



Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

TETZAVEH • תצוה

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ז"ל

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.

"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah.

An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

This year's series of essays were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks ז"ל in 5772 (2011–2012).

These timeless messages are accompanied by a new [Family Edition](#) created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha and Haftara.

The Aesthetic in Judaism

Why is the Torah so specific and emphatic, in this week's Parsha, about the clothes to be worn by the Kohanim (Priests) and the Kohen Gadol (High Priest)?

"These are the vestments that they shall make: a breastplate [*chosen*], an apron [*ephod*], a robe, a knitted tunic, a turban, and a sash. Make them as sacred vestments for Aaron and his sons so that they will be able to be priests to Me."

Ex. 28:4

In general, Judaism is sceptical about appearances. Saul, Israel's first king, looked the part. He was "head and shoulders" taller than anyone else (1 Samuel 9:2). Yet though he was physically tall, he was morally small. He followed the people rather than leading them. When God told Samuel that He had rejected Saul, and that Samuel should anoint a son of Yishai as king, Samuel went to Yishai's home and saw that one of his sons, Eliav, looked the part. He thought he was the one God had chosen. God, however, tells him that he is mistaken:

But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people

look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

1 Sam. 16:7

Appearances deceive. In fact, as I have mentioned before in these studies, the Hebrew word for garment, *begged*, comes from the same Hebrew word as 'to betray' – as in the confession '*Ashamnu bagadnu*', 'We are guilty, we have betrayed'. Jacob uses Esau's clothes to deceive. Joseph's brothers do likewise with his bloodstained cloak. There are six such examples in the book of Genesis alone. Why then did God command that the Kohanim were to wear distinctive garments as part of their service in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple?

The answer lies in the two-word phrase that appears twice in our Parsha, defining what the priestly vestments were to represent: *le-kavod ule-tiferet*, 'for dignity [or 'honour'] and beauty'. These are unusual words in the Torah, at least in a human context. The word *tiferet* - beauty or glory - appears only three times in the Torah, twice in our Parsha (Ex. 28:2, Ex. 28:40) and once, poetically and with a somewhat different sense, in Deuteronomy 26:19.

The word *kavod* - 'dignity' or 'honour' - appears sixteen times, but in fourteen (2x7) of these cases the reference is to the glory of God. The twice they appear in our Parsha are the only occasions in which *kavod* is applied to a human being. So what is happening here?

The answer is that they represent the aesthetic dimension. This does not always figure prominently in Judaism. It is something we naturally connect with cultures a world apart from the Torah. The great empires – Mesopotamia, Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece and Rome – built monumental palaces and temples. The royal courts were marked by magnificent robes, cloaks, crowns and regalia, each rank with its own uniform and finery. Judaism by contrast often seems almost puritanical in its avoidance of pomp and display. Worshipping the invisible God, Judaism tended to devalue the visual in favour of the oral and aural: words heard rather than appearances seen.

Yet the service of the Tabernacle and Temple were different. Here appearances – dignity, beauty – did make a difference. Why? Maimonides gives this explanation:

In order to exalt the Temple, those who ministered there received great honour, and the priests and Levites were therefore distinguished from the rest. It was commanded that the priest should be clothed properly with the most splendid and fine clothes, "holy garments for glory and for beauty" ... for the multitude does not estimate man by his true form but by ... the beauty of his garments, and the Temple was to be held in great reverence by all.

Guide for the Perplexed, III:45

The explanation is clear, but there is also a hint of disdain. Maimonides seems to be saying that to those who really understand the nature of the religious life, appearances should not matter at all, but "the multitude," the masses, the majority, are not like that. They are impressed by spectacle,

visible grandeur, the glitter of gold, the jewels of the breastplate, the rich pageantry of scarlet and purple and the pristine purity of white linen robes.

In his book *The Body of Faith* (1983), Michael Wyschogrod makes a stronger case for the aesthetic dimension of Judaism. Throughout history, he argues, art and cult have been intimately connected, and Judaism is no exception.

"The architecture of the Temple and its contents demand a spatial thinking that stimulates the visual arts as nothing else does. It must be remembered that among the many artefacts past civilisations have left behind, those intended for ritual use almost are always the most elaborate and aesthetically the most significant."

Wyschogrod says that postbiblical Judaism did not, for the most part, make outstanding contributions to art and music. Even today, the world of religious Jewry is remote from that of the great writers, painters, poets and dramatists. To be sure, there is a wealth of popular religious music. But by and large, he says, "our artists tend to leave the Jewish community." This, he believes, represents a spiritual crisis.

"The imagination of the poet is a reflection of his spiritual life. Myth and metaphor are the currency both of religion and poetry. Poetry is one of the most powerful domains in which religious expression takes place. And the same is true of music, drama, painting, and dance."

Rav Abraham Kook hoped that the return to Zion would stimulate a renaissance of Jewish art, and there is a significant place for beauty in the religious life, especially in *Avodah* - service - which once meant sacrifice and now means prayer.

An immense body of recent research into neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, and behavioural economics has established beyond doubt that we are not, for the most part, rational animals. It is not that we are incapable of reason, but that reason alone does not move us to action. For

that, we need emotion – and emotion goes deeper than the prefrontal cortex, the brain’s centre of conscious reflection. This is where visual stimuli play a key role. Art speaks to emotion. It moves us in ways that go deeper than words.

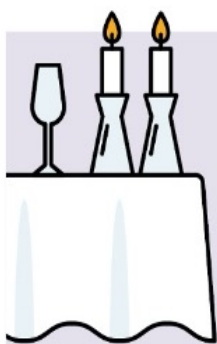
That is why great art has a spirituality that cannot be expressed other than through art – and that applies to the visual beauty and pageantry of the service of Tabernacle and Temple, including the robes and sashes of the priests. There is a poem in the Reader’s repetition of Musaf on Yom Kippur that expresses this to perfection. It is about *Mareih Kohen*, the appearance of the High Priest as he concluded his service and emerged from the Holy of Holies:

As the brightness of the vaulted canopy of heaven,
As lightning flashing from the splendour of angels,
As the celestial blue in the fringes’ thread,
As the iridescence of the rainbow in the midst of clouds,
As the majesty with which the Rock has clothed His creatures,
As a rose planted in a garden of delight,
As a diadem set on the brow of the King,
As the mirror of love in the face of a bridegroom,
As a halo of purity from a mitre of purity,

As one who abides in secret, beseeching the King,
As the morning star shining in the borders of the East –
Was the appearance of the [High] Priest.

And now we can define the nature of the aesthetic in Judaism. It is art devoted to the greater glory of God. That is the implication of the fact that the word *kavod*, “glory,” is attributed in the Torah only to God – and to the Kohen officiating in the house of God.

Judaism does not believe in art for art’s sake, but in art in the service of God, giving back as a votive offering to God a little of the beauty He has made in this created world. At the risk of oversimplification, one could state the difference between ancient Israel and ancient Greece thus: that where the Greeks believed in the holiness of beauty, Jews believed in *hadrat kodesh*, the beauty of holiness. There is a place for the aesthetic in *Avodah*. In the words of the Song at the Sea: “*Zeh Keili ve-anvehu*,” “This is my God and I will beautify Him.” For beauty inspires love, and from love flows the service of the heart.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. How does the dual meaning of “begged” (garment/betrayal) deepen our understanding of the role clothing plays in both deception and sanctity?
2. What parallels can we draw between the aesthetic of the Mishkan and modern-day religious practice?
3. When else in Tanach does clothing serve as a symbol of spiritual connection or transformation?

● These questions come from this week’s **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks’ Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/tetzaveh/the-aesthetic-in-judaism/>