

## **A Vision of the Divine: It Can Take You Higher**

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Parashat Tetzaveh 5784 / February 23, 2024

Ten years ago, when I was an associate rabbi at a congregation in the Chicago area, I had the great privilege of traveling with an interdenominational group of rabbis to Rome and Jerusalem. It was one of the most impactful religious experiences I've had in my career.

We visited the Jewish Quarter in Rome, which sits quite literally in the shadow of the Vatican. You can imagine what it was like for Roman Jews back in the day—going about their daily lives under the constant watchful eye of Vatican City; the imposing structure projecting the wealth and power of the Catholic Church over their poor and powerless ghetto.

One day while we were there, we had the opportunity to attend Pope Francis's weekly audience in St. Peter's Square. Thanks to the generosity of the Chicago Archdiocese, we were seated on a special dais, not all that far from the pope. The view was incredible; the experience surreal.

There he was, the pope himself, dressed in his regalia, seated on a special throne, addressing the crowd. He was surrounded by cardinals and other church officials, all dressed in their glorious uniforms.

Another day, we had the truly unique experience—for simple rabbis from the Midwest—to view some of the Vatican's collection of Jewish artifacts, including original manuscripts of some of Judaism's most sacred texts, illustrated in vivid colors of gold, blue, purple, and red.

A few days later, one of my colleagues and I stood in the Old City of Jerusalem, at the entryway to the plaza overlooking the Temple Mount and the Western Wall.

The contrast with the place we had just come from was stark.

It was about this time of the year, and we were reading the same *parshiyot* in the Torah we're reading now: the ones describing the elaborate design of the *Mikdash*—the Tabernacle—and the *bigdei k'hunah*—the magisterial clothing worn by the ancient temple priests.

As we stood there looking at the Temple Mount in the Old City, an insight came to me: All that grandeur—the imposing edifice of the *Beit HaMikdash*, the magnificent priestly garments, all the gold and acacia wood and precious gems described in the Torah—used to be right there, in the heart of Jerusalem.

But now? Now, if you want to see those things we read about in the Torah, you don't go to Jerusalem anymore. You go to Rome.

In Rome, there's a famous arch, the Arch of Titus, depicting the conquering Roman army leading Jewish captives out of Jerusalem pulling wagons filled with treasure and taking it to Rome.

The expropriation of Jewish wealth—first by Titus and later by the Catholic Church—first from Jerusalem and later from Jewish communities in Europe to Rome was immense.

Original Jewish manuscripts are still being held in the Vatican library! Think about that.

We learned that at least some of the spoils from Jerusalem were used to fund the Roman Coliseum.

But perhaps the most significant of all was the expropriation of Jewish imagery.

The *Beit HaMikdash* has been replaced by the Vatican. The Kohen Gadol (the High Priest) has been replaced by the pope. And the bejeweled garments of the Israelite priests, which *Parashat Tetzaveh* this week describes in exceeding detail, have been replaced by the flowing robes and accoutrements of the Catholic ecclesiastical bureaucracy.

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But here's the question: Should we care?

So instead of the cerulean (blue) headdress and a breast piece encrusted with precious stones, our clergy today wear an open-neck shirt from Joseph Bank and dress sneakers? Big deal.

But maybe there is something lost. After all, if none of those things really matter that much, why does the Torah spend so much time talking about them?

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu offers some insight.

The majesty of the priestly garments and the ceremonies surrounding them are what Bourdieu calls "performative social magic."<sup>1</sup> I'll explain.

In reality, there is no intrinsic difference between a priest and an ordinary Israelite. They are both human beings, both flesh and blood. Substantively, they—and all human beings—are the same.

The designations "priest" and "ordinary Israelite" are social constructions. They create differences between two people—or two groups of people—where none actually exists.

But although these differences are created from nothing, they are made very real through performative social magic, for instance: By designating certain uniforms for one category of people but not for the other, or by holding public ceremonies—like ordinations and inaugurations—that say to the community, "This class of people is different from everyone else."

The elaborate description of the priests' clothing in our *parashah*—and the ceremonies involved in making them and putting them on—is performative social magic. Through it, the priests are set apart as *kodesh*—holy—and somehow closer to God than ordinary Israelites are.

If you look at it cynically, you might say it's a power play—the priestly class arrogating to itself more power and more wealth than others in the community have. And I think you would be right about that—on one level.

But it's also more than that. This performative social magic has a spiritual purpose, too.

When the priests are wearing their majestic uniforms, they are not seen by the community as ordinary people of flesh and blood. Indeed, the identity of the person inside the costume becomes irrelevant. Instead, the vivid, other-worldly clothing transforms the person into a symbol.

The priests in uniform give their community a vision of something that is, in truth, beyond their grasp: a vision of divinity, a vision of God.

We may scoff at this. After all, ever since the destruction of the Temple we have been rigorously trained to believe that God can't be seen with the eyes.

We know this intellectually, but, spiritually, it may be different. It's not for nothing that the Torah presents the priests this way, or that the Catholic Church uses the same kind of imagery, or that Judaism and other religions utilize all kinds of material things to stir our souls.

As Rabbi Robert I. Kahn once said to a class of HUC rabbinic students on the eve of their ordination, "A little boy will see you at religious school and go home and tell his parents, 'I saw God today. He wore a black robe and he smiled at me.'"<sup>2</sup>

Our tradition, no less than others, understood well that imagery matters. There is something very powerful about being able to see the ideal represented in tangible form.

Not only do visions of such things inspire awe and reverence and kindle the spiritual fire within us, but they also create a sense that there is something higher to aspire to, to reach for. And when it's visible to you, it somehow feels like you can actually grasp it if you want it badly enough and are willing to try.

As the Torah says, "It is not hidden from you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven...nor is it beyond the sea. ... It is very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it." (*Deut.* 30:11-14)

By their presence and visibility, the priests in all their grandeur suggest to all who see them that God, though "farther than the farthest star," is, paradoxically, somehow accessible to us.

They signify an ideal that, while aspirational in the extreme, is not beyond our reach.

That the chasm between heaven and earth, though incomprehensibly immense, is not entirely unbridgeable.

To borrow lyrics from the rock band Creed, this vision of the divine can "take [you] higher / to a place where blind men see / [It] can take [you] higher / to a place with golden streets."<sup>3</sup>

Especially in our world today, this message of hope and empowerment is one we could all stand to hear—and believe.

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Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote that “God and man, heaven and earth, are the two powers between which the Tabernacle was intended to serve as the connecting link.”<sup>4</sup>

When the Roman army destroyed the Temple in 70 C.E., that nexus between heaven and earth was ripped apart. Jerusalem was laid waste, its inhabitants were put in shackles, the priesthood disappeared, and the wealth and the imagery of the Jewish people were carted off to Rome.

But our longing to restore our intimate connection with God—and God’s longing to do the same with us—has persisted in our spiritual consciousness all these centuries.

It is a core theological tenet of Judaism that if we remain faithful to God and “fulfill our duty [to God] in everyday life”<sup>5</sup>—by learning Torah and living by its teachings, by cultivating good character and morality, by serving our fellow human beings with the work of our hands and the kindness of our hearts, by reaching toward the heavens in sincere prayer and bringing the heavens down to earth through our *mitzvot* and good deeds—then that tear in the cosmos will be repaired, and God and humanity will once again be united together in harmony.

As we pray each day in the Amidah: “R’tzeh Adonai Eloheinu b’amkha Yisrael—May you be pleased, Adonai our God, with your people Israel and accept our prayer in love.”

“*Barukh atah Adonai, ha-machazir shekhinato l’tziyon*—Blessed are You Adonai; one day, may you cause your presence to return to Zion.”

1 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Language & Symbolic Power*. Bourdieu alternately uses the terms “performative magic” and “social magic” in speaking about the phenomenon described here.

2 Rabbi Robert I. Kahn, “The Faithful Shepherd” (1960).

3 Adapted from the Creed song, [“Can You Take Me Higher?”](#)

4 *Collected Writings of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Volume III*, 161.

5 Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, *The Hirsch Siddur* (Feldheim), 159.