

Weekly Words of Torah

Wearing Our Hearts on Our Sleeves: Parshat Tetzaveh

Framing

In this Torah portion of Tetzaveh, God gives Moses instructions about the special uniforms to be worn by the priestly class serving in the Mishkan (Tabernacle), as well as the pieces of the uniform worn exclusively by the kohen gadol (the high priest - currently Moses' brother Aaron). An explanation is given for each of the components of the high priest's distinctive clothing, spelling out the spiritual role each garment plays. Amazingly, several of those components are being echoed today, in the current unacceptable situation, as our people toil to get the message out to the world in person, in print, and on social media: more than 100 of our loved ones are still held captive in Gaza. Help us bring them home now.

Access Points

■ **The Ephod.** The first of Aaron's vestments to be described in our parsha is the "ephod" - a sort of long robe, tied behind his back, sleeveless but with shoulder-pieces, and a belt, which is also attached to the shoulder-pieces. Two precious stones, one on each shoulder-piece, are engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel: six on each shoulder, almost as if Aaron is symbolically carrying all of Israel on his shoulders. "Attach the two stones to the shoulder-pieces of the ephod, as stones for remembrance of the Israelite people, whose names Aaron shall carry upon his two shoulder-pieces for remembrance before the Lord" (Exodus 28:12). The Malbim (Rabbi Meir Leibush Weiser, 19th-century central European commentator) says, whether presciently or wishfully, that these two stones, on either side of the high priest's neck, "point to the unity of the Jewish people. And even though they are divided [because their tribal names are engraved on two separate stones], and some lean to the right and some lean to the left [you can't make this stuff up!!], even so they are all united on the shoulder-pieces of the one ephod that ties them together." And so it must be. Whether we lean to the left or to the right, politically, religiously, or socially, we must take to heart the lesson of the ephod's avnei shoham, which are inextricably linked - and band together to keep our message clear and unified: Bring them home.

■ **The Choshen Mishpat:** Over the ephod, Aaron then wears a breastplate, called the "choshen mishpat." The breastplate is made up of four rows of three stones, each a different type: one carnelian, one chrysolite, one emerald, one turquoise, one sapphire, one amethyst, etc. "The stones shall correspond in number to the names of the children of Israel: 12, corresponding to their names" (Exodus 28:21). The rows of stones - all unique and special in their own right - mirror the rows and rows of pictures of the hostages, each of whom has their own family, their own story, their own life. Just like the tribes of Israel, each individual hostage has their own name, and we must continue to say those names and display their photos. [In an agonizingly poignant twist, the soldiers in Paratroopers Brigade, Battalion 890, while serving in Gaza, [took upon themselves to each wear a photo of one hostage on the front of their ceramic vest](#), to remind themselves and each other what and who they were there for. Those vests are called "ephodim."]

■ **Over His Heart:** We are told that "Aaron shall carry the names of the sons of Israel on the choshen mishpat over his heart, when he enters the sanctuary, for remembrance before the Lord at all times" (Exodus 28:29). The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 19th-century Lithuanian scholar) comments that any time the term remembrance (זכרון) is used, it means remembrance for salvation. In other words, the names of the Jewish People on the choshen are put there so God remembers them and saves them. Redeems them. Brings them home safe. And it should not surprise us that Aaron carries those names over his heart - just as Rachel Goldberg carries the number of days the hostages have been stolen from us over her heart. It is the heart that cries out for salvation and rescue.

Call to Action

This week, when you think about what you wear, consider a bracelet, a piece of tape with a name or a number, a t-shirt, or even a picture (like those Paratroopers), that reminds you and others - and of course, reminds God as well - that we cannot rest until our children, our parents, our sisters and brothers all come home. Take a photo of your holy vestments and post it on social media. You never know whose heart will be jarred into action because of it.

Closing Intention

We sometimes hear that it is the clothes that make the man. In Parshat Tetzaveh, we learn that clothes can indeed have real meaning and significance and intention. May we use our garments, like the high priest of old, to make our hopes and prayers and demands known to all.