

### Parashat Tetzaveh – Beauty and dignity

There is a story about a man who was invited to a very fancy party. This man was not a sophisticated person and was not used to wear elegant clothing, so he came to the party using a nice but very informal dress. When he arrived to the party he was stop by the guards on the entrance who told him that unfortunately he could not enter the building because of his “inappropriate dressing”.

This person, not being upset at all, came back to his house, put on a very elegant suit and returned to the party, where now he was admitted without any problems. But in the middle on the night, when it was the time for supper, the man decided to give everyone a lesson: He suddenly stood up, took the plate with the most exquisite food, and poured it completely on himself messing his entire suit. And when the people ask him what was happening, he told them: “Since I was not invited but my suit, I thought it was logical to give it the food”.

I hear this story when I was a child. It is very simple story with a very clear message: Don't give importance to the “outside”, what is important is the “inside”. Don't judge someone from her clothes; we have to consider what the person “is”.

And the context from where I heard the story was a Jewish one: “That is the Jewish way... a good Jew doesn't give importance to the way he dress, to the exterior side”. And when we analyze that argument it really makes sense: If we remember, for example, the story of Hanukka, we see there that the fight of the Hashmonaim against the Greek culture was a fight between ethics and esthetics... Our tradition of values, study, intellectuality from one side, and the cult of the body: Gyms, saunas, big parties, etc.

And if I try to think specifically about mentions of clothes in the Torah, I can only think about stories where the message about clothes is a bad one: Adam and Eve were naked in the idyllic situation of the Garden of Eden, Jacob cheated his father using skin from an animal, and also Yosef: He had a very nice and especial coat that his father gave to him, a coat that according to the Torah was the responsible of his brother's envy, the decision of being sold as a slave, and also the beginning of the slavery for 400 years. But there is something very interesting too: The root of the Hebrew word “begged” is the same as “bogged”, someone who cheats, deceives.

So, which is it the Jewish way? Is it really “Jewish” not to give importance to the way we look, to how we dress? Is it not permitted to give value to aesthetics?

Our Torah portion Tetzaveh gives us an answer: It describes with details the garments of the Kohen Hagadol, the High priest, giving much relevance to their beauty, and it is clear after reading this description, that all the details were related with the “kedusha”, the sanctity of the High priest! (They are called “bidgei kodesh” – “holy garments”). So beauty, splendor, glamour, class... those are fundamental components of the High Priest's role.

The former Chief Rabbi of England, Jonathan Saks, says that in order to understand why the Torah gives so much importance to Aaron's garments we need to pay attention to a verse which is at the beginning

of the whole description: *Vesita bigdei kodesh leaaron hachicha, lejabod uletifaret*. God says to Moses: "And you will make sacred vestments for your brother Aaron, for honor and for beauty".

Rabbi Sacks says: The Torah is teaching us that there are two different ways to relate to the external image of a human being: One is giving importance to the "beauty" and the other one is understanding that "beauty" should be at the service of "kavod", dignity. So if we give importance to beauty, for example, and we buy a nice dress for Shabbat or for honoring a friend's wedding, in those cases, I am using beauty as a mean to give kavod to other people or to God; it serves a higher purpose. But if I do it as an end in itself, for example trying to fit in a social class, the clothes don't serve any value, the opposite: They are helping you to disrespect your own dignity.

This is a beautiful message that teaches us how to balance beauty and dignity, and how to establish the priorities in our lives.

Shabbat Shalom!