



Dress for Success • Parshat Tetzaveh

Fashion icon Ralph Lauren once said, “I don’t design clothes. I design dreams.” This week’s Torah reading, *Tetzaveh*, involves a detailed description of the High Priest’s garments. To understand the ‘dream’ behind them, we must understand more about the design of this clothing, specifically the tunic:

On its hem make pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, all around the hem, with bells of gold between them all around: a golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, all around the hem of the robe. Aaron shall wear it while officiating, so that the sound of it is heard when he comes into the sanctuary before God and when he goes out—that he may not die (Exodus 28: 33-35).

This garment alone invites a rich visual and sensory reaction. The gemstone colors appeal to the eyes. The small pomegranates on the hem remind one of taste. The bells between the pomegranates invoke sound. Rashi and Chizkuni add that there were clappers in each bell that would make noise when the High Priest walked. Nahmanides believed that the bells functioned as clappers inside pomegranates. In the Talmud, R. Yitchak said, “This teaches that the Divine Presence jangled before him, inspiring him, like a bell (BT *Sotah* 9b). In this reading, the bells were not only making noise for the people to sense the close presence of the High Priest but also functioned as a constant reminder to Aaron of his mission. Whenever the *Cohen Gadol* moved, he was aware of his Divine service.

Rabbeinu Bahya (1255-1340) elaborates on this: “When a person wishes to receive an audience, he first knocks on the door of the king or prefect from whom he requests the audience. Aaron would announce his intention to pray by means of the chiming of the bells at the hem of his robe. What is customary as a sign of deference to a mortal king must also be observed when one petitions the King of Kings.” In the *Mishkan*, the bells were a sign of respect to prepare for meeting God.

Each stitch of the priest’s clothing also had to be made with proper intention, signaling the care that a spiritual leader must put into clothing choices and the service performed in them. In the Talmud, R. Yohanan made clear how sartorial choices impact others long after the priestly service stopped: “Any Torah scholar on whose garment is found a stain deserves death, as it says (Prov. 8:36) ‘All who hate Me love death.’ Do not read it ‘who hate Me’ but “who cause (people to) hate Me” (BT *Shabbat* 114a). To bring majesty to an office, one must dress the part. Those who represent Torah must understand that people’s impressions are almost always shallow and based on external realities; the leader has to communicate, at all times, the dignity of the position.

In their article “Clothes Make the Leader! How Leaders Can Use Attire to Impact Followers’ Perceptions of Charisma and Approval” (*Journal of Business Research*, Jan. 2021), Thomas Maran, Simon Liegl, Sebastian Moder, Sascha Kraus, and Marco Furtner sought to understand the impact of clothing on leaders: “While popular media relishes leaders who catch the eye by way of such

distinctive fashion, we know little about how this salient daily practice of dress specifically affects perceptions of leaders in their daily business.” Their findings? “...leaders’ charisma and approval were higher when a person’s clothing style contrasted their organization’s culture.” Lastly, in their study of CEOs of Fortune 1000 companies, they discovered that, “leaders can manipulate their style of attire to actively shape their followers’ impressions of themselves.”

In “Dress for Success: How Clothes Influence Our Performance” (*Scientific American*, Jan. 1, 2016), Matthew Hutson and Tori Rodriguez cite multiple studies that correlate behavior with clothing. In the journal *Social, Psychological, and Personality Science* (Aug., 2015), researchers asked participants to wear either formal or informal clothes before taking cognitive tests. They discovered that, “Wearing formal business attire increased abstract thinking—an important aspect of creativity and long-term strategizing. The experiments suggest the effect is related to feelings of power.” A 2014 study in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* concluded that informal clothing may hurt in negotiations. In a 2012 study in the same journal, subjects made half as many mistakes on a particular task when wearing a white lab coat. Clothing, in this study, not only positively influenced others, it also changed one’s own sense of self-worth and performance.

According to one view in the Talmud, the High Priest’s clothing represented more than mere ceremonial fitness for office: “R. Simon said, just as sacrifices atone, so the garments of the High Priest atone: shirt, trousers, turban, and vest” (JT *Yoma* 7:3). The High Priest was the intermediary between the human and the Divine. Followers, therefore, needed to see in their spiritual leaders, the possibility of getting closer to God. The priest’s clothing conferred dignity and authority to the role and inspired repentance in those who observed the High Priest’s activities. That was the dream behind the design.

Today, with no centralized worship space, clothing still communicates authority, but you don’t have to be a priest for clothing to matter. “To be a leader,” Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, “you don’t need a crown or robes of office. All you need to do is to write your chapter in the story, do deeds that heal some of the pain of this world, and act so that others become a little better for having known you” (“Defeating Death” *Nitzavim*, Covenant & Conversation).

So, how do your clothing choices communicate leadership to you and to those around you?