

“It Doesn’t Matter If You are Wearing Chanel or Wranglers, You Fit in Here”
11 Adar 5769/March 7, 2009
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This morning we were, once again, treated to celebrating a milestone in a young woman’s life. Emily was called to the Torah as a Bat Mitzvah and she made all of us very proud. She worked hard to master all of the skills. She practiced and rehearsed and did wonderfully. I am sure you all agree. However, I hope you noticed there was a subtle change. It is not that she has grown, though she has. It is not that she is more confident, though she is. It is not that she normally wears sweats and today she is dressed beautifully, though that is close. Maybe you noticed and maybe you didn’t, but just before she read the *Maftir aliyah* this morning, she changed her *tallitot*. She switched from the *tallit* purchased by her parents for today, to a *tallit* given to her by a friend and survivor of the Holocaust. It was her husband’s and by wearing that *tallit*, Emily forces us to remember those who died in the Holocaust. She also makes the statement that what she wears is important. It helps define who she is. When I met with her Hebrew school class last week, we had a chance to talk about the clothes we wear and the statement they make. They laughed when I remarked that as a child we had play clothes, we had school clothes and we had *shul* clothes. They chuckled when I shared the story of the day I got holes in the knees of my *shabbos* pants. We also learned how what we wear impacts others. So last Sunday I was the teacher and today, Emily has become the teacher.

This week we find ourselves in a conversation about the Tabernacle and what should go inside. Today, I will tell you what I think belongs there and ask you to join me in making that happen. Today we read about the people who were to be on the inside. If, last week we read of the varied vessels that were to be utilized in the service of God in the Tabernacle, then this week could be classified as devoted to the people that were to provide that service, the people who found themselves at the heart of the tabernacle experience. Last week, we read of tables and arks, we read of menorahs and curtains. This week we read of Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, Elazar and Itamar. Last week we read about things, this week we read about people. While describing the work they would do, our Torah describes the clothing they would wear. A *ketonet* or coat; *Michnasayim* or pants; *Mitznefet* or mitre; *Choshen* or breastplate; *Ephod* or staff, and a *mi’eel* or robe. The rabbis say that this is not about the clothing, it is about what the clothing does and how it focuses our attention and impacts the wearer.

Our rabbis of the Talmud (Zevachim 88b) explain that clothing does change the way we feel about ourselves. Clothing can remind us of the values we hold at our core. The Talmud takes the ornamental garb of the priesthood, of the *kehunah*, and seizes the moment to teach an important lesson about what type of community we want to build.

- *Ketonet michaperet al shifichut damim* – the coat atones for bloodshed.
- *Michnasayim michaperet al gilui arayot* – the pants atoned for lewdness.
- *Mitznefet michaperet al gasei ruach* – the mitre atoned for arrogance.
- *Choshen michaperet al dinim* – the breastplate atoned for those who neglected the laws.
- *Ephod michaperet al avodat cochavi* – the ephod atoned for idolatry.
- *Mi’eel michaperet al lashon harah* – the robe atoned for slander.

This is the recipe for community and the rabbis tell us that it is in our clothing. When the sages teach that the *kohen* put on a *ketonet*, he stood before the congregation and made the statement, “We abhor violence and we will not stand idly by while violence is perpetuated.” We must do the same. We, too, must stand for the innocent victims around the world. We, too, must stand before the world and say that violence in our homes is unacceptable, violence in our cities is unacceptable, and violence in our world must come to an end.

When the Talmud teaches that the *kohen* put on the *michnasayim*, he stood before the congregation and made the statement that we value modesty, we value monogamy, and we value a relationship where our partners are also valued. We say that other people matter and we shun the promiscuity that demeans others and ourselves.

When our tradition teaches that the *kohen* put on the *mitznet*, he stood before the congregation and made the statement that we value humility. We recognize that in this dog-eat-dog world and in the “me” generation, other people do matter. If I have to tell myself to make room for others, it is a sacrifice worth making. We live in a society and we need to make room for each other. We must reject the motto of “Looking out for *numero uno*.”

When Chazal teaches that the *kohen* put on the *choshen*, he stood before the congregation and made the statement that we value the rule of law and that no one is beyond the reach of the law. The laws of society are the fabric which holds us together. No one is above the law.

When the sages teach that the *kohen* put on the *ephod*, he stood before the congregation and made the statement that we value belief in one God, that we don't worship at the feet of false gods, like money, success, and personal achievement, which can so easily draw us in.

Finally, when the Talmud teaches that the *kohen* put on the *mi'eel*, he stood before the congregation and made the statement that we value the language we use. He makes the statement that we care about what we say and about whom we talk. We say, “No more,” to cheap gossip and degrading comments behind people's backs. We say that each person has value and we will not judge each other or deem any one unworthy.

Emily has taught us many lessons today. Last Sunday I had the opportunity to teach the middle school and Emily was in that class, but today Emily and I have switched roles. Today Emily stood before this congregation and made a statement that she was now stepping forth into adulthood with all of the skills we want her to have. She has chanted and she has taught with her words and with our tradition's script and, even more than what she taught us with her words, she said she taught us with what she wore. Near the beginning of the service she put on her own *tallit* and made the statement that from this moment forward she will wrap herself in the values and the commitments of our people. Then, amidst the commotion of this service, she switched her *tallit* and gave herself the opportunity to try on her responsibility to our past, to try on her responsibility to our collective memory.

Emily stood before the congregation and made the statement that she cares. She made that statement just as much by what she said, as by what she wore, and it had nothing to do with designer labels. This week we are going to celebrate the holiday of Purim. It is the one time of

year when we get to put on a costume and see how a different personality feels. We all get to be hippies and dancers, heroes, and princesses, kings and queens. Then, when we take off that costume, we can hold on to some of that royalty or fun or freedom. What we wear changes the way we feel about ourselves. We ought to accept everyone for who they are and how they decide to dress.

Soon, after I arrived in this community, I made a mistake and I am not proud to admit it. *Et chata'ai ani mazkir hayom*. I had been here about a year when I grew disheartened by the way some of the children were dressed when they came to services Friday night and Shabbat morning. I was raised in a congregation where, if you wanted to lead the service any day of the week, you had to be wearing a sport jacket, so this just didn't seem right to me. Children would come to services Friday night wearing jeans or even sweats. Shabbat morning they would come in baseball uniforms because they were going straight from *shul* to little league. So, I wrote a letter to parents asking that their children come properly dressed for services. In response, I received numerous phone calls, letters and emails. Many were in support, while many were in opposition, however, the remorse that I feel is not based on any of those responses. The reason I feel bad about the letter is that feelings can't be mandated. Just because a person feels a certain way doesn't mean others will feel that way. You have heard the phrase, "You can dress him up but you can't take him anywhere." Maybe some believe clothing makes the man – but dress only means something when...it means something.

One final story. It is a story that is really an amalgam of a number of stories and it is one with which I hope you can empathize. A gentleman loses his job so he is out of work and afraid. He is afraid of losing his home and he is afraid that he will be unable to provide for his children. He has some debt and is clinging to hope and a dream that the market will turn around. He says desperate things as he begins to cry. Then he told me the most remarkable thing. Everyday he gets up at the time he normally would. He gets dressed and gets on the train and yet he has no job to go to. As he tells the story, I begin to wonder why he does this. He explains, I do this because I have been taking the same train every day with the same men for the last 20 years. We drink our coffee and we play a round of cards and then we go off to work. I am embarrassed to let them know I lost my job, so I do this little charade every day. He gets dressed, he puts on a suit in order to make believe he has somewhere to go. As the conversation comes to a close, he begins to feel better, strengthened, uplifted. I say what I often say to people, "We are here for you." And we are. It doesn't matter what you are wearing. It doesn't matter if you are wearing Chanel or Wranglers, you fit in here. Though we are "a nation of priests and holy people," this doesn't mean we have to dress like *kohanim*. Please know that these are our guiding principles and we value you.

In the next months and possibly the next years, our building, our institution, our community, and our home will become even more valuable as so many seek a safe haven and are in need of care. So, to paraphrase President John F. Kennedy, "Let the word go forth from this place, this holy place, that we are willing and able to shelter you."