

Clothing

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Synopsis: The Hebrew word 'begeg' means both clothing and betrayal. This duality is important because we use clothing to communicate - status, sexuality, position, power, etc. Realizing that clothing can lie and betray is an important part of navigating in society. The High Priest's vestments are thus a statement that can either be true of the man or false. So too with others who wear the robes of authority.

We're in the middle of a chiasm. Well, actually not in the middle yet, the middle probably happens next week. But there's a chiasm, and on one side you have the specification for the tabernacle, and on the other side you'll have the building of the tabernacle, and in the middle is the golden calf.

We've talked about it a lot, and my perspective is that the tabernacle, with all of its trappings, is a vehicle to allow God to travel safely with his people. It's a compound that's sealed off, it's serviced by trained technicians. Anybody that comes in there uninvited dies. It's sort of like having a nuclear reactor in your submarine, and only certain people get to get near it because it's dangerous. But it lets God travel in the midst of it. I've said that lots of times.

I was reading Rabbi Sacks, and he also says that this tabernacle is a reaction to the golden calf, but he's got an entirely different perspective than I did. My perspective, I believe, is correct, and I believe his perspective is also correct. So I'm going to talk about it from his perspective this morning, because I just gave you mine.

His point of view is Judaism is not a visual faith - one of the things they routinely get in trouble for is making idols - all of Judaism is based on listening. So we say the Shema. What that means is listen. And in fact, one of the things Rabbi Sacks said, and I didn't realize this, is that it is traditional for Jews, when they do the Shema, to close their eyes. So the idea is, "I am listening, I am not looking." And he said Eve, for example, in the garden, was tempted by what she saw. And I'll read that briefly to you.

I'm in Genesis 3.6. "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and it was a delight to the eye, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. And she also gave some to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together to make themselves loincloths."

So she's been deceived by the serpent, and he is appealing to her vision, as opposed to God, who appeals to listening. At Mount Sinai. I'll read you from Deuteronomy, "Then the Lord spoke to you out of the midst of the fire. You heard the sound of words, but you saw no form. There was only a voice."

God didn't stand up there in all of his splendor. It was clouds and fire and so forth, and all they did was hear a voice out of them.

Elijah - remember when he destroyed all the prophets of Baal, and he's running away from Jezebel, and he goes to a cave? The vignette there is - he came to a cave, and he hears a voice, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" Notice he doesn't see anything, he hears a voice. And he says, "I've been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, killed your prophets with a sword, and I, even I, only am left. And they seek to take my life." And he said - God - "Go out and stand on the mount before the Lord." And behold, the Lord passed by in a great and strong wind, tore the mountains and broke it in pieces. When you think about that, think of a blast wave, The working fluid in an explosion is air. So you have a blast wave that's breaking the rocks. But the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind, an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire. But the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, the sound of a low whisper.

All of this visual stuff that's going on, earthquakes, fires, explosions, that isn't God. God is a whisper, talking to you. And the idea in Judaism is this is not a visual religion. The Bible is not a visual book. It's listening.

So what Sacks says is the idea of this tabernacle with all of its magnificent splendor is an anomaly. His relationship to the golden calf, which is different than mine, but also correct, is God realized after they made the golden calf that people needed something to focus on. That's why we get icons in the Eastern Orthodox Church, that's why we get statues of saints in the Catholic Church, and all that. People want something that they can see, because we tend to be visual people, even though God wants us to be listening people. So God says, "All right, all right, all right. You want something to look at? I'll make you something to look at. It'll be beautiful. But there will be no images of me in there, except in the Holy of Holies. And oh, by the way, you can't go in there. So you can't come and look. The only one who can do that is the high priest, and he only does it once a year. And if he doesn't do it right, he dies."

So this idea of a splendid edifice and a priest that is decked out in these splendid robes is an anomaly. One of the things he (Sacks) says, which is absolutely correct, is the word for clothing, *beged*, also means betrayal. Same word.

What he reminded me of is every vignette in Genesis where clothing is involved, the clothing is used as a vehicle of deception. The very first example, of course, is Adam and Eve, where they put on clothing to hide what they had done.

The next one is Jacob. Jacob takes Esau's garments and pretends to be his brother to get the blessing from his father and steal Esau's blessing. And then he gets up to Haran and gets tricked with the wrong wife because she is wearing a veil and a garment that conceals her identity. The next thing that happens is he makes a garment for his favorite son. A coat of many colors. And he is deceived by his other sons when they send that garment back dipped in blood.

Joseph in Egypt - Potiphar's wife has the hots for him. She takes his coat off of him and frames him with a garment, "This Hebrew that you brought in here tried to lay with me and he left his coat when I screamed." So she's framing him using his garment.

And then Joseph meets his brothers. He's dressed up as an Egyptian viceroy. Doesn't look like a Hebrew at all. And it's only when he reveals himself with his voice that anybody realizes who he is.

Judah and Tamar - Tamar dresses up like a harlot to deceive Judah and get him to give her a child.

So every vignette in the book of Genesis that involves garments involves deception. So people want a visual thing. So God says, "All right, I'll let you have some visuals. And since the high priest represents me, we're going to make it really snazzy because it wouldn't do for the one who is representing me to look shabby. So we'll do this up properly.

Now, the problem with this is visual worship is a trap. And what it eventually does is it becomes idol worship. Remember, clothing and deception are the same word. So the tabernacle eventually becomes an idol - actually, the temple - by the time we get to Jeremiah, before the Babylonian captivity. I'm in Jeremiah 7. "The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, 'Stand at the gate of the Lord's house and proclaim there this word and say, 'Hear the word of the Lord, all you men of Judah, who enter these gates to worship the Lord. Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel. Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words. 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.' "

And the background there is, they are saying, as long as we have got the tabernacle or the temple of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he will not let this city be destroyed. That's their mindset. But they're corrupt in every way. So God is saying, "If you're standing here saying, this is the temple of the Lord, and you're behaving the way you're behaving, it is no longer the temple of the Lord, because I'm not going to be there."

So the temple gets turned into an idol. Another example – Nehushtan - in the wilderness, remember when the snakes come through the camp, and Moses makes this bronze snake and puts it up on a pole, and anybody that gets bit by a serpent looks at that and he's healed. Well, by the time of Hezekiah, they had made that an idol. I'm in 2 Kings 18, "And Hezekiah did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, according to all that David his father had done. He removed the high places and broke the pillars and cut down the Asherah, and he broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made. For until those days, the people of Israel had made offerings to it. They called it Nehushtan." Even something that God ordains to be made we can turn into an idol.

When God makes this tabernacle and dresses the high priest up in these really fancy duds, it is very risky. Because what He's doing is He is setting up for us the thing that is going to lead to our downfall, which is idol worship.

As I say, He did that for two reasons. My reason is because this is a compound in the middle of the camp surrounded by trained technicians, so God can travel with His people without destroying them. From Sacks' point of view, the golden calf convinced God, at least temporarily, that people need visuals when they worship. I think both of those are right, just different perspectives.

So let's take a look at clothing. The first use of clothing is to keep you warm and keep you modest. That's a perfectly benign use of clothing. It gets more interesting from there, though. We also use clothing to communicate. You've heard dress for success, for example. So we wear clothing because we want to create an impression.

This is not sexist, but women are past masters at this. They're really good at it. You can walk into some place and you can tell all sorts of things about her. And again, this is not a slam. It's just the way people are.

Men used to be more dandy. In fact, you know where the word slacks come from? Slacks are as opposed to tights. And if you look at men in 16th, 17th centuries, they would wear tights. They would wear very colorful and fancy pantaloons. They would also wear stuff to enhance their sexual appeal, shall we say. So again, they are communicating.

So the idea here is we use clothing to say something. And the thing we say is not always true. That's the other part of it. The thing that we say with our clothing is not always true. Hence, "begged" - deception. So there are benign uses of clothing, but there are also deceptive uses of clothing, which is why the word is ambiguous.

The other part of clothing is like the high priest. And those are uniforms or robes of office. So that's special clothing that somebody gets to mark his position, his status, or his authority.

That can be deceptive. If you are stopped by a policeman in a uniform and the guy happens to be a crook, which is entirely possible because policemen are human just like anybody else is human, what that uniform does is it now deceives. What we're seeing in our government right now is people in robes of office who are doing things that are contrary to what their office says they should be doing. This is, again, clothing used to deceive.

Now, let's go back to the high priest for a minute. The high priest is a representative of God to the people. He's also a representative of the people to God. The human temptation when you are decked out in all this finery and gold and everything else is to say, "Look at me. I am something special." as opposed to I am a functionary in a role.

So when people put on these special robes, robes of office, uniforms, however you want to describe them, the temptation is always there for that person to lose track of the fact that he is a servant and instead puff himself up as, "All of this worship, all of this respect, all of this power is mine." And that's what we're seeing today in the gospel.

So you have the high priest and he's judging Yeshua and he is clearly trying to frame him. So what he's doing is he is betraying his robes of office. He is the high priest and he would be in all of this finery and he's a liar. He's not representing God here. He's representing himself. He's representing his political party. He is using the robes of authority to deceive.

So as you go through your life, recognize that when you put clothing on, you are sending a message whether you like it or not. Because everybody else has preconceived notions of what whatever kind of dress represents. So you're sending a message. Understand that and obviously think about whether or not that's the message you want to be sending.

I can remember having daughters, "You're not going out of the house like that." I didn't say it this way, but you're sending the wrong message.

So when you dress, you're sending a message. The other thing is when somebody else dresses, they are also sending a message. And what your job is, is to figure out whether the message that they are sending is congruent with their behavior. And obviously, as we all are seeing right now after this election and so forth, there's a whole lot of people in high priest robes that are being untrue to the message that their uniform sends.