

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

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BH

KEEPING UP WITH THE COHENS

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Lately I have been thinking about the relative value people place on their outward appearance. This is not a merely modern problem. One's outward appearance, including one's clothing, and specifically the hem of one's garment, had great symbolic significance in the ancient and rabbinic eras. The degree of the hem's decoration was a symbol of the owner's rank and authority.

The High Priest's robe was particularly ornate and was beautiful not only to look at, but to hear, as well:

And they made upon the hems of the robe pomegranates of blue, and purple, and scarlet, and twined linen. And they made bells of pure gold, and put the bells between the pomegranates upon the hem of the robe, between the pomegranates. A bell and a pomegranate, a bell and a pomegranate, around the hem of the robe to minister in. (Exodus 39:26)

Compare this with the hem of each Israelite which only had to have four strings of tekhelet, the expensive blue dye that marked the High Priests' garments:

Speak to the Israelites and say to them that they should make fringes on the corners of their garments for the generations and put on this fringe on each corner a thread of blue. And it shall be a fringe so that you will look at them and remember all the commandments of the Lord and do them lest you follow your wanton eyes and heart to do wicked deeds. (Numbers 15:38-29)

This represents a democratizing bent in Judaism. Instead of the high being brought low, this legislation brings even the poorest person to the highest status, fulfilling the command:

You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:6)

Everyone was to take part in this "participation" in the priesthood:

Rav Yehudah attached fringes to the aprons of [the women of] his household....Our Rabbis taught: All must observe the law of tsitsit: priests, Levites and Israelites, proselytes, women and slaves. (B. Menachot 43a)

But the fringe is more than just a symbol of one's relationship with God. It is also a key of one's identity. For example, when David is on the run from Saul and Saul steps into the cave where David is hiding, David cuts off a corner of Saul's robe as proof of his having been close enough to kill the King (I Samuel 24:3-11).

The corners of our garments, then, are not only a key to our cultural identity but our personal identity as well. So, in some cultures, a husband could divorce his wife by cutting off the hem of her robe. In Mari, an ancient city in what is now Syria, a professional prophet or diviner would enclose with his report to the King a lock of his hair and a piece of his hem....Sometimes the hem was impressed on a clay tablet as a kind of signature.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do "clothes make the man"? Honestly, when do appearances count? What is the "fringe" or "corner" that is impressive today-designer brands, fancy cars, houses in certain zip codes?
2. What do our clothes say about us? What happens when we refuse to try to impress people with our appearance, hoping they will value our personal qualities instead?
3. The life of a priest (or a king, for that matter) had many advantages but many disadvantages as well. To function in the Temple, the priest had to be absolutely blemishless. Imagine what it might have been like growing up as a boy being groomed for the Temple service: no games of touch football, nothing that would leave even the tiniest scar, a more restricted pool of women from which to choose a wife. What makes the trade off worth it? Would the fancy clothes and high status be enough? Who, among today's "aristocracy" would choose to swap their money for their lives, so to speak?