

“Bigger than Phil”

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One of the most memorable of Mel Brooks's 2000-year-old man stories is the one about Phil, the ancient bully who accidentally brings awareness of God into the world. Phil demands worship, fealty, loyalty, and submission, much like Haman in the Book of Esther. One day everyone is shocked to witness lightning striking Phil dead as he walks in a field. Says the 2000-year-old man, “Suddenly we knew that there's something bigger than Phil.”

One could be misled by the vivid instructions in our parashah for dressing the High Priest, the Kohen Gadol. We might erroneously think that the splendid garments adorning the Kohen were intended to dazzle the people into believing that the Kohen was the embodiment of God; or that perhaps he was an incarnate vision of God; or that at the very least he was in direct contact with God. If not “Phil,” then the next best thing to Phil.

I say this because our parashah explains the quote-unquote “reason” why the Kohen's garments are so elaborate: *v'asita vigdey kodesh l'aharon achicha l'chavod ul'tif'eret*. “Make the sacred garments for Aaron your brother for gravitas and splendor.” You can read it ten times over – and many of you have read it or heard it more times than that – and reasonably think that the point of this masquerade is to wow the people into belief, and ultimately to obedience and submission.

To paraphrase JTS student-rabbi Ben Perlman speaking on this parashah and referring to a teaching of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the word *beged* means both “clothing” and “betrayal; deceit.” In fact, in present-day Israeli parlance, one of the most toxic epithets one can fling at an ideological opponent is *boged*, “traitor.”

Therefore, the Kohen’s *beged*/clothing could be understood as a subterfuge, a way of fooling the masses into thinking that this flesh-and-blood person is somehow holy, Godly, maybe even God’s very self. Dressed in his civvies as he lunches with his wife and kids, he is an average Joe. Dressed in the literally “heavy” – *kaved* - garments of the priesthood, he transforms himself into *tiferet* itself, divine splendor. And in so doing, he can demand whatever he wants.

Perhaps this is the intent of many who lead by creating a stylized image for themselves. They literally “make images,” thus violating a key precept of the Decalogue. But no matter. They achieve their goals. They “fool some of the people all of the time,” to quote Lincoln, and they can wield tremendously dangerous power. They can inspire riots, violence, destruction, insurrection, not to mention loyalty, fealty, submission, indiscriminate allegiance.

Ramban tells us to read the Torah more carefully, for our own good. Ramban is Nachmanides, Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, the rabbi/philosopher/physician of 13th century Spain, and one of the keenest eyes ever to tackle the poetic and legal twists in the Torah’s playful language. Our beloved Wednesday morning study group, consisting of Rabbi Gordon Tucker, Rabbi Shira Milgrom, Rabbi Chaim Marder and myself, is spending two full years delving into Ramban’s teachings.

Ramban tells us that the Hebrew letter *lamed* in our context, *l'chavod ul'tiferet*, does not mean “for,” as in “for gravitas and for beauty.” We are off-base to think that Aaron’s garments are “for,” “so that” he can take on an air of gravitas and splendor.”

In fact, says Ramban, the garments have nothing to do with Aaron whatsoever, except insofar as they affect his psychological outlook. The garments are in place so that Aaron, or whoever serves after him in that routinized high office, **can serve gravitas and splendor *itself***. He must wear them in order to keep his eyes on the prize, as it were. He must don that uniform in order to remember that it is the abstract but nonetheless real *idea* of God’s splendor that he must serve, and in so doing set an example for his people to do the same. *Serve the Splendor*.

He must, in other words, wear the uniform to remind himself and others that he is not Phil, not God, and not even splendid. Not even important, except to the extent that he has been chosen to serve his people in an all-important way.

Why do we almost always read this parashah in conjunction with the Megillah of Esther? Why do we spend Purim reading of buffoons wearing kingly robes of royal blue and purple and crimson? Possibly to remind ourselves that neither Haman nor Ahashverosh, nor even Mordechai or Esther can ever seem to learn this evasive lesson.

The lesson is that the blue and crimson and purple uniform is ours to wear *because* we are servants, and because we have been given the extraordinary opportunity to use the power of service to good ends. And to that end, we bring the *kavod*, the gravitas, and the *tiferet*, the splendor, to the very people we humbly serve.