

Message from the Haftara

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Dressed for Redemption

NITZAVIM

In this week's haftara, the last of the series of seven readings of comfort from the prophet Yishayahu (61:10), we find a striking metaphor. The prophet describes the ideal redemptive and purposeful life in terms of physical clothing: "I shall rejoice, rejoice in the Lord; my soul exults in my God; He has wrapped me in garb of rescue, on my shoulders the mantle of righteousness, as a bridegroom attends in splendor, and a bride puts on her jewels."

Righteousness and salvation, intangible spiritual concepts, are here infused with physicality through their comparison to physical garb. For human beings, clothing functions both as a protective layer for the body and as a medium of communication that can express a person's stature, priorities and even state of mind. The colorful coat of Yosef, the Torah's demand that kohanim be properly clothed while performing the service in the Mikdash, and Tamar's use of garments for concealment and barter in her interaction with Yehuda are just a few biblical examples of the

prominent role of physical clothing in our national culture.

In these contexts, clothing serves to show affection, signal distinctiveness, and express purpose – or disillusionment – within Biblical narrative and law.

In our haftara, however, Yishayahu adds another dimension to the notion of clothing. Here, clothing represents spiritual qualities rather than material wealth or emotional expression. In the prophetic metaphor, our relationships with God, community, and society can be thought of as being woven from spiritual threads, forming clothing that adorns our soul.

This idea was developed in greater detail by the Kabbalists, who speak about NISHMATIN D'AZLIN ARTILIN, "souls that go unclothed". This phrase is used to denote personalities suffering from a lack of righteous deeds of spiritual development.

The Zohar teaches: "Happy are the righteous ... [their actions are] woven into garments of glory to be worn in the World to Come" (Zohar Vaychi 224a). "Great is the portion of whoever is found worthy of those garments wherein the righteous are clad in the Garden of Eden. Those garments are made out of good deeds performed by a person in this world ... a human's soul is sustained by these deeds and is clothed in garments of

glory made out of them.” (Zohar, Vayakhel 210a-210b).

Likewise, before donning the Tallit, some recite this prayer: “I am about to wrap myself in the tzitzit [Tallit]; So, too, may You wrap my soul ... in the light of the tzitzit. And just as I cover myself with the Tallit in this world, so too may I merit to be worthy of the rabbinical dress and [spiritual] garment in the World to Come.”

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik notes that the notion of spiritual garb is as old as the institution of clothing itself. When God fashioned clothes for Adam and Chava after their first sin, we are told: “And the Lord God made for Adam and his wife garments of skin (AYIN-VAV-REISH) and clothed them” (B'reishit 3:21).

The Midrash (B'reishit Rabba 20:12), however, reads the verse slightly differently: “In Rabbi Meir’s Torah scroll it was found written: ‘Garments of light (ALEF-VAV-REISH)’.” Apparently, the real challenge for Adam and Chava was not their need to cover themselves physically, but rather spiritually. It was their souls that felt dangerously exposed to the elements and which needed protection.

The Rav notes the appropriateness of this Midrash being attributed to Rabbi Meir, whose two teachers – Elisha ben Abuya (also known as ACHEIR) and Rabbi Akiva – embodied

opposite models of clothing, physical and spiritual. For ACHEIR rebelled against his people and the Torah. He became an agent of the oppressive Roman government and spent his latter days living in the lap of luxury. He ultimately died in his own bed, warm and protected in physical clothing, but his mutiny against God led him to die without any true legacy. His soul had become unclothed.

On the other hand, because of his steadfast loyalty to the Torah, Rabbi Akiva spent his final days as a fugitive, living a desperate untethered existence to avoid capture by Rome. Every night he would sleep in a different location. His body withered without the comfort of warm clothing. When captured, his death as a martyr was as far as can be imagined from the comfort of home. His body was raked with iron combs until he died stripped of even his own skin. And yet his essence became immortal, living on in the psyche, literature and gestalt of his people. Thus, he departed this world clad in extraordinary garments of spiritual light (Y'mei Zikaron pp. 202-209).

As we begin the High Holiday season in these turbulent times, the shofar beckons us to ask: What is the state of our spiritual clothing? How can we mend its tears and restore its

regalness? If we find the answer within our own souls, we will merit to stand before God unashamed – adorned in garments of light. 