

“Indeed all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” (Ex 19:5-6) Oh, goodness, what was Moses to do with that – and what are we to do with that?! A kingdom of priests and a holy nation!

I think this week’s parsha, T’zaveh, begins to answer that question; and I think it matters to us as we each spend time discerning where and how we are called to act and to live in this world.

Parshat T’zaveh is the only Torah portion, from the beginning of the book of Exodus, when Moses appears, to the end of the book of Numbers, which does not contain Moses’ name. Granted, the Torah is known as “the Five Books of Moses” so it should have a lot of Moses– but the absence of his name here is notable. What does the **absence** of Moses’ name in T’zaveh – which coincides with the absence of **God**’s name in the *Megillah* –make room **for**?

Space is made here for Aaron – the first priest, and his sons, the beginning of the priestly lineage. Very specific instructions are given [to Moses] to “make *bigdei-kodesh*, **garments of holiness** for Aharon your brother, *L’cavod ul’tiferet*, for glory and for splendor; for honor and for beauty, dignity and adornment. They were to bring in wise and skillful craftspeople, to use fabrics of gold, blue-violet, purple, and scarlet, fine linens and weaves. They were to use stones of onyx, and make braids of pure gold. The front of the Breastpiece of Judgment was inlaid with four rows of four stones, with carnelian, topaz, emerald, ruby, sapphire and onyx, agate, amethyst, jasper and jade. The descriptions continue in elaborate, glorious detail.

What do we make of this elaborate detail about the priestly garments?

1. Something about this priestly role matters, a lot, even though Aaron doesn’t have much of a voice.
2. Tending to glory, beauty, and splendor are ways to honor the divine.

3. God is in the details. (Mies Van DerRohe, great 20th c modernist architect)

This is only the beginning of the descriptions that will follow about the responsibilities of the priests. The entire center of the Torah, *Leviticus*, will go deeper into details and specifics. Many a bar/bat mitzvah student born in the late spring is deeply pained by these descriptions and the corresponding lack of narrative. Because it's true –daily rituals and details of preparation are much less dramatic, and potentially much less “interesting” than the prophetic call to free the Israelites! And yet, the daily details are where most of us live most of our lives. The moments of getting dressed, of adorning ourselves for work or play, the moments of chopping vegetables for the soup or folding and putting away the laundry- those are the places that are ripe for bringing in the priestly sort of holiness.

As I mentioned, Moses' brother Aaron is the first of the priests. Together they are the beginning of a typology that continues to today: Moses represents the prophetic voice; Aaron represents the priestly function.

The differences are fascinating, and I'm grateful to Rabbi Jonathan Sacks for enumerating them in “Covenant and Conversation.” I'm going to talk a little about the different types – but I want to remind us that like all typologies, no one fits squarely into one or the other; we all have elements of both.

Just so we're all on the same page about what we're talking about, who are some of the great Biblical prophets besides Moses? Contemporary prophets? And who were some of the great biblical priests besides Aaron? (Eliezar, Eli, Avishua, Bukki, Uzzi, Achimelech, Zadok) Yeah. So that tells us already about some of the big differences: Prophets have charismatic personalities; they express themselves through words and actions; Priests are quieter, with duties in the realm of ritual rather than driving change. Prophets and priests operate in different concepts of time: Priests operate in *cycles* of time, daily and weekly rituals, annual holiday

rituals, life cycle rituals. Prophets respond to the specific situation of their day, whether slavery in Egypt or ... slavery today.

We spend a lot of time as contemporary Reform Jews, as Shir Tikvah, tending to the prophetic call. What this week's portion reminds us is that the priestly work of bringing holiness into the ordinary is just as much part of our call as is the prophetic. As Rabbi Sachs wrote:

Without the prophet, Judaism would not be a religion of history and destiny. But without the priest, the children of Israel would not have become the people of eternity. This is beautifully summed up in the opening verses of Tetzaveh: "Command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of pressed olives, to keep the lamp constantly burning (*l'halot ner tamid*). Aaron and his sons shall keep the lamps burning before the Lord from evening to morning. This is to be a lasting ordinance among the Israelites for all time, throughout the ages." (Ex 27:20-21)

As a kingdom of priests, we are to keep the fire burning – and not burn ourselves out!! So, like the priests, may we gently bring *k'vod and tiferet*, dignity and beauty into our surroundings. May we tend to the beauty in the ordinary; may we have patience – *savlanut*- with the specifics, and may we embrace the seasons and the cycles of daily life. Shabbat shalom.