

Sermon Parshat Tetzaveh 5766
March 11, 2006
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I sit down on the train and open a book to start to read. The woman next to me starts up a conversation. The next thing I know she is telling me her whole life's story – all about her divorce and the difficulties of raising her children as a single parent.

I get off the train and hop into a cab and the cabby starts a conversation with me. The next thing I know he is telling me about all the difficulties he's having getting a visa and how immigration is breathing down his neck.

I arrive at my hotel a little early and sit in the lobby because my room is not quite ready. A young man approaches me and we start talking. As it turns out he is on a business trip and the traveling is killing him, but the real truth is he is unhappy in this job because it isn't what he thought it was going to be. The pay is great but he is miserable. He is a newlywed and is spending so much time away from his wife it's just terrible but he has a knack for what he does and is on the fast track towards Vice President. When he takes a break I excuse myself. I am wondering what is going on.

This often happens to me. So I go check to see if I am wearing anything that would give away the fact that I am a rabbi. I go to see if the sign, which I feel is often taped to my forehead, is showing, the sign that says, "I care."

We have a joke in our family about how I must have a sign on my forehead that I cannot see but others can. Whether I am out on a run or at a movie, people stop to talk to me and I wonder what am I saying that makes people open up to me. How do others know I care? You remember the cruel joke that was played in grammar school where the class bully secretly places a sign on the back of the poor little red-haired child that says, "I am a dummy." We all seem to wear signs. A look, a glance can give it all away. We all wear signs on our foreheads that send clear messages to those around us. Some do it purposefully and some are less conscious of it.

That is why the sentence from this morning's reading is so dramatic. "You shall make a frontlet of pure gold and engrave on it the seal inscription, 'Holy to the Lord'." (Exodus 28:36)

וּפְתַחֲתָהּ עָלָיו פְּתוּחֵי חֹתָם קֹדֶשׁ לַה'

We can't let it be implicit – we must make the statement out loud and we must be clear about what we really want to say. Our Torah says make it obvious that we believe ourselves to be holy and that we believe you are holy too.

So I ask, rather naively, what does our clothing say about us? Is it a deliberate comment?

This morning's reading spends so much time teaching us about the role clothing has in shaping how we view ourselves and how others view us. In intimate detail we learn of the garments produced for the priesthood. Undershirts, breastplates, shoulder stitching, headdress. So much is described and explained symbolically throughout the commenting literature.

Ibn Ezra says the headband was worn among the wealthy in Baghdad and Babylonia, but it never became common practice among the Jews. However, the high priest took that clothing and made it Jewish by inscribing on it "Holy for God." Ibn Ezra says, "Like human behavior, clothing can be adapted from the surrounding culture and transformed into something holy." Ibn Ezra tells us that this headband was not used in our culture but was a sign of those honored in other traditions. Ibn Ezra teaches that in adapting this piece of dress and adding the words "Holy to the Lord," makes all of the difference. By adding the words to the clothing "Holy to the Lord," we add not just a design element, but also substance. By adding the words "Holy to the Lord," we make clear the difference between our clothing and theirs. By adding the words "Holy to the Lord," Ibn Ezra reminds us that our clothing says something different about us and we decide what that statement is.

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In my junior year of college, just before spring break, I got my ear pierced. I wanted to go home and show how I had changed, that I had grown up and I was now in charge of my body. I came home expecting questions about what compelled me to do this. I came home ready for an argument with my parents in which I could exercise my right to self-determination and I could exert my independence. They said nothing. I don't think they even cared and if they did they didn't let on. A year later the earring was gone. I don't know if I made any proclamation – but I did learn that if I wanted to say something, I had to say it. So I joined the Guardian Angels. I have to tell you – that got their attention.

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You may already know that I was very involved in Judo while in college. One day I was sitting on the subway and a drunk got on the train and was yelling obscenities. Across from me was a woman clearly unnerved as was apparent in her eyes. There was little I could do to let her know that I wouldn't let anything happen to her without provoking this man further. It wasn't that I was going to be a superman; it was just that this man could barely stand on his own. It would not have taken any great act of heroism to stand between him and her but I still had no way of letting her know. This led me to join the Guardian Angels so that I might become at least a psychological deterrent to those who might be inclined toward criminal activity.

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But we must be careful. We must take care in what we say, for once it is said there is no retraction. Rhetoric that incites hatred is equally dangerous.

In the small town of Saint-Genis-Pouilly, France, a small riot broke out when the town's cultural center permitted a reading of Voltaire's *Mohamet the Prophet*, which, as the Wall Street Journal reports, "uses the founder of Islam to lampoon all forms of religious frenzy and intolerance." (March 6, 2006) This all takes place on the backs of the dispute and the passionate anger over the cartoon that ran late last year. Once again the dispute over free speech and faith continues. Why can't we all just learn to get along? Just because we have the right to say whatever we want doesn't mean we have to. This is not a comment about censorship; this is about consideration and respect.

We all have the right while living in this great country and enjoying the enormous freedoms afforded in this majestic land to exercise our right to say whatever we want. But having that freedom doesn't mean we ought to. Just because we have the privilege to say whatever we want doesn't mean it is responsible to do so, and more than that, it doesn't mean that whatever we want to say, whatever we desire to put out in the public forum, will add to the freedoms from which we benefit. Just because we can say what is on our mind doesn't require us to do so.

So, I ask you, what is it you really want to say? Do you want to be like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the President of Iran, who speaks *his* mind and denies the Holocaust? Do you want to be like, Mahmoud al Zahar, the leader of Hamas, who speaks his mind and perpetuates the hate mongering while calling for Israel to be driven into the sea? Or would you prefer to be like those in our society, examples of which are far too difficult to conjure up, like leaders of both the Republican and Democratic parties who spoke in Washington this week at the AIPAC Policy Conference. Leaders like Roy Blunt, Majority Whip and Steny Hoyer, Minority Whip, who both spoke to the conference of reconciliation and love, like those who speak of humanity and respect.

This week I attended the AIPAC Conference in Washington D.C. It was a fantastic opportunity to hear many of our leaders speak to the issue that is at the core of most every Jew in America – the relationship between our two great nations, America and Israel. On Tuesday morning, Vice President Dick Cheney addressed the conference of nearly 6,000 people and said exactly what the crowd and I wanted to hear. He said definitely and without equivocation that America stands by Israel and will never abandon her. He said it clearly and with determination and we all

needed to hear it. The European Union needed to hear it, the President of Iran needed to hear it, the leaders of Hamas needed to hear it - and believe me they were all listening. The Vice President, speaking on behalf of our President, made it abundantly clear that the United States and Israel are natural allies. We already know this but it still needs to be said. Sometimes what is implicit needs to be made explicit. Sometimes verbalizing or giving voice is necessary. Sometimes quiet diplomacy is critical – sometimes-fervent speeches are required.

Consider, for example, Heschel's words: "The opposite of good is not evil, the opposite of good is indifference," a conviction that he translated into a political commitment: "In a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible." Martin Luther King writes, "To accept passively an unjust system is to cooperate with that system." In so doing, he went on, "the oppressed becomes as evil as the oppressor." Not to act communicates "to the oppressor that his actions are morally right."

Winston Churchill remarked that, "An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile, hoping it will eat him last." If we are silent, to keep those forces in the world that seek our destruction mollified, then we may very well be the last eaten.

I wear my kippah everywhere I go and I tell the world I am Jewish. I put on a pin depicting a pink ribbon and I tell the world I care about breast cancer. I wear a pin that depicts the American flag and the Israeli flag and I tell the world Israel and America are inextricably tied together and they must remain close allies. I support that openly.

Just two last questions...

What are the statements you are making? What are the issues on which you have chosen to remain silent?