

Tetzaveh 5779

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I am giving this drash in memory of my mom, Charlotte Bergman, who passed away on Tuesday. Although she was not particularly religious she encouraged my involvement in synagogue youth activities at Temple Beth El in Springfield along with sending me to Camp Ramah in Palmer. On Friday nights she would look forward to the sermons of Rabbi Samuel Dresner and the music of Cantor Morton Shames and the Beth El choir. It was a different time back then but my mom always valued friendships, candlepin bowling and hard work. She will be missed.

This week's parsha of Tetzaveh along with the surrounding parshot all deal with reaching out to God by finding a place and method where one can communicate with God. Last week's parsha of Terumah dealt with the special details of building a holy structure; the Tabernacle. In Tetzaveh there is still one more item needed for the Tabernacle; the ner tamid. Ramban considers this a perpetually lit lamp. Nehama Leibowitz, citing a Midrash, points out that the light of the lamp "supplies light to others without diminishing its own light in any way. The light of the lamp can thus serve as a symbol for wisdom and spiritual treasures."

The ner tamid is one more item that makes the Tabernacle holy, but there is more to reaching out to God than creating a Tabernacle where we can be in God's presence. Tetzaveh also deals with how we will communicate with God. Only select individuals can be entrusted with

this responsibility. These are the priests. The individuals designated for these roles are Aaron and his sons. In addition to being anointed Aaron and his sons must wear special garments when officiating in the Tabernacle. For the priests these garments include the ketonet, michnasayim, mitznetef and avnet. In addition to these items the high priest wore the eiphod, which resembled an apron, the choshen or breastplate, the me'il and the tzitz.

Rashi compares the eiphod to “a pinafore worn by upper-class Frenchwomen when they went horseback riding.” It is made of gold, blue, purple and crimson yarns. Two stones are attached to the shoulder-pieces of the eiphod. The names of six tribes are engraved on each stone. The breastplate, which is called the breastplate of judgement, contains four rows of precious stones each one engraved with one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The Urim and Tummim are placed into the breastplate. They represent a device for determining the will of God. The me'il is a cloak of blue wool with bells and decorative pomegranates on it. The tzitz is a golden plate worn on the forehead.

The descriptions of the priestly garments are very elaborate. They are majestic pieces of clothing. Why are these garments specified? What is the benefit of wearing these fancy garments? Sforno says “the Priest should inspire awe among the Israelites who are all considered his disciples seeing he had the names of all the tribes engraved on these garments right opposite his heart when he wore them in his official capacity.” Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch says “only in this attire does (the priest) come forward as the servant of the nation. Without these garments the Kohen is merely an ordinary individual. But when he is clothed in his priestly garments, the priest presents himself not in terms

of the personality he actually has as an individual, but in terms of the character he should have in accordance with the requirements of the Law of God.”

There is a good reason for all the care in properly constructing the Tabernacle and creating the elaborate garments for the priests. God is not regularly appearing before the Israelites or speaking to the Israelites. How else can Moses and Aaron focus attention on worshipping God? How can they create respect for God? The Tabernacle and the priest’s clothing are essential in creating the proper atmosphere for worship.

The right atmosphere is essential. When I was a kid at Camp Ramah in Palmer late every Friday afternoon we would shower and put on white clothes. After Kabbalat Shabbat and Maariv we would have the best meal of the week in the Hadar Ochel (dining room) followed by z’mirot and a special Shabbat melody for Birchat Hamazon. These actions distinguished Shabbat as a special time. Cantor Morton Shames used to stress how the experience of worship is greatly enhanced by the melodies used. The small details make a difference; they can make things holy. Isn’t that what Judaism is all about? We pray as we wash our hands before we eat. We say blessings on our food before and after we eat. Kashrut is about sanctifying the act of eating through laws meant to be as humane as possible and treating animals with the respect they deserve. The Torah teaches us how to respectfully treat our fellow man as well as how to respect the land by letting our fields rest and how to respect the poor by not harvesting a portion of the fields.

The Tabernacle was created as a place for the Israelites to reach out to God and the priests, in their special garments, were our mouthpiece to speak to God. Today we don't have a Tabernacle, priests or even a Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Yet, God and His creations are all around us. The respect meant to be elicited from the majesty of the Tabernacle or the dress of the High Priest is the respect that we still need to show to God and His creations; Earth and our fellow man.

We have disrespected our environment and are now paying the price for that behavior. Plastics infect our oceans depleting the supply of fish. Man-made climate change is destroying villages and towns along the coastlines of the world. We see the diversity in animal and plant life being substantially reduced thereby threatening the existence of other species and reducing our ability to develop cures for disease. By disrespecting our fellow man we live in a divided nation and see turmoil around the world resulting from man's inhumanity to man.

We have the ability to correct our mistreatment of the world. In the early 1960's the Soviet Union diverted water from sources of the Aral Sea to irrigate cotton fields, which were not native to the area. This resulted in desert being created in the depleted sea and surrounding area. Actions to restore the North Aral Sea, which began in 2003 have restored fishing, given rise to rain clouds and the restoration of agriculture.

In the 1920's gray wolves were eliminated from Yellowstone National Park resulting in the destruction of the ecosystem. Overgrazing resulted in the loss of trees and the beaver population having an adverse effect on the streams running through the park. Efforts in 1995

to reintroduce the gray wolf in the park have corrected many of these problems.

Parsha Tetzaveh is about respecting God and the world He created. To reach out to God the Israelites created the Tabernacle and the holiest of garments so that God would listen to their prayers. We are still able to reach out to God today. We can do that by treating God, the world and the rest of His creations with the same reverence as the Israelites did in this week's parsha.