



Costumes and the Eternal Self

R. Micha'el Rosenberg – roesenberg@hadar.org

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Purim is a holiday of costumes, putting on masks, and presenting ourselves to the world in unusual ways. It makes sense, then, that this holiday most often falls, as it does this year, in the week after Parashat Tetzaveh, a *parashah* largely about the costuming for the priests in the Temple. The fact that the Torah tells us so much about the garments the *kohanim* must wear cuts against an all-too-common tendency to treat the external as shallow and meaningless. To the contrary, there is spiritual significance to the garb we wear and the image we present to the outside world.

The Shem mi-Shmuel¹ writes:

שם משמואל, תצוה וזכור תרע"ב ענין בגדי כהונה הגיד כ"ק אבי אדמו"ר זצלה"ה כי כל דבר פנימי צריך כיסוי ולבוש.	Shem Mishmuel, Tetzaveh and Zakhor (1912) [Regarding] the matter of the priestly garments: My holy blessed father the Rebbe, ² of blessed memory, said that every internal-focused thing requires covering and clothing.
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¹ R. Shmuel Bornsztain (1855-1926), the second Sochotchover Rebbe.

² R. Avraham Bornsztain (1838-1910), the first Sochotchover Rebbe.



Precisely because the *kohanim* are meant to be engaged in internal, spiritual work, their costume is important. But the Shem Mishmuel does not explain why that should be.

The Sefat Emet³ offers us more insight into the relationship between the internal and the external. Commenting on the fact that after revealing himself to his brothers, Yosef gives them clothing for the trip back home, he explains:

שפת אמת, ויגש תרל"ט [לְכֹלם נָתַן לְאִישׁ חִלְפוֹת שְׂמֹלֶת וְלִבְנִימִן נָתַן... חֲמִשָּׁה חִלְפוֹת שְׂמֹלֶת (בְּרֹאשִׁית מֵהֶ:כב)] והענין הוא כי הפנימיות לעולם אחד אבל המلبוש מתחלף כפי מדריגות האדם עולה ויורד	Sefat Emet, VaYigash (1879) ["To each of them, moreover, he gave a change of clothing; but to Benjamin he gave... five changes of clothing" (Genesis 45:22)]. The matter is thus: The internal is always one-and-the-same, but the garment changes in accordance with a person's ups and downs [on the ethical plane].
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Yosef gives his brothers garments for their trip to Eretz Yisrael and back. These garments, in the Sefat Emet's telling of the tale, are not merely practical resources for a journey, but rather, emblematic of what it means to live in the world. Because even though each of us has an authentic Self that remains constant—a *neshamah* that is pure no matter what is going on around us and no matter what we ourselves have done—we all, necessarily, have external guises that change depending on the moment and our response to that moment.

The Sefat Emet continues:

וז"ש חז"ל שרמז לבנימין	And this is what the Sages meant when they said that this
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³ R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (1847-1905).



שיצא ממנו מרדכי שיצא מלפני המלך בה' לבושים כו'. כי בימי אסתר הי' הסתרת פנים ביותר ומרדכי תיקן ה' מיני לבושים הנ"ל. [ואפשר ע"ז הרמז מה שמחליפין המלבושים בפורים. כי מנהג ישראל תורה].	foreshadows the fact that destined to descend from Binyamin is Mordekhai, who “left the king’s presence” with five garments (cf Esther 8:15). For in Esther’s day, God’s face was exceedingly hidden, and Mordekhai repaired five garments. (And perhaps this is an allusion to why we wear costumes on Purim. For Jewish custom is Torah.)
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The Sefat Emet connects this notion of the constant, internal Self and the various external guises we take on to the Purim story. Precisely because God’s presence was more hidden in the days of Esther and Mordekhai, more repair needed to be done to those external trappings. When God’s presence is obscured, hard to feel and to see, the gap between our eternal *neshamah* and the various and ever-changing ways we see ourselves and present ourselves to the world increases. Mordekhai’s wearing five garments is thus an allusion to repairing these outward appearances, bringing them closer to our true Self.

This, says the Sefat Emet, is perhaps the reason we wear costumes on Purim. He doesn’t further explain the connection, but I want to offer one way to understand his insight into Purim costumes. To live in the world means constantly to put on masks; I present myself one way to my colleagues, and another way to my family; one way to my friends, and another to my students.

Too often, we put these masks on without realizing what we are doing. At a certain point, we no longer think, consciously, I will put on this specific persona for this particular setting. Instead, we all too easily slide into our ways of being, becoming the rebel or the star pupil, the team player or the individual star, without giving a second thought to who we really are. We



wear these masks so effortlessly that we lose track of what is external—and, by definition, temporary and reactive—and what is our constant, eternal Self. Who is the real “me”?

On Purim, we consciously put on a mask. Wearing costumes allows us to try on personas in order to help us figure out who we want to be. If we are blessed to achieve Purim in its fullness, though, we achieve something higher: We figure out who we already are and always have been.

