

Dressing for Temple

Shabbat Vayakheil 5784

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When you ask one of our young people, “What do you love most about Jacobs Camp?” you might expect the answer to involve sports or other favorite activities, particularly Maccabiah, the color war that is a highlight of every session. Instead, one of the top answers is always, “Shabbat.” The other is “friends,” and the two responses are intimately connected. On Friday night, everybody dresses in white. They pose for photos with their friends, meaningful keepsakes of the best time in their lives, and they look forward to dancing together to Israeli tecno-pop after dinner.

It’s camp, of course, so nobody has “dressy clothes,” the kind of attire one might wear to Temple here. Still, as kids get older, increasing attention goes into the selection of Shabbat clothes to bring to camp, as everybody wants to look their best in their Shabbat whites, in the moment and in the photographs. And it’s instructive to know that, aside from those Shabbat whites, the outfits they most carefully select for camp are for “messy night,” clothes that are stained and tattered, fit for being smothered in every kind of disgusting goo in a night of great fun before the clothes end up in the trash. Clothes sanctify that occasion, too!

Most of us, most of the time, are not told what to wear to services on Shabbat or holy days. Some of us recall a time when nobody would have passed through the Temple doors for worship without being dressed in what might be called semiformal business attire—that is, a jacket and tie for gentlemen and correspondingly dressy attire for women, in an era when no other gender would have been acknowledged. My dad consulted Jerry Jacobson to learn the sartorial customs of our congregation when he moved here in 2014. Jerry said he would wear a jacket but no tie most of the year, omitting the jacket in the summer. And that was with Trudy’s approval, of course!

Every now and then, I will hear some kvetching about what somebody wore to Temple. Sometimes, the concern is that the clothing is too casual—that is, the person did not accord sufficient sanctity to this holy place or to the occasion in selecting their clothing. At other times, the complaint is that the person was insufficiently covered. These comments are almost exclusively made about women. They aren’t exposing parts of their bodies that should only be seen by that person themselves and an intimate partner or physician. Instead, their top is described to me as “too low cut,” or they might have a bare midriff or shoulders.

I tend to dismiss such concerns. I am glad that people come to Temple, however they're dressed, and I'm not put off by a bare midriff or shoulders. Moreover, I'm reluctant to make gender-based judgments about what people should wear to Temple or anywhere else.

I would be remiss, though, if I did not acknowledge that the latter part of Exodus, which we read at this season, places a great deal of emphasis on the attire for at least some people at Israelite religious rituals. I'm referring specifically to the priests, Moses's brother Aaron and his sons, whose garb is prescribed for the sacrificial service in the desert tabernacle—and later, the Jerusalem Temple.

Moses is commanded, “Make sacred vestments for your brother Aaron, for honor and adornment.”ⁱ Sforno, a rabbi in medieval Italy, taught that the two words—כבוד, “honor,” and תפארת, “adornment”—point to two separate functions of the special clothing. Sforno said that the word כבוד suggests that the garments are meant to “render honor and glory to God.” The word תפארת often refers to beautifying the performance of a ritual, and Sforno teaches that the clothing “should inspire awe among the Israelites who are all the priests' disciples.”ⁱⁱ

While both the Torah and Sforno are referring only to garments worn by priests in ancient Israel, those two functions for their clothing, honor and adornment, may be relevant to any person who attends a religious service. We want to bring our whole selves, including but not limited to our outward appearance, to honor God. At the same time, our personal presentation may signal to ourselves and others that we have gathered for a significant sacred occasion.

Turning to the description of the priestly garments in our portion this week, the Talmud suggests an even more exalted function. Our sages focus on the word שרד, translated for us as “service” in the phrase, “the service vestments for Aaron the priest.”ⁱⁱⁱ The word שרד, though, doesn't really mean “service,” but is more likely a description of the material, “plaited” or “knitted.” In the Talmud, though, our rabbinic sages don't speculate about what the word means, suggesting instead that its mysteriousness is its point. They teach that שרד suggests שריד, a different word that means “remnant” or “survivor.” “Were it not for the שרד vestments,” they argue, “there would be no שריד, surviving remnant of the Jewish people” in this world, since those garments are the mechanism by which the priests secured atonement for our ancestors in ancient days.^{iv}

While I am not convinced that anybody's clothing inspires God's forgiveness, the rabbis may be onto something about the role of clothing in building a Jewish future. Those Shabbat whites at Jacobs Camp—and the “messy

night” outfits, too—are part of a meaningful and inspiring culture that keep campers and staff engaged in Jewish life.

Every Jewish institution, including Congregation B’nai Israel, ought to be focused on assuring a vibrant, purpose-driven Jewish future. If our customs and attitudes about what to wear—and, especially, about what we expect others to wear—honor God and our entire community, they serve our mission. By contrast, when we impose our own cultural or gender norms on others, we may make them feel unwelcome to bring their authentic selves to worship among us. We would thereby turn away people who are eager to participate in building a vibrant future of the whole Jewish people, now increasingly celebrating our diversity, and fulfill our sacred purpose.

Our rabbinic sages taught in *Pirkei Avot*, “Do not look at the container; but rather, what is inside.” They elaborated: “A new container may hold old wine, while an old container may have no wine at all.”^v For the sages, “old” implied greater value. We know that people who have been Jewish all their lives, and who are descended from multiple generations of Jewish ancestors, may be more likely to dress as was expected in their childhood. Some among them have “old wine inside,” that is, they practice Judaism in ways that give deep meaning to their lives and contribute to the community. Others, sadly, may have no “wine” inside at all. By contrast, some in our midst are “new containers”—that is, they do not come with a lifetime of Jewish memories, but they represent a new generation and diversity that our congregation could not previously celebrate. Still, the wine inside may be “old.” They may have what some call “an old soul”—or *a yiddeshe n’shama*, a Jewish spirit that has only come to express itself in their own generation. Let us celebrate the old containers and the new ones, in all their varied glory, for the magnificent gifts that each one holds inside.

Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 28:2.

ⁱⁱ Sforno to Exodus 28:2.

ⁱⁱⁱ Exodus 35:19.

^{iv} Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 72a-b.

^v Mishnah *Pirkei Avot* 4.20.