

The Clothes We Wear: Concealing Our Bodies, Revealing Our Souls
Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5773
Rabbi Leora Frankel, Community Synagogue of Rye

1. Do Clothes Make the Person?

There is a story about the “Wise Men” of Chelm, a fictional Polish town of very wise fools:

The *rebbe* of Chelm and one of his students were once spending the night at an inn. The student asked the inn keeper to wake him at dawn because he had to take an early train. Not wishing to wake up the *rebbe*, the student quietly groped in the dark for his clothes and, in his haste, accidentally put on the long black coat and furry hat of the *rebbe*. He hurried to the station, boarded the train, and was dumbstruck with amazement when he caught a glimpse of himself in the compartment mirror.

“What an idiot that inn keeper was!” the student angrily cried out. “I asked him to wake me, and instead he went and woke the *rebbe*!”¹

We chuckle not only because the punch line is funny, but also because we recognize a truth: what we’re wearing can affect how others view us, and even how we see ourselves.

What separates Clark Kent from Superman, Bruce Wayne from the Dark Knight? A cape, a costume, a mask. Though you and I may not be superheroes, the same principle applies. I look more “rabbinic” in this white robe than in jeans and a t-shirt, though of course I’m the same person inside. And for your part, you feel compelled to enter and honor the New Year dressed in your own finest. In fact, I think amidst all the election season surveys, I heard about a Gallup poll which revealed that more than the penitential prayers or even the rabbi’s sermon, the number one draw to Rosh Hashanah services is the annual High Holy Day fashion show!

Nonetheless, *Pirke Avot, The Ethics of our Ancestors*, warns us, “*Al tistakel b’kankan, elah b’mah sheyesh bo*. Do not look at the vessel, but rather what is inside it.”² In *Hamlet*, by contrast, Polonius declares: “the apparel oft proclaims the man.” So which is it? Do our clothes define us?

The parable of the *rebbe* and his student sides with Shakespeare. The student so associates a particular persona with its distinguishing costume that he doesn’t recognize his own reflection in the mirror. To him, the long black coat and hat don’t just represent the *rebbe*; they are the *rebbe*.

2. Covering Our Naked Selves

While our tradition cautions us not make assumptions based on outer appearance, you must admit that there has always just been something about Jews and their clothes. The last day of

¹ Adapted from *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore*, edited by Nathan Ausubel [1948] New York: Crown, 1963, p. 326.

² Mishnah Avot 4:27

Creation, the birthday of human beings—the very things we gather on Rosh Hashanah to celebrate—all build up to a fashion choice: After Adam and Eve eat from the Tree of Knowledge, the first thing they do is sew together fig leaves to cover their nakedness. To know yourself, apparently, is to want to conceal yourself. “Where are you?” calls out God, as the couple tries to blend into the trees. Adam’s answer? “I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid myself.”

We learn from the first man and woman that clothing is designed to conceal not only our physical nakedness but our psychological vulnerability. There is something about being totally exposed, especially before their own Maker, that is terrifying to Adam and Eve. The need to clothe ourselves is the desire to be more than we are—which is, in a funny way, a variation on the impulse that draws us toward God and not away.

God recognizes this, responding to Adam and Eve’s anxiety with compassion, even while punishing them for partaking of the forbidden tree. Just before banishing the pair from the Garden of Eden, God fashions outfits for Adam and Eve to wear on their journey. It is from this act that the rabbis derived the morning blessing praising God as “*malbish arumim*” (One Who clothes the naked).³

Our tradition is rich with many midrashim or rabbinic legends about what these first clothes were made of. The Torah itself speaks of *kotnot or*, commonly read as “shrouds of skin.” The Targum, an Aramaic translation of the Bible dating back to the 1st century BCE, suggests that this was the skin shed by the very serpent who tricked Eve into tasting the fruit. Imagine what it would have been like for Adam and Eve to go out into the world wearing serpent’s scales, pausing by some pool of water to reflect on what they had become and seeing this constant reminder of their transgression.

An alternative interpretation of this phrase *kotnot or* offers a play on the Hebrew word “*or*.” Spelled with an *ayin*, the word means “skin;” but with an *aleph*, “*or*” means “light.” Perhaps it was not with skin, but rather in God’s own Divine light that the first human beings were clothed.³ *Pirke D’Rabbi Eliezer*, yet another midrash, extends the tale even further, recounting that Adam passed on these garments to his son Seth, who gave them to his own son, and so on.⁴

By this logic, exactly ten generations later, Adam’s coat would have found its way into Noah’s closet. Although we think of Noah as the great ark-builder, it is the end of his *parashah* that is most relevant to us tonight. In the aftermath of the flood, Noah plants a vineyard and gets drunk from the wine, eventually passing out naked in his tent. While his firstborn son, Ham, responds to his father’s nudity by running out of the tent to gossip about it, Noah’s two older sons, Shem and Yafet, react differently. Taking pains to protect their father’s dignity, they walk backwards carrying a *simla* or gown to cover him. By re-clothing their father, Noah’s sons give him back his humanity. They also remind us that outside of the Garden, we humans are now responsible for clothing one another, for being *malbishei arumim*.

³ Bereishit Rabbah 20:12.

⁴ *Pirke D’Rabbi Eliezer* 24

3. From Confinement to Freedom

We know of, course, that clothing can also be used to take away someone's humanity. To chronicle the clothes we Jews have worn is to revisit the annals of discrimination and violence. In the 9th century, a caliph in Baghdad first introduced the yellow badge—initially for both Jews and Christians—and in 11th century Egypt, Jews were ordered to wear bells on their garments like cowbells on livestock.

Throughout Medieval Europe, Jews were subjected to Sumptuary Laws which regulated what colors, clothing, and head coverings we could wear in public. Our costumes branded us and set us apart; Looking in the mirror, we saw how alien we were to others and fought not to become strangers to ourselves. Over centuries and across countries, the shape and hue of the bands and badges changed, but who among us hasn't seen the photos from just 70 years ago? A yellow star pinned on the left chest of every Jewish man, woman, and child.

Here in America, rather than our clothes limiting our possibilities, they expanded them. Beginning around 1880 with the first waves of Eastern European immigrants, it was primarily Jewish tailors and dressmakers from the old country who drove the Garment Industry. From filling the sweatshops to filing in picket lines, young Jewish men and women were also among the leaders of this country's Labor Union movement, protesting working conditions that led to tragedies like the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.

As our people's socio-economic status climbed over the past century, the look of American Jews shifted, as one writer put it, "from Ghetto to Glamour."⁵ Many of the greatest names in fashion have been Jews: from Levi Strauss to Ralph Lauren (originally Ralph Lipshitz), Donna Karan to Calvin Klein, and most recently Marc Jacobs and Isaac Mizrahi. God may have clothed Adam and Eve, but we Jews have literally dressed America.

Despite the freedom of self-expression that we now enjoy, our clothing can still be constrictive. Women, especially, find that societal and self-inflicted pressures impel us to wear higher heels and lower necklines, to buy flashy or expensive suits so as not to be outshined by neighbors or colleagues. And for the fashion-challenged, we have helpful shows like TLC's "What Not To Wear."

As I recently learned firsthand, even our newborns are not immune to these critiques. We feel compelled to dress baby girls in pink and boys in blue, lest others misidentify their gender. From the earliest age, the palettes and patterns that we wear become an inextricable part of our identity. Even in 21st century America, the choices we make when we get dressed may very well be the choices of others.

⁵ See Neuman, Johanna. "From Ghetto to Glamour: How American Jews Toppled Paris Couture and Redesigned the Fashion Industry." *Moment*. July/August 2009. <http://www.momentmag.com/moment/issues/2009/08/Ghetto-to-Glamour.html>

4. The Priestly Vestments

Recent studies of a fascinating psychological phenomenon called “Enclothed Cognition” propose that what we wear can affect not only our emotional state, but also our cognitive abilities.⁶ Northwestern University researchers found that individuals who wore a white lab coat performed better at a series of attention-related tasks than those who were just in their own street clothes; If the subjects were told that the white coat was that of a doctor, their scores increased even further.⁷

It isn't hard to understand, then, why the Torah devotes so many lines to the priestly vestments. Exodus 28 opens with God instructing Moses: וַעֲשֵׂיתָ בְּגָדֵי-קֹדֶשׁ, לְאַהֲרֹן אֶחִידְךָ, לְכָבוֹד, וְלִתְפָאֳרָתוֹ. “And you shall make for your brother Aaron holy garments, for his honor and his splendor.”⁸ As pointed out by my teacher, Dr. Norman Cohen, in his new book *Masking and Unmasking Ourselves*, when the Torah describes Aaron's inaugural robing, it uses the same words as when God dressed Adam and Eve,⁹ “suggesting that the tunics worn by Aaron and all the High Priests were symbolically, if not actually, the garments from Eden.”^{10 11}

More than forty verses intricately detail the eight elements of the high priest's apparel, each one with both aesthetic appeal and a distinct spiritual function: On his chest sat a breastplate with twelve jewels to represent each of the tribes, such that Aaron would physically bear the weight of his responsibility to the people of Israel;¹² The sound of golden bells and pomegranates dangling from his skirts would focus his *kavannah*, or intention, when entering the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, and announce to the people that he had made it back out alive;¹³ Finally, a golden amulet or “*tzitz*” dangled from his headpiece, inscribed with the words “*kodesh l'Adonai*- holy for God,”¹⁴ constantly reminding Aaron of his Divine calling and capacity to be an intermediary on the people's behalf.

In fact, the Talmud explains that each article of the High Priest's clothing was itself an atonement for a different sin of the Israelites: his crown atoned for haughtiness,¹⁵ his robe for bloodshed, his breeches for lewdness.¹⁵

Even as the garments of the High Priest served others, they sustained his own soul as well. Aaron's identity was so deeply bound up in his costume that the moment the vestments were stripped from his body and transferred to his son, Aaron died.¹⁶

⁶ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/03/science/clothes-and-self-perception.html?_r=1&ref=science

⁷ http://cls.ucla.edu/doc/Enclothed_cognition.pdf

⁸ Exodus 28:2.

⁹ See Leviticus 8:13 in comparison to Genesis 3:21.

¹⁰ Cohen, Norman J. *Masking and Unmasking Ourselves: Interpreting Biblical Texts on Clothing & Identity*. Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2012, p. 100.

¹¹ This sermon was inspired and informed by many sections of both the book and my coursework with Dr. Cohen.

¹² Exodus 28:15-21

¹³ Exodus 28:34-35

¹⁴ Exodus 28:26-38

¹⁵ Babylonian Talmud, Zevachim 88b

¹⁶ Numbers 20:23-28

5. The Tallit

Though the biblical priesthood is no more, and Rabbinic Judaism requires that each of us now make our own atonement, elements of Aaron's outfit have endured in various forms. The High Priest's decorative breastplates, crowns, and chiming pomegranates now adorn our *Sifrei Torah*. Aaron's white tunic is the model for the *kittel* that some men wear on the High Holy Days, under the chuppah, and as a burial shroud. And we still have a vestige of his golden *tzitzit* in our own *tzitzit*, the fringes that hang from each corner of our prayer shawls.

At Torah study this spring, some of us examined together the commandment to wear these fringes. God charges Moses: "Speak to the Israelite people and instruct them to make for themselves fringes on the corners of their garments throughout the ages [...] Thus you shall be reminded to observe all My commandments and to be holy to your God."¹⁷ As the golden *tzitzit* of the High Priest kept his thoughts elevated, so too are these tassels intended to aid our concentration in prayer and be a tangible sign of our connection to God and commitment to mitzvot.

But what do they really mean to us?

For some, these fringes are a fond reminder of their Bar or Bat Mitzvah day, the first and perhaps only time they wore a tallit. For others, they are a foreign symbol of more "religious" Jews, or a relic of another era that no longer resonates. The 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, the American Reform Movement's first major declaration of principles, explicitly rejects wearing ritual garb. Isaac Mayer Wise and his colleagues codified this scathing critique: "We hold that all such Mosaic and rabbinical laws as regulate diet, priestly purity, and dress originated in ages and under the influence of ideas entirely foreign to our present mental and spiritual state. They fail to impress the modern Jew with a spirit of priestly holiness; their observance in our days is apt rather to obstruct than to further modern spiritual elevation."¹⁸

For nearly a century, even Reform rabbis were discouraged—if not outright forbidden by their Temples' bylaws—to wear a kippah or tallit on the bimah. Over the past several decades that stance has changed dramatically. While Reform Judaism still emphasizes personal autonomy in religious ritual, if you walk into most Reform synagogues today, you are likely to see *tallitot* on the shoulders of clergy and congregants alike.

At our own synagogue, the Meyers and Zeitlin families have a beautiful tradition of each member wearing a tallit with a unique hand-embroidered *atarah*, or neckband, lovingly stitched by Carol and Sue's mother. Leah Meyers, one of our youth group's co-presidents, describes the experience of wearing hers: "When I put on my tallit, it connects me to Judaism and Jewish traditions. However, it also connects me to my family, generations past and present."

Paul Levenson, a longtime member and *gabbai*, shared with me that after rarely wearing a tallit for the past fifteen years, he was inspired by our Torah discussion in June to revisit the ritual. It

¹⁷ Numbers 15:37-41

¹⁸ http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/pittsburgh_program.html

just so happened that his son, David, was in Israel at the time, so he asked David to bring him back a tallit from Jerusalem. Putting the tallit on, Paul reflected, “It was my son and Israel all wrapped up in one.”

For Susan Cicelsky, one of the “wizards behind the curtain” at SUNY Purchase making everything magically work on these High Holy Days, wearing a tallit was a ritual that for a long time felt off limits. Susan explains: “Coming to wear a tallit was a desire that for many years, I truly didn’t feel qualified for. The women I saw wearing tallit[ot] were clergy, leaders of congregations, women I looked up to for their knowledge and Hebrew ability... I felt the tallit was a mantle to be placed on those who knew more.”

After two years of study in our Anshe Binah class, Susan finally felt ready, and celebrated the culmination of her learning in a patchwork tallit from her daughters, as vivid and varied as Joseph’s coat of many colors. She writes: “Now, as I wrap myself in my Tallit... I create a quiet space for prayer. I’ve separated myself from my busy life, I stretch out my arms, take the ends of the tallit and drape them over my shoulders pulling in the arms of those I dearly love, near or far, alive or not ... They are all with me under the tallit.”

For me as well, the tallit was once a forbidden fruit. In the “Conservadox” synagogue where I grew up, women did not count in a minyan, did not chant from the Torah, and most certainly did not wear a *tallis*. The sanctuary was a sea of white linen with black or blue stripes, but all on the backs of men. I have fond childhood memories of hearing the priestly benediction chanted on Shabbat mornings, a prayer during which we were taught to avert our eyes. Instead of turning his back to the ark, my father would drape his tallit around my brother and me. Enveloped by the canopy of cloth, I felt protected and loved by both my dad and by God. Still, the thought did not even occur to me at the time that I might one day don my own tallit, let alone become a rabbi. It was only years later in college, as I began to encounter female friends and teachers who wore *tallitot*, that I acquired the very one I’m wearing tonight.

As each of these individual experiences suggests, when any one of us puts on a tallit, we are wrapping ourselves in Jewish history, in family memory, in our aspirations to be more than who we are. Just as the knots secure the fringes to the tallit, the tallit itself binds each of us to a chain of tradition as old as Eden, and wearing it publicly affirms that we are proud members of the Jewish people. The tallit is, you might say, our team jersey. And just as Jeter and Rodriguez wouldn’t be caught dead at the World Series without their pinstripes, we Jews aren’t quite dressed for our High Holy Days without our tallit. Like the cloaks of Divine Light in which God wrapped Adam and Eve, the tallit can help us feel connected, protected, and better prepared to face the unknown future.

So, tonight after services, when you get home, I want you to remember that somewhere in your house there is... a closet. Inside that closet is a shelf. And on that shelf, perhaps in the very back, folded safely in its case, sits your old Bar or Bat Mitzvah tallit, or the one you got more recently for your child’s simcha or on a trip to Israel. Bring it to services tomorrow morning and try it on for size. (And if you don’t have a tallit at home, we’ll have some extras in the SUNY Purchase lobby for you to borrow.) See how it feels to put on again, if it changes your experience of worship.

6. Returning to Eden

Although in a sense I am inviting you to dress up tomorrow, the High Holy Days are also a time of stripping down. Exactly half a year ago, we came together in this space to celebrate Purim, a day on which we are commanded to put on costumes and masks, to pretend to be someone else. Whether or not we are not conscious of it, we actually wear such guises all the time.

Like Jacob, arms covered by hairy skins to impersonate his brother Esau and steal the birthright, we are so desperate to achieve our objectives that we conceal or lose sight of ourselves. Like Leah, wearing her sister Rachel's wedding veil, we take on a life intended for someone else. But beginning tonight, and for the next 10 days, we are challenged to peel off our costumes, remove the masks, and draw back the veils, so that we can look in the mirror and—unlike the *rebbe's* student—recognize ourselves.

The process of *teshuvah* demands that we clear out of our spiritual closet those aspects of our personalities and lives that no longer fit or flatter us. Having recently cleaned out my actual closet post-maternity, I know how hard this is to do. Getting rid of certain outfits means parting with particular memories or self-conceptions. But it can be liberating, too.

A final story: After defeating the Philistines and securing Jerusalem as his capitol, King David led a jubilant procession up the Judean hills to dedicate the ark of the covenant. There were throngs of dancers, whirling to the harp, the timbrel, the drum, and the triumphant blast of the shofar. Although one might have expected him to be all decked out in his holiday finest, Second Samuel states that King David “danced with all his might,” wearing nothing but a linen *ephod*, the undergarment also worn by the biblical high priests.¹⁹ David's own wife rebukes him for his un-kingly dress—but sometimes, the clothes don't make the man.

As it did for King David, the sound of the shofar calls to us on Rosh Hashanah to dispense with all pretense and raise our voices in joyful praise. It summons us to unwrap and encounter our innermost selves, flaws and all. To feel again the vulnerability of Adam and Eve exposed before their Maker in the Garden of Eden. To return to God, and thereby to ourselves.

¹⁹ 2 Samuel 6:14-23