

The Clothing of Deception, The Clothing that Reveals

Aliana is my first Bat Mitzvah with Panamanian roots, so in her honor and that of her family, both here in Chicago and those in Panama, I thought to speak this morning about something that had to do with Panama. My problem is that my knowledge of Panama is limited. Truth be told, the only things I knew about the country is that it has an important canal and the Panama Hat. Not being sure of how to tie the Panama Canal to the Torah, I began researching the Panama Hat. I learned that when the conquistadors arrived on their shores in the 16th Century, they observed that the indigenous people wore a brimless hat woven from the fibers of a palm tree. They were light and surprisingly effective in protecting people's heads from the harsh sunlight. I also learned that a businessman by the name of Manuel Alfano came over in the 19th century with the idea of creating an industry with these hats. Alfano was remarkably successful, and the hat had its biggest boost when Teddy Roosevelt came to Panama and wore one for a picture. From then on, the Panama hat became a must-wear item. The problem is that these famous hats are misnamed since Panama hats did not originate in Panama but Ecuador. Because Panama was the place that the hats were loaded on ships, people called them Panama Hats even though the weaving process was very much tied to Ecuadorian culture. As a result, calling these hats anything but Ecuadorian hats is, I'm afraid, an act of deception.

Well, I have clearly failed in my mission to speak about some aspect of Panama, but all is not lost as this does connect to the Torah after all, since the deceptive nature of clothing has a long history. In fact, it goes all the way back to the Bible.

Consider the first reference to clothing in the Torah. After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden, the book of Genesis continues:

Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked, and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loin clothes.

And when God called out to Adam he hid.

From the very start, clothing had a connection to deception.

Jacob put on his brother's clothing to steal the blessing of the first-born from his blind father. The Torah describes how Isaac felt Esau's clothing and smelled the scent of the hunter on them and, as a result, was deceived by Jacob.

There are several other examples of clothing used for deceptive purposes throughout the Bible but the most famous is the many-colored coat of Joseph. That coat which Jacob awarded to Joseph as a reflection of his love for him became a symbol of jealousy and hatred to his other brothers. So much so that they sold Joseph into slavery and then decided to report Joseph as having died to their father Jacob. Recall how they dipped the beautiful coat of Joseph into the blood of an animal and then showed it Jacob and cruelly asked if their father recognized the coat! This coat symbolizing Jacob's love was used as a garment of deception, convincing him that Joseph had been torn apart by a wild beast, breaking an old man's heart.

The connection between clothing and deception is so strong in the Jewish tradition that the word for clothing, *Begeg*, and the word for deception, *Bagad*, contain the same Hebrew root. But many of you already knew that from reciting the confessional prayer every Yom Kippur, when we rise as a community and beat our hearts and say:

Ashamnu: We have sinned. Bagadnu: We have acted deceitfully.

In the same way we can use our clothing as a means of deception, so, too, can we create the illusion that we are clothing ourselves with what appear as the best of intentions but are not; with actions that appear to be

pure, but are far from it. The words *Bagad* and *Beged* are related in Hebrew for a reason.

Based upon everything I said so far, the Biblical understanding of clothing was decidedly negative. Yet, in this week's Torah reading, Tetzveh, the Torah goes into great detail describing every aspect of the clothing of the High Priests, from head to toe. How is it possible to learn anything positive from the *Beged* which is so associated with what is *Bagad*? To understand the answer, let us remember that the High Priest, the Kohen Gadol, was intermediary between God and the people of Israel. He would sacrifice and pray on their behalf. As the Tabernacle, the Mishkan, was understood as God's holy space, the responsibility placed upon the shoulders of the High Priest was awesome. Any mistakes on his part, or even errant thoughts, could have disastrous consequences for himself and the people that entrusted him with this role. One would think that clothing would be the last thing that the Torah would concern itself with in these holy confines.

I believe that in our portion the Torah is offering an alternative understanding of clothing in the case of the Kohen Gadol. Up until now, we have only spoken of clothing as a means of deception. But the symbolism of the clothing of the Kohen Gadol reflects something different: clothing as a means of revealing the best of the Kohen, rather than a vehicle that covers up the worst of him.

Here are a few examples:

On his head, the Kohen wore a *Mitznefet*, a crown-like covering with words etched in gold on the front: *Kodesh L'adonai: Holy to God*. No matter what the Kohen Gadol thought of himself, the head piece was a reminder that this person had the potential to be holy to God. However, he must rise to the occasion and become that person. Allowing an unworthy thought to enter his mind in that moment would make a mockery of his actions. The *Mitznefet* challenged the Kohen Gadol to see the holiness implanted within himself and actualize it, and to

embrace his role as the one called upon to stand before God on behalf of his people.

On his chest there was a *Hoshen*, a breastplate with 12 stones upon it, one for each tribe of Israel. In this way, the Kohen Gadol was reminded that he represented each of the tribes of Israel. This was never about him as an individual, but rather he stood as an emissary of the Jewish people. The breastplate was affixed to the shoulders of his garment with gold chains so that the Kohen would feel the full weight of his obligations. The *Hoshen* called upon the Kohen Gadol to embrace his responsibility and be the person worthy of his exalted role.

On the hem of his robe were *Rimonim*, small bells. According to tradition, the bells were placed upon his garments so that when the Kohen Gadol would enter the Holy of Holies they, would ring and announce his coming to God. It is never a good idea to startle the *Kadosh Baruch Hu!*

Now, if we are going to show such civility to God, who no doubt knew the Kohen Gadol was coming, should we not do the same for those around us? The bells are a reminder that we should always consider the feelings of others, no matter their station. In Jewish tradition, this is called *Derech Eretz*, or common courtesy. A person in the position of the Kohen Gadol might be given to arrogance. He might believe that the only feelings that he has to consider are his own. However, the Torah offers a powerful reminder that in the same way that the Kohen Gadol needs to have the awareness to treat God with *Derech Eretz*, common courtesy, so, too, do all people need to extend this courtesy to one another.

The garments of the High Priest were designed to encourage the wearer to bring out the best in himself. Unlike the fig leaves of Adam and Eve or the coat of Joseph, which were used to deceive, the *Bigei Kenuna* were designed to inspire the wearer to fulfill the best in himself, and not to use these holy garments as a way of presenting himself as something he was not.

Ask any magician and they will tell you that clothing is vital for the art of illusion, of deception: the card up one's sleeve, or the quick-change artist. Since the dawn of time, since the earliest books of the Bible, people have used clothing to deceive. In the world in which we live, illusions have gone far beyond the garments that we wear to that technology that we can don in order to deceive one another in ever more convincing ways. Filmmakers can create the illusion that you or I have been seen to say or do anything the creator desires. The Internet is filled with scams, phishing efforts, and click bait to ensnare us in deception. The news that we read can be presented with half-truths; doctored pictures that can create the illusion of truth and turn the people of our country against one another. We have reached the point that our trust in one another has sunk to an all-time low, threatening our relationships and the safety and security of our nation.

Here, I believe the Torah offers us a different path.

In the end, the Temple was destroyed in the year 70 CE and with it, the clothing of the Kohen Gadol. One would think that this was the end of the garments of the Priest, but not so. The Rabbis took them and placed the crown, the breastplate and the bells on the Torah. The lesson that they wanted to teach was that in the same way that the *Bidei Kehunah* had the potential of revealing the best of the Kohen Gadol, the Torah does the same for us.

- The Torah calls on us to don a symbolic *Mitznefet*, a crown, and see ourselves as *Kodesh L'Adonai* and act on it.
- The Torah calls on us to don a figurative *Hoshen*, breastplate, and appreciate our responsibilities to one another, from our family to our people to all humanity.
- The Torah calls upon us to don the symbolic bells, the *Rimonim*, and act towards one another with *Derech Eretz*, with civility. To consider the feelings of others when we speak and when we act. To display empathy in the way that we listen, in the way that we judge.

Bagad or *Bege*: the clothing of deception or the clothing of elevation?
Which will we wear? When the Kohen Gadol would look into the mirror, he had to ask himself if his inner actions reflected his outer garments. When we look into the mirror, how will we answer?