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Parashat T'tzaveh / Shabbat Zachor

Putting on the Megillah

Many of you were here earlier for our annual Purimshpiel. Our Wicked-themed play follows a long tradition of silly performances of the Purim story – and these shpiels are among the earliest examples of the regular integration of theater into Jewish life. Purim lends itself naturally to theater, as the Book of Esther is suffused with themes of pretense, costume, and role. And as we discussed at our congregational retreat last weekend, the five main characters of the story—the monstrous Ahashuerus and his scapegoat wife Vashti, the villainous advisor Haman, the sage, Mordecai, and the heroine, Esther—all represent classic character profiles that we find in many compelling stories, both ancient and modern. So it wasn't only fun to put on a costume and prance around onstage—it's also a natural part of telling this story in a lively and exciting way.

Though Purim is the main context in Judaism for **theater** *per se*, **drama** is a very ancient part of our religion. All of our rituals involve some element of drama, and the grandest of them—such as funerals, weddings, and the Yom Kippur service—are replete with dramatic flourish. This week's Torah portion adds to the dramatic palette of our tradition by describing in detail the sacred clothing designed to be worn by the priests during their worship in the sanctuary. God tells Moses, "Make holy garments for Aaron, your brother, for honor and glory. … And they shall be upon Aaron and his sons when they come to the Tent of Meeting or when they approach the altar to serve in the sanctuary" (Ex. 28:2, 43). These are, in effect, the costumes of the priesthood.

The text invites us to imagine the priests donning the sacred vestments, which belong to the order of priests generally and not to any particular person individually. The clothes are to be worn only during the priestly service, and the priestly service can only be conducted by one wearing these clothes. Bible scholar Baruch Schwartz calls these garments "sacred equipment,"[1] essentially bound to the priests' role as conduit between the Israelites and their god.

We might envy the priests for their exceptional access to divine spaces and the magnificent trappings of their office. On the other hand, we might pity them for their lack of freedom and individuality, as each one is expected to dress, act, and serve just like every other priest who has gone before or will come after. For better and for worse, the priest's clothes are literally the mantle of religious leadership, and wearing them creates both transcendence and loss of self.

On Shabbat Zachor, at this intersection in the Jewish calendar between preparing for Purim and reading about the priestly garments, we might reflect on how costumes—both chosen and imposed—show up in our own lives as well.

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[1] "The Garments of the High Priest: Anthropomorphism in the Worship of God," https://www.thetorah.com/article/garments-of-the-high-priest-anthropomorphism-in-the-worship-of-god .

For instance, you need not literally dress up as characters from the Megillah in order to ask: when do I play the roles I see portrayed in this perpetually relevant story? When am I a slave to my own appetite, like the king, or a reckless champion for my ideals, like Mordecai? When, like Haman, does my own self-interest drive me to lash out at others; and when, like Esther, do I strive to make the right choice even if it puts me in harm's way? Reading this story every year, and reconnecting with its sheer theatricality, reminds us that we can often choose the roles we inhabit, emphasizing or diminishing aspects of ourselves in different ways at different times.

And, on the other hand, we also find ourselves, from time to time, handed a proverbial costume and instructed to perform. When are we shrouded in duty, subsuming our individuality for the greater good; and when do we submit to a higher purpose even if it requires taking on the lives and stories of people we've never met?

In either case—whether we're playing roles by choice or doing what's expected of us—it might seem that, in taking on the persona of someone else, we lose a part of ourselves. However, losing ourselves can actually be completely freeing. Perhaps this is a lesson we learn from the absence of the name of God in the Megillah – by not mentioning God, the text intimates that God might be lurking behind every coincidence and occasion. And in this week's Torah portion, too, Moses's name does not appear, though he is the unspoken object of many of the *parasha*'s commands. So too for us: when our name is buried, when we find ourselves acting a role assigned to us or taken on by choice but not typical of our usual behavior, we might, ironically, activate or simply notice parts of own deepest selves in new and profound ways.

Because really, it is me doing this or that, even if I attribute my behavior to my costume or role. When we choose to be brave like Esther or selfish like Haman, we draw from real reservoirs of our true selves. And when we wear the clothes of an office—such as a government or military official or a bride or groom or a petitioner before the court—we do so *as ourselves*, just in a context we don't normally access. Our personality pulses in the interplay between identity and action. As we try out new voices and try on new roles, we bring to life parts of ourselves we might never, or at least not often, see.

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It will come as no surprise that I love to act. I love putting on the winged monkey costume—or the High Holy Day robe—and expressing deep and important parts of myself that emerge, so to speak, onstage. And these public roles also give voice to the private experiences that I have and that everyone has of taking on and putting away costumes and roles, day in and day out. Purim invites us to put on masks, and as we do, we may uncover a part of ourselves that's usually hidden away. This is an invitation as divine as the one offered to the priests, to wrap ourselves in garments of glory and honor, and to discover even in places where our name can't be found how we might, as our own true selves, appear.