YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PURIM 5782**

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In memory of our dear friend and supporter   
Mr. Joshua Mermelstein z"l  
whose yahrzeit falls on 20 Adar.

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**Garment (*Beged*), Betrayal (*Begida*), and Costume**

**Rav Itamar Eldar**

**The Priestly Garments**

An entire chapter in the book of *Shemot* is devoted to the priestly garments, and especially to the special garments of the High Priest (*Shemot* 28:2): “And you shall make holy garments for Aharon your brother, for glory and for majesty.”

As the Ramban explains, the garments of the High Priest are similar to the clothes worn by kings and princes, and the phrase "for glory and for majesty" indicates that the High Priest who is clothed in his garments is considered like a groom and a king:

"For glory and for majesty" – that he be glorious and majestic in glorious and majestic garments, as it is stated in the verse: "As a bridegroom puts on a priestly diadem" (*Yeshayahu* 61:10). Because these garments are royal attire; kings dressed in such garments at the time of the Torah.

The Ramban then offers another explanation, following the path of the Kabbala and esoteric lore:

And in accordance with the way of truth: "For glory and for majesty" – that they should make the holy garments for Aharon that he should minister in them for the glory of God who dwells among them and for the majesty of their strength.

According to the inner meaning of the words, the phrase "for glory and for majesty" refer to God who dwells among Israel. One may not appear before the king in unfit attire, and it is therefore appropriate that one who goes in and out before the King of kings should wear majestic clothing. It is because of the glory of God that the priests who minister to Him must wear glorious and majestic garments.

Why does the Torah attach such significant weight to garments, which are external to man and his personality? Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk writes that the word "garment" [*beged*]is derived from the same root as that of the word "betrayal" [*begida*], because a person's attire betrays his inner self. A garment covers and hides what is under it, and at the same time it can reveal things that do not necessarily reflect the person dressed in it.

In a world where the standards are external, a person's garment is indeed the main player. One who is dressed in royal robes is called "king," even if he is a poor man, and one who is dressed in sackcloth is considered a poor and destitute person, even if a valuable soul is hidden inside him. Does the Torah submit itself to the world of lies, when it dresses the High Priest in beautiful clothes? Is it not guilty of externalizing, when it states that the glory and majesty of the High Priest rest – at least in part – on golden garments set with precious stones?

**Yosef and His Coat of Many Colors**

In addition to the section dealing with the High Priest's garments, significant attention is devoted to clothing in two other contexts: the Torah section dealing with Yosef and the book of *Esther*.

The earliest account of Yosef involves the coat of many colors that his father Yaakov made for him (*Bereishit* 37:3):

Now Yisrael loved Yosef more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he made him a coat of many colors.

The coat of many colors was an expression of Yaakov's special love for Yosef, and it also marked Yosef as Yaakov’s heir and as being fit for kingship.[[1]](#footnote-1) The coat continues to appear in the story of Yosef after his brothers throw him into the pit (*Bereishit* 37:23-32):

And it came to pass, when Yosef came to his brothers, that they stripped Yosef of his coat, the coat of many colors that was on him… And they took Yosef's coat, and killed a he-goat, and dipped the coat in the blood; and they sent the coat of many colors, and they brought it to their father; and said: This have we found. Know now whether it is your son's coat or not.

"Know now whether it is your son's coat or not," say the brothers to their father. In this way, they try to convince Yaakov that Yosef was devoured by an evil beast, but also to intimate to him that the coat was the factor that gave rise to their anger and hatred.

Yosef was sold into slavery in the house of Potiphar and found favor in the eyes of his master, and then once again we encounter clothing when Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Yosef (*Bereishit* 39:12):

She caught him by his garment, saying: Lie with me. And he left his garment in her hand, and fled, and went out.

Once again, Yosef was thrown into prison and once again he rose to greatness, after successfully interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams (*Bereishit* 41:14-42):

Then Pharaoh sent and called for Yosef, and they brought him hastily out of the dungeon. And he shaved himself, and changed his raiment, and came in to Pharaoh…

And Pharaoh said to Yosef: See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand, and put it upon Yosef's hand, and arrayed him in vestures of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck.

Thus, we see that twice Yosef rose to an elevated status and was given handsome clothes, and twice his clothing was removed from him and he was cast into a pit. Yosef's downfall and his greatness are therefore tied to his clothing – from his coat of many colors, through his prisoner's uniform, and to his royal attire.

**The Book of the Garment**

The pinnacle of the world of clothing is reached in the book of *Esther*, where references to elements of apparel are woven into the story from beginning to end.

The whole of the king's entourage is clothed in splendor, and it is against this background that the book notes Mordechai's behavior after learning about the decrees of Haman: he removes his clothing and puts on sackcloth (*Esther* 4:2):

And he came before the king's gate; for none might enter within the king's gate clothed with sackcloth.

Mordechai usually sat at the king's gate, dressed as a rule in handsome and dignified attire. Haman's decree brought him to remove his handsome clothing and don sackcloth, causing Esther concern when she heard (*Esther* 4:4):

And Esther's maidens and her chamberlains came and told it to her; and the queen was exceedingly pained; and she sent raiment to clothe Mordechai; and to take his sackcloth from off him; but he accepted it not.

In contrast to Mordechai's sackcloth, Esther must appear before the king in royal attire: "Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal apparel" (*Esther* 5:1). And when Mordechai's fortune reverses, and he mounts the king's horse, he too is dressed in royal attire (*Esther* 6:11):

Then Haman took the apparel and the horse, and dressed Mordechai, and caused him to ride through the street of the city, and proclaimed before him: Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.

Similarly, when the tides turn and Mordechai and Esther are able to send out a new decree empowering the Jewish people to fight back, Mordechai’s clothes are described (*Esther* 8:15):

And Mordechai went forth from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a robe of fine linen and purple….

Royal attire is the lot of the man whom the king wishes to honor. Clothing is the means by which the book of *Esther* expresses honor and appreciation, and therefore even Mordechai's clothing is described in great detail. In his wake, we too, when celebrating the holiday of Purim, focus on clothing and costumes: Our routine garments are replaced by costumes, just as the characters in the book of *Esther* change their clothing repeatedly.

**Two Functions**

A garment has two functions: one – to conceal; and the other – to reveal.

The first function of a garment is to conceal, to cover and hide from the eye. Adam and Chava in the garden of Eden felt exposed and overly visible after eating from the tree of knowledge, and therefore God clothed them in garments of skin that were meant to cover their private parts (*Bereishit* 3:21). A garment's first function is to preserve modesty and intimacy, and prevent the private from becoming public.

On the other hand, dressing in clothes also expresses movement in the opposite direction. A garment shows, reveals, and exposes. The royal robes in the book of *Esther* are meant to express greatness, just as the ashes and sackcloth come to express grief and sorrow. In that sense, garments might be misleading: even the horses in the capital city of Shushan were outfitted with a royal crown,[[2]](#footnote-2) despite the great difference between a noble horse and a true monarch. Royal garments are not guarantees of success, for one who today is clothed in regal clothing may find himself the next day hanging from a gallows. The second function of clothing is therefore to publicize, display, and externalize, even when the projected image has no true internal basis.

Is a garment then meant to conceal or to reveal? Is its role to preserve privacy or to make public?

**The Betrayal of Garments**

Rabbi Natan of Nemirov, a disciple of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov and the disseminator of his teachings, noted the significance of a garment (*Likutei Halakhot*, *Hilkhot Orla* 5:8):

Because all the hindrances to the service of God stem from soiled clothing… Garments that are soiled by a person's sins, from which arise all the hindrances and barriers, interpose like a river between him and the holiness which is the aspect of Eretz Israel… The main power of soiled garments to bar a person from the true path of life is by the pride and imaginary honor of this world…

For surely one who truly feels his lowliness, and sets in his heart how dirty he is with his many sins and lusts and defects, will surely go on his hands and knees and seek out with all his might the true Healer who can cure the ailments of his soul, for who can suffer being clothed in soiled and filthy garments? However, the soiled garments themselves confuse his mind and bend his heart, to the point that he pretends not to know the filth of his deeds, and he still desires the honor of this world, and he stumbles in pride and arrogance. Because of this, he cannot draw near to the truth, lest people mock him and see him as a crazy fool.

As noted above, a person's clothes are liable to mislead the people who see him. Rabbi Natan teaches us that the same garments are liable to deceive even the person himself. According to Rabbi Natan, soiled garments represent the pride and imaginary honor of this world. In a second, the golem may rise up against its maker, and a person's garment will become the most important thing to him.

The soiled clothes that Rabbi Natan describes are not dirty, worn, and tattered clothes. On the contrary, the soiled garments are garments of glory and majesty, behind which stands a person who is soiled and filthy because of his sins. His clothes are so beautiful that he himself does not notice the filth that is found within them. The world does not see the inner filth, but only the outer splendor and glory, and the people are impressed; the attention of the person himself is then distracted from looking inward, to what is deep down and requires repair.

Glory and majesty can instantly turn into an external pursuit of honor and boasting – the attribute of arrogance. This pursuit, in which the external world is immersed, distracts the mind from inner truth. This distraction prevents a person from engaging in repair, even after he is aware of it, because externalization is inconsistent with deep, fundamental inner processes. A person does not want to be considered crazy in the world of clothes and apparel, and all he can do is to become addicted to the imaginary honor and pride that he receives by virtue of his garments. This is the betrayal of garments, and this is the falsehood that lies at their door.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**“To Remove the Clothes of One’s Pride”**

How does one move from the lies of garments, from the perverted distinction and beauty of Achashverosh, to the glory and majesty of the High Priest? How did Yosef, Mordechai, and Esther make that same journey, and achieve the higher, purified level of garments? Rabbi Natan addresses this issue as he continues his remarks (ibid. 5:10):

The main repair for this was made by Mordechai, who rent his garments and put on sackcloth and ashes because he knew that the main defect relates to the matter of clothes, as explained above. "And he went out into the midst of the city, and cried with a loud and bitter cry" – because there is no remedy for the multiple obstacles that come from soiled garments, other than humbling oneself to the ground and removing the garments of one's pride and crying out very, very much to God with a great and bitter cry, as did Mordechai, until God looks out and sees from heaven, as Mordechai later merited by way of the miracle of Purim, when everything was reversed for the good, as it is written: "And Mordechai went forth from the presence of the king in royal apparel of blue" – the repair of clothes and garments, the repair of the blue in *tzitzit*, which is the main repair of garments.

Rabbi Natan explains that the only way to escape the defect of soiled clothing is by smashing the conception that drives the world of clothes: "humbling oneself to the ground and removing the garments of one's pride."

As is evident from the book of *Esther*, a person who removed his handsome clothing and walked about the city of Shushan in rags – especially in the vicinity of the king's gates – was liable to lose his status and all the glory of his greatness. He might even put himself in danger, for if a person who walks about town in royal attire is someone whom the king wishes to honor, then a person who walks about in sackcloth and ashes is ostensibly someone whom the king does not wish to honor, and thus prey for any person of power and authority to do with him as he desires.

Mordechai the Jew is prepared for that. He removes his clothes and waives the honor and respect stemming from them. He decides to stop cooperating with the false game of royal attire. Surprisingly, it turns out that as soon as Mordechai gives up the false world of clothes, he receives them from a different place, pure and clarified.[[4]](#footnote-4) When Mordecai goes out from before the king, he is dressed in royal apparel of blue and white. Ostensibly, these clothes are the same as the clothes he wore while sitting at the king's gate earlier in the book. In fact, however, between these two appearance of the royal robes, Mordechai also wore sackcloth. After the inner renunciation of the world of clothing, which is expressed in the wearing of sackcloth, Mordechai freed himself from the shackles of the betrayal in garments and was liberated from enslavement to the image of clothing. And from the moment that Mordechai was set free, he could even wear golden garments in holiness and purity.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**White Garments and Gold Garments**

Later, Rabbi Natan discusses the High Priest, who specifically on Yom Kippur – when he would enter the Holy of Holies – would not wear his ordinary majestic garments, but rather simple white garments (ibid. 14):

And therefore the High Priest would not enter the innermost sanctum in the eight garments which include gold and precious stones, but only in four white garments. This teaches that even though the High Priest would wear those precious garments in great holiness, to repair the defect of lust and desire for wealth that depend on precious garments… But even so, on Yom Kippur he was forbidden to enter the innermost sanctum with those garments, because the accuser cannot become the defender…

This intimates that even for greatly righteous men, who are capable of serving God with gold, precious stones and the like, nevertheless, there is an exceedingly high place which many not be entered into that way, but only in white garments.

The High Priest, like Yosef and Mordechai at the end of their respective paths, knows the secret of garments. Unlike the lustful king, the glory and majesty of the High Priest are purified and refined, and even affect the entire world. The High Priest does not forget where he came from or where he is going. He remembers before whom he is standing, and the glory and majesty projected by his clothes are an external reflection of the feelings of awe and humility within him.

This notwithstanding, on Yom Kippur the High Priest does not enter the Holy of Holies with his golden garments. At the climactic moment, while the eyes of all of Israel are on him, the High Priest takes off his golden garments and dons simple white garments. In contrast to the golden garments, which represent the sanctification of clothing, the white garments express relinquishment of clothing. When a person reaches a certain depth and inwardness, he gives up the world of clothing altogether. He does not act upon it to sanctify it, but leaves it behind.

A person encounters white garments at three significant moments of life: in the clothing worn on Yom Kippur, in the bride's gown on her wedding day, and in the shrouds of the day of death. These are the three moments at which we seek to eliminate the external, temporary, and transient reality and meet eternity.

On Yom Kippur we stand before God, who examines our innermost and naked selves. Important and unimportant people, rich and poor – all pass before him like sheep and stand before Him in judgment. During the judgment, all the screens are removed – anything that might lie, externalize, or distract from the inner truth – and each person stands before his Creator in simple white clothing.[[6]](#footnote-6)

A bride on her wedding day wears a white gown, as if to say to her chosen groom: Look not at my external clothes, because they are unimportant. Look inside me and not at my clothing. A bride's gown is distinguished not by its splendor or pattern, but by its simplicity. It is designed to prevent distraction from the truth, from the bride as she is. The groom as well sometimes wears white clothing, in order to bare his innermost self before his bride. The joining of the souls of the bride and groom is a supernal joining, based on an inner covenant between the two souls, and focusing on it requires the removal of clothing that is liable to be misleading.

So too on the day of death, external screens are removed. All are equal before death; neither the rich nor the wise take their wealth and wisdom to their graves. Death liberates a person from the shackles of this world, from the false norms and from the temporary externalization, and the encounter with death is a rare opportunity to contemplate inner reality. The white clothing of the dead focuses our attention internally, rather than on external trappings.

**Purim Costumes**

On Purim as well, we remove our ordinary clothing. But unlike Yom Kippur, when we don white clothing, on Purim we put on costumes. There are two aspects to these costumes.

On the one hand, a costume takes the deception of clothing to a ridiculous extreme. A boy wearing a police uniform does not truly believe that those who see him will think he is a police officer, and a girl dressed as a fairy queen does not think anyone will mistake her for a fairy. Those who observe them are compelled to ignore the external clothes and listen to the internal voice concealed behind them. In this sense, it is precisely in the vast gap between the person and the costume that expression is given to a message similar to that of the white garments of Yom Kippur.

On the other hand, a costume does in fact express a person's inner being. A person's costume indicates his desires, aspirations, and the people he admires. All year round, clothes cover a person's hidden beliefs and conceal them. On Purim, a girl who dresses up as a football player and a boy who dresses up as a rabbi or scientist both testify, each in his or her own way, to the character with whom they wish to identify. In this sense, a Purim costume expresses a person's inner self in a more tangible way than the white clothing he wears on Yom Kippur. It does not force the observer to ignore the external and focus on the internal, but on the contrary, it neutralizes the expectation of a correspondence between a person's clothing and his social status, and provides a one-time opportunity to get to know the person's inner self, his aspirations and beliefs through the clothes that he wears.

Yom Kippur is a day of sincerity, in which we stand before God in our nakedness. Purim is a day of "*venahafokh hu*," of turning to the contrary, in which we choose which costume to wear. The distance between them seems large, but in truth – as Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Ladi, founder of Chassidut Chabad, said – "Purim and Yom Kippurim are one aspect; Yom Kippurim means 'like Purim'" (*Torah Or*, *Esther* 95d). Through Purim costumes, as through the white clothes worn on Yom Kippur, we free ourselves of the chains of soiled garments and ascend for one day to a world that is all truth.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. Later, it is said about Tamar, the daughter of David, that "she had a garment of many colors upon her; for with such robes were the king's daughters that were virgins apparelled" (II *Shmuel* 13:18). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As the Ibn Ezra infers from Haman’s words: "Let royal apparel be brought which the king uses to wear, and the horse that the king rides upon, and on whose head a crown royal is set" (*Esther* 6:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Perhaps Esther sinned in this manner, when she was exceedingly pained when Mordechai removed his royal attire while still sitting at the king's gate. And perhaps Yosef also sinned in this matter, becoming addicted to his coat of many colors which led to his dreams of greatness, and because of that began to curl his hair (*Tanchuma Vayeshev* 8, 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Rabbi Natan explains that just as the danger of pride expresses itself in clothing, so the repair of this danger is done through the *tzitzit* attached to one's garment. The thread of blue, which symbolizes glory and splendor, reminds us – because of the *mitzva* involved – of all of God's commandments and prevents us from straying after our eyes in the world of garments and deception. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In this, Mordechai is like Yosef, who also goes back to wearing royal robes after having been stripped of his coat of many colors. While Yosef is in prison, he reaches the understanding that royal robes are just a costume that can be removed from him in the blink of an eye, and when he is once again given the possibility of wearing garments of fine linen, he avoids falling in the world of betrayal of clothing. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is worth noting the difference between the High Priest, who appears before the King of kings in white clothes, and Queen Esther, who enters before King Achashverosh in royal robes. In the world of impurity, the more dignified the place in which a person is found, the more he is required to wear dignified clothing. The influence of the clothes reaches its peak in the innermost and most "sacred" place, and it is precisely there that a person is completely shackled by the chains of his apparel. In the sacred world, entry into the innermost sanctum is done precisely in white garments, since that is the truest and most genuine place. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)