

## Parshat Tetzaveh

A Midrash by Rabbi Pamela Frydman  
in honor of the fiftieth anniversary of her bat mitzvah

Shabbat shalom. I offer these words in honor of my precious children: my son Josh and my son and daughter-in-law Terry and Ericka; and to all my friends and our birthday celebrants Edna Stewart, Herb Klarr, Jerry Derblic and Carole Baden.

Rabbi Donniel Hartman of the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem was once discussing creation and he pointed out that science differs from Torah in its understanding of the creation story. Science tells us that the universe was created over eons of time, but the Torah says that the world was created in six days. Science tells us that the sun was created long before life began on earth, but it says in Genesis, that the plants were created on the third day and the sun was created on the fourth day. Rabbi Hartman reconciles these discrepancies by pointing out that **the Torah is not a book of science; it is a book of values.**

This week's Torah portion, Parshat Tetzaveh, is one long set of instructions from God about the anointing and ordaining of priests and the construction of an incense altar. These are hardly topics of scientific import, but they are brimming with spiritual values. Here are a few examples:

There were two altars in the mishkan--the portable sanctuary built by the Israelites in the wilderness--and there were two similar altars in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

There was a large altar made of acacia wood covered with copper and placed in the courtyard outside the sanctuary. That was the altar where sacrifices were offered and in this week's Torah portion, God provides instructions for the sacrifices to be offered during the seven day ceremony for the ordination of the priests.

There was also a smaller altar made of acacia wood laminated with gold. This was the incense altar and it was placed inside the sanctuary in front of the curtain that covered the *aron hakodesh*, the holy ark. In this week's Torah portion, God provides instructions for building the altar and burning incense on it twice a day--morning and twilight.

Rabbi Johanan and Resh Lakish taught that when the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem, the altar for the sacrifices made atonement for the people. Consider this example: Let's say you have an argument with someone you love and you really made a mess of it and you want to clean it up, so you go out and buy something that your loved one really likes and you offer it as a gift, together with an apology.

Your apology is part of your atonement, and the gift is part of your atonement, and the container in which you bring the gift is also part of the atonement, because when your loved one sees the container, your loved one's heart is already melting; forgiveness is on the way!

**Rabbi Johanan and Resh Lakish taught that when the Temple stood, the altar of sacrifice made atonement for a person, and after the Temple was destroyed, the table makes atonement for**

**the person.**<sup>1</sup> Rashi, the eleventh century French scholar, commented on this teaching by saying, “שולחנו - בהכנסת אורחין מכפר עליו -” Our table becomes a vehicle for atonement when we welcome guests.

The table in our home is called a mizbe'ah m'at, a small altar--or mini-altar, if you will. It might be the coffee table, dinner table, table on the patio, table in the kids' play area. **According to Rashi, an ordinary table becomes an altar when we welcome guests into our home.**<sup>2</sup>

Rabbi Lazar Gurkow, a Chabad Rabbi in London, Ontario, Canada, takes this one step further by drawing an analogy between family life and the incense altar. Rabbi Gurkow says that **the love and kindness we share with family pervades our home like a sweet fragrance and sets the tone for all of our interactions.** This sharing of love and kindness with the people with whom we live is a replacement for the incense altar that stood in the Holy Temple.<sup>3</sup>

Now I want to turn from the altars to the priests. In this week's portion, God provides instructions that the priests are to wear a holy and dignified outfit consisting of a robe, belt and turban. God also instructs that when the priests are performing their priestly functions, they should wear linen shorts that extend from the hips to the thighs. These were pants for personal privacy--what we now call underwear.

The high priest was to wear the robe, belt, turban and linen underwear that the other priests wore, but God also instructed that the high priest should wear four additional items--a cloak, an ephod, a breastplate and a gold plate that was placed over the forehead.

The high priest wore the cloak went over his robe. At the bottom of the cloak, there was blue, purple and crimson yarn sewn into the shape of pomegranates. Between these yarn filled pomegranates were gold bells, and because of the bells, everyone could hear the high priest as he walked in the sanctuary and the Holy of Holies.

Next came the ephod, which was a combination vest and apron that was worn over the cloak. This combination vest and apron covered the lower part of the high priest's body and went up and over the shoulders with additional parts coming around the middle. Attached to the front was a breastplate made of pure gold containing twelve precious gemstones. On each gemstone was inscribed the name of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. The purpose of having the names of the tribes engraved on the breastplate was so that the high priest would have the names of the tribes over his heart, so that he would remember each tribe when he entered the sanctuary and stood in the divine presence.

There was also a gemstone on each shoulderstrap. The gemstone on one shoulderstrap was engraved with the names of six tribes, and the gemstone on the other shoulderstrap was engraved with the names of the other six tribes. Having the names of the tribes engraved on the gemstones that sat on the priest's shoulders alluded the expectation that the priests were to shoulder responsibility for ministering to all twelve tribes.

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1. Babylonian Talmud, Masechet Chagigah (Tractate on Celebrations), 27a.

2. בזמן שבית המקדש קיים מזבח מכפר על אדם: עכשיו שלחנו של אדם מכפר עליו: רש"י על חגיגה כ"ז א

3. “Vayakhel Pekudei: The Temple of our Home.” by Rabbi Eliezer Gurkow. March 3, 2013 <http://net-presence.ca/innerstream/2013/03/vayakhel-pekudei-the-temple-of-our-home/>

After the destruction of the Temple, the sages of the Talmud taught כל ישראל ערבים זה בזה: The entire Jewish people are responsible one for another.<sup>4</sup> When the Temple stood, the high priest was responsible for making atonement for the people and serving as their healer. After the destruction of the Temple, we are all responsible for one another. **We are our brother's and sister's keeper.**

On the inside of the breastplate, on the part facing the priest's body, there was something called urim v'tumim. No one knows exactly what they were, but their function was to enhance the high priest's intuition so he could help Israelite leaders with difficult decisions.

The high priest also wore a turban with a gold plate over the forehead. The gold plate was engraved with the words קודש ל'לה kodesh l'adonai, Holy to God. Rabbi Avi Geller of Yeshivat Aish HaTorah in Jerusalem<sup>5</sup> teaches that every part of the priests' garments made atonement for one of the sins of the people. **Rabbi Geller says that the gold plate with the words Holy to God atoned for the sin of misguided chutzpah--misguided arrogance.**<sup>6</sup>

The words kodesh l'adonai, holy to God, are a reminder of the teaching in the first chapter of Genesis that all human beings are created b'tzelem Elokim, in the image of God. Not just Jewish people, but all people. Not just people we like, but all people.

As Rabbi Donniel Hartman reminds us, the Torah is not a book of scientific proofs; it is a book of spiritual values. We cannot prove that God exists and we cannot prove that God does not exist. And that is why religion is based on values and not on empirical evidence.

The teachings that we are created in the image of God and that we are holy to God cut both ways. These teachings can fill us with arrogance and a sense that the world was created just for us. Or they can fill us with humility and a sense of who are we to ask for anything? Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshishka taught that everyone should have two pockets and place a slip of paper in each pocket.<sup>7</sup> The paper in one pocket should say, "the world was created for me,"<sup>8</sup> and the paper in the other pocket should say, "I am but dust and ashes."<sup>9</sup> According to Rabbi Simcha Bunim, the secret of life is know when to put your hand into which pocket.

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4. Babylonian Talmud, Masechet Shevuot (Tractate of Vows) 39a.

5. "A Symbolic Description of the Priestly Garments," by Rabbi Avi Geller of Yeshivat Aish HaTorah in Jerusalem. February 5, 2003. <http://www.aish.com/tp/b/lp/48941986.html>

6. This article contains a beautiful description of the symbolism of each of the eight elements of the high priests' sacred outfit. "A Symbolic Description of the Priestly Garments," by Rabbi Avi Geller of Yeshivat Aish HaTorah in Jerusalem. February 5, 2003. <http://www.aish.com/tp/b/lp/48941986.html>

7. The fuller teaching is available at <https://rebpam.com/teachings/dust-and-ashes/>.

8. The phrase, "the world was created for me," is contained in a teaching in Mishna Sanhedrin 4:5.

9. Abraham said, "I am but dust and ashes," when he was negotiating with God in an attempt to save Sodom and Gomorrah. See Genesis 18:27.