Clothes Maketh the Man Think

How significant is the way one presents oneself? On the one hand we are instructed to look beyond superficial exteriors and to focus on the essence of a person: ‘do not look at the container, but rather at what it contains’ (Pirkei Avot 4:20). And yet on the other hand, the Torah places heavy emphasis upon the attire of the priests. It stipulates that their holy garments were for ‘honour and glory’ (Exodus 28:2) and the Talmud states that the donning of these garments is a prerequisite for service in the Sanctuary (Tractate Zevachim 7). This presents a somewhat perplexing contradiction with the usual approach of the Torah that calls upon each of us to look beyond externality.

Rather than imparting automatic sanctity on the priest, the clothes serve to inspire and instil sanctity within their bearer. This is most clearly illustrated through exploring the details of the bottom and top most adornments.

The robe worn by the high priest was decorated along the hem with delicately placed bells which could be ‘heard when he entered the sanctuary before God and when he exited...’ (Ex. 28:35). The bells achieve several practical purposes for all involved. For those around, the bells announce the time of service so that people can act appropriately and distinguish the high priest (Chizkuni). For God, the bells serve as a respectful announcement of entry (Rabeinu Bachaye) and elicit His favour towards prayer (Ibn Ezra). Perhaps the most vital reason for the constant sound of the bells, however, is for the high-priest himself, enabling him to realise and remember his constant and immense responsibility (Ktav Ve’Hakabbala).

This message of self-awareness should ring beyond the bells and should resonate beyond the high priest. The bells remind the priest that every move he makes has an indelible impact. We too should strive for this constancy of mindfulness, to remind not just others of what we represent, but to remind ourselves of the impact of our actions.

The meaning behind the highest garment that the priest wears complements these ideas. The Torah obligates a gold plate which extends around the forehead from ear to ear called a tzitz (Tractate Shabbat 88b).
when getting dressed, this is the final item that the high priest puts on (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Klei Hamikdash 10:3). Of all the garments, this is perhaps the most overt in the message it portrays: ‘sanctified to God.’ Why did this have to be the final piece of clothing?

There are many people that wave the banner of public piety before they develop the more basic, personal private character traits. The priest could only exhibit his explicit ‘crown of sanctity’ (Lev. 8:9) once he had first taken care of the less visible, yet just as necessary items of clothing. One can only proclaim one’s public holiness to God once one has taken care of one’s personal and private behaviour vis-à-vis oneself and others. Prior to publicly claiming God’s seal of approval, one must first work on oneself and refine one’s own practices.

If the entire dressing process is a metaphor for the priest’s gradual development in his service of God, it begins first with the inner garments, those that can perhaps reflect his own personal thoughts and feelings. Moving gradually outwards, he dons the external garments that represent his behaviour towards his fellow and once they have all been donned, he can finally place the holy tzitz on his head, portraying his absolute dedication to the public service of God. Here it becomes clear not that ‘the clothes maketh the man’ (Shakespeare, Hamlet) but rather that they are there to make us think.

In that context, we can now understand that there is indeed no real contradiction between the intricate detailing of the external garments of the priests and the instruction we have of focusing on the essence. These two approaches represent parallel elements of our relationships with ourselves, those around us and even God. With this in mind, we should hear the ringing of the silent bells below so that we can project a message of holiness above.

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