Priestly Garments and Gettysburg

Parashat Pekudei, Exodus, Chapters 38-40 | March 3, 2022

On November 19, 1863, Americans gathered in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to listen to what they hoped would be one of the extraordinary addresses in American history. The man to whom they were listening was the orator Edward Everett, who spoke for several hours. Following the main event, the President of the United States stood up and delivered several sentences that would somehow succinctly capture not only the meaning of the moment, but also the essence of the American experiment. But how exactly did he say it, and what exactly did he say? The answer tells us something profound—not only about Lincoln, but about the political perspective of the Bible itself.

The end of Exodus turns to the creation of the garments of the *kohanim*, the priests who minister within the Holy. Most are adorned in a simple set of four pieces of clothing. But the High Priest wears magnificent garments of the finest fabrics:

> *And he made the ephod of gold, blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine twined linen.* (Exodus 39:2)

What is the intention of this *ephod*? When we examine it, a political theme also introduces itself. The *ephod* is a kind of apron, hanging from two shoulder pieces with onyx stones, on which are emblazoned the names of the twelve tribes of Israel:

> *And they wrought onyx stones inclosed in ouches of gold, graven, as signets are graven, with the names of the children of Israel...* (Exodus 39:6)

The inscriptions of Israel are to be joined as one, half on one side, half on the other. But also attached to these stones, covering the chest, the heart of the High Priest, is the *choshen*, the breastplate, displaying twelve different, individual gems, each engraved with a tribal name:

> *And the stones were according to the names of the children of Israel, twelve, according to their names, like the engravings of a signet, every one with his name, according to the twelve tribes.* (Exodus 39:14)

Thus, the jewels serve as an ornamental embodiment of the Israelite polity. But whereas on the onyx shoulder stones the names are undifferentiated, here each is different, emblazoned on a unique stone.

> *And they set in it four rows of stones: the first row was a sardius, a topaz, and a carbuncle: this was the first row.*
>
> *And the second row, an emerald, a sapphire, and a diamond.*
>
> *And the third row, a ligure, an agate, and an amethyst.*
>
> *And the fourth row, a beryl, an onyx, and a jasper: they were inclosed in ouches of gold in their inclosings.* (Exodus 39:10-13)

This is the breastplate: each stone singular and separate, with its own luminance and luster; but only joined is the true aesthetic effect achieved. The *choshen* provides an embodiment of Israel in which difference is recognized, with its many members and tribes blessed with varied vocations that enhance each other.

In unpacking further what precisely this is intended to teach, we must ponder not only this glorious garment but also the man designated to wear it. On whose heart would the breastplate rest? Who is the designated High Priest? It is Aaron, brother of Moses. In what did Aaron's worthiness lie? Why was he elected for the high priesthood? Why was it forever affiliated with his family?

The answer, as some suggest, can be found in God's statement at the beginning of Exodus. Standing before the burning bush, Moses balked at the Divine's calling, feeling inadequate for the task of leadership, and only agreed to take on the Divine charge when he was informed that his elder brother would join him and represent him before Pharaoh. God's words back in Exodus 4:14 are important to review. The Almighty says:

> *...Is not Aaron the Levite thy brother? I know that he can speak well, and also, behold, he cometh forth to meet thee, and when he seeth thee, he will be glad in his heart.*

Note here how the heart of Aaron is emphasized. The Almighty not only assures Moses that his brother will speak on his behalf, but also that he will *rejoice* in doing so. It is all too easy to miss the magnitude of this verse. Every ancient society has an origin tale of fratricide and sibling rivalry. Divinely revealed Scripture gives us Cain killing Abel, Judah kidnapping Joseph. Pagan myths describe Romulus killing Remus in Rome, Osiris killing Set. In Exodus, we are told that when Aaron, among the elite of Israel, finds out that his long lost younger brother has been chosen to be the most important Israelite in history, there will be nothing but happiness in Aaron's heart.

It may well have been this one act, this joyous greeting given to Moses, that merited Aaron the high priesthood. Aaron was informed that his brother—who had grown up not in slavery, but in splendor, not in poverty, but in palaces—had been chosen to lead the Israelites, and he responded without the slightest trace of envy. Given what we know from Genesis, we might have expected Aaron to act with resentment. "Why," he might have thought, "should I, the eldest, serve as *his* assistant, *his* spokesman to Pharaoh?"

But no—Exodus is not Genesis. Here is a man who does not define his success by the achievements of others. He is a man who seeks to use his God-given talents to their fullest, even as he rejoices when others do the same. Aaron does not begrudge Moses his fame. The origins of Israel's polity will not be Romulus and Remus. It will not even parallel the tensions of Jacob and Esau, or Joseph and Judah. Moses only becomes who he is called to be, he only embraces his own identity, because of Aaron's embrace.

Moments such as these, devoid of envy, are rare in the history of nations, though they do occur. Doris Kearns Goodwin's book *Team of Rivals*, describes the relationship between Lincoln and the members of his cabinet who had previously sought to lead the Republican Party. Most interesting, to my mind, is the example of William Seward, Lincoln's Secretary of State. Seward, a prominent politician, had had every reason to expect the presidential nomination of his party, and was surely chagrined to serve as a cabinet member to a seeming political neophyte. At the beginning of Lincoln's term, during the Fort Sumter crisis, Seward wrote a memorandum that seemed to unconstitutionally infringe on the president's authority.

Lincoln at this point could have fired him. Goodwin cites an earlier biography of Lincoln that reflects:

> Had Mr. Lincoln been an envious or resentful man, he could not have wished for a better occasion to put a rival under his feet.

But Lincoln did not do this, and Seward himself ultimately became the president's chief spokesman, an admirer and dear friend of Lincoln's, working to effectuate Lincoln's vision. He became, as it were, an Aaron to the redeemer president, overcoming all earlier envy, devoting his extraordinary talents wholeheartedly to the greater good—and the republic was better for it. This then is the meaning of the breastplate's precise placement:

> *And Aaron shall bear the names of the children of Israel in the breastplate of judgment upon his heart, when he goeth in unto the holy place, for a memorial before the Lord continually.* (Exodus 28:29)

Moses' brother, who in Egypt rejoiced in his heart, will now bear the breastplate on his heart. In integrated unity, but still dazzling diversity, placed on

the loving heart of Aaron himself, the breastplate's jeweled splendor embodies an aspiration for Israel, one eloquently enunciated by Lincoln in his Second Inaugural:

> With malice toward none, with charity for all...

This is how Israelites are asked to see one another. Aaron alone can demand it; Aaron alone can embody this aspiration. For he is the first elder biblical brother to eschew envy, to find his own role in God's providential plan, and he thereby can ask all Israel to do the same.

But what can inspire us to imitate Aaron? The answer, for the Bible, begins with faith. In the play, *A Man for All Seasons*, a character who desires fame and power is told by Thomas More to become a schoolteacher. And he asks, "But who would know?"

Thomas More responds, "You, your students, and God... Not a bad audience that."

Envy, as the medieval Jewish exegete Abraham Ibn Ezra argues, is ultimately a lack of faith, because it reflects a focus on what others have, rather than a focus on living meaningfully in one's own life, on behalf of the audience that matters most. One must believe in a providential plan before one seeks one's own part to play within it.

And this in turn brings us to another garment of Aaron's, one which adorns his head, rather than his heart:

> *And they made the plate of the holy crown of pure gold, and wrote upon it a writing, like to the engravings of a signet, Holy Unto The Lord.* (Exodus 39:30)

A headband, or crown, is worn by the High Priest, known as the *tzitz*. It too radiates splendor, but unlike the breastplate, it bears not the names of Israel's tribes, but rather the ineffable appellation of the Almighty.

The breastplate represents the polity; the golden crown of the High Priest is a symbol of God's sovereignty. But the latter is worn *above* the former. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik suggested that this emphasizes the preeminence of the spiritual over the political; not because the political is unimportant, but precisely because it is vital, and therefore its own relationship with the spiritual is so critical. The High Priest, one might argue, personifies the Israelite polity, and in the precise placement of these two glorious garments, the *tzitz* above the breastplate, we are given not only sartorial splendor, but also the ultimate embodiment of a nation under God.

Here, we can find an unexpected connection between the priestly garments and Gettysburg. In dedicating the graves of the fallen soldiers, Lincoln declared famously,

> ...that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Two words, "under God," inspire further reflection. The drama of Lincoln's life is that of a man who was once known as the local agnostic, who, caught in the maelstrom of bloodshed that was the Civil War, came to seek theological meaning in the providence of God. In the drafts of the address written by Lincoln before it was delivered, the words "under God" do not appear in Lincoln's hand; but every copy that Lincoln wrote out of the address after that day does contain them. Moreover, the newspaper transcript from the reporters that were there confirms that Lincoln specified that "this nation, *under God*, shall have a new birth of freedom." All this indicates (and I am grateful to my friend Harold Holzer for inspiring this part of my reflection) that while Lincoln had not initially intended to invoke the Divine, nevertheless, overcome in the emotion of the moment, Lincoln added these two words, transforming a speech that originally elided a direct reference to the Almighty into a biblically-inspired speech for the ages. Lincoln had come to see that only if we saw ourselves as a nation under God, could we understand that as a nation we are judged, and as a nation we are punished, and that only as a nation under God could we come together.

After describing the glorious garments of the High Priest, Exodus describes how Moses is to anoint Aaron for the High Priesthood. Moses the redeemer suddenly spiritually celebrates and sanctifies his elder brother, inspiring the exquisite statement of Psalms:

> *Behold, how pleasant it is when brothers dwell together!* (Psalms 133:1)

With envy toward none, with a role in God's providential plan for all—this, in the end, is what the priestly garments ask of us. This is what the heart of the High Priest asks of us, this is what Aaron asks of us. The laws of the Temple and Tabernacle may seem initially irrelevant to our lives, but once again they teach a lesson that is eternal, and which will therefore not perish from the earth.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why doesn't Aaron envy Moses the way so many other biblical brothers envy each other? Do you think it has to do with his unique character? Could it have to do with the unique circumstances in which Moses and Aaron were raised (separated at Moses' birth, enslaved in a foreign land, etc.)?

2. Rabbi Soloveichik notes how William Seward grew to overcome his negative attitude toward President Lincoln and become close to him. Aaron, however, seems not ever to have had negative feelings toward Moses. What can we learn from each of these examples: the man who overcomes envy and the man who seems free of jealousy from the start?