרֶן אֶת מִשְׁפַּט בְּנֵי
 יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל לְבָבוֹ כְּלוֹמֵר לִפִּי שְׂהוּא הָיָה בְּבַחֲיִנַת לֵב בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
 הָיָה צָרִיךְ לְשִׂאת אוֹתָם לַהֲגִין עֲלֵיהֶם וְלֹהֲצִילֵם מִכָּל רַע כִּי יָדוּעַ
 אֲשֶׁר הַכָּאֵב מִכָּל הָאֲבָרִים מֵגִיעַ קוֹדֵם אֶל הַלֵּב וְעַל כֵּן הָיָה הוּא
 הַמְּרַגֵּשׁ תַּחֲלִילָה בְּכָאֵב יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבִיקָשׁ רַחֲמִים עֲלֵיהֶם וְכִפָּר

feel the pain of Israel first and he would ask for mercy, forgiveness, and the sweetening of judgment on their behalf and bless them with the priestly blessing. (Beer Mayim Chayim, Tetzaveh, chapter 28)

עליהם להמתיק הדין מעליהם ולברכם בברכת כהנים. (ספר באר מים חיים - פרשת תצוה - פרק כח)

As High Priest, Aharon represented the heart of *bnei yisrael*. He was their nerve center, attuned to pains that they themselves did not yet even feel. And he was their life force, quick to alleviate suffering and bolster well being. As one who carried the people on his heart, he synchronized his own heartbeat to the collective heart of his people, again with intimacy and great vulnerability.

We are left now with three arresting images of who Aharon was relative to his people, all shaped by the clothing he wore and the name-stones he bore. He was a protective father giving his child a shoulder-ride; a laden leader bearing the weight of others' suffering; and a humble soul whose heart beat to the tune of someone else's rhythm. Clothing, alas, really can make a man.

Indeed, the *Imrei Emet*, Rabbi Avraham Mordechai Alter, quoting the *Tikkunei Zohar*, suggests that Aharon was so profoundly shaped by these garments that he became them, so to speak.

It is brought in *Tikkunei Zohar* on the verse [from Song of Songs 8:6] "Place me like a seal on your heart, liked a seal on your arm" that even though I depart. . . your image will not leave me forever. That is, its imprint will remain. "Like a seal on your heart"--that is the *choshen*, as the verse states, "And they will be on Aaron's heart" [Exodus 28:30]. "Like a seal on your arm"--that is the *ephod*, as the verse states, "On his shoulders" [Exodus 28: 12].

איתא בתקוני זוהר על הפסוק שימני כחותם על לבך כחותם על זרועך [שיר השירים ח:ו] אף על גב דאנת תסתלק וכו' דיוקנך לא אתעדי מנאי לעלם, היינו שנשאר רשימה, כחותם על לבך היינו החושן כדכתיב והיו על לב אהרן וכחותם על זרועך היינו האפוד כדכתיב על שתי כתפיו. (ספר אמרי אמת, פרשת תצוה, תרוס)

With or without the *ephod* or the *choshen*, Aharon came to wear the heart of his people. Lifting, bearing, absorbing, and representing them, he grew to become an embodiment of love, empathy, attunement, protection, and the thirst for mercy. He himself became inscribed with the names of *bnei yisrael*, so deep was his identification with them, so imprinted was he by their pathos. They became a seal on his heart as he carried them, on his shoulders and in his heart.



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