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## Humility and the Soul of Incense

This week's Torah portion ends with the construction of the Golden Altar, the *Mizbeiach Hazahav*, upon which *ketores*, incense, was burnt every morning and evening. The placement of this section is striking, for its rightful place seems to be four chapters earlier, in Parashas Terumah, where the details of all the other sacred vessels of the Tabernacle are explained. Why does the Torah leave the Golden Altar for the very end of the next Torah portion?

The burning of the incense represents the highest level of service to God; it is the pinnacle that can only come after all else is in place. (1) The Torah hints to the lofty status of the incense by describing the Golden Altar as "*kodesh kodashim hu laShem - holy of holies to God*" (Exodus 30:10), whereas the Copper Altar is referred to only as "holy of holies" (20:37).

The exalted status of the incense is reinforced by the fact that the primary sense involved in

its burning is the sense of smell, the most spiritual of all the five senses. As the Talmud says, "Rav Zutra bar Toviyah said in the name of Rav: From where is it derived that we recite a blessing over a fragrance? As it is stated: 'Let every soul praise God.' What is something from which the soul derives pleasure but the body does not? You must say that this is the pleasure of smell" (*Berachos* 43b). Smell is the sense of the soul.

The Maharsha explains that smell is more spiritual than our other senses since it was through Adam's nose that Hashem invested mankind with a soul, as it says, "He blew into his nostrils the soul of life; and man became a living being" (*Bereishis* 2:7).

## Slaying the Ego

We find a unique halachah regarding the Golden Altar: Unlike the other services of the Holy Temple, the incense can still be offered even after if the altar was uprooted. (See Rambam, *Hilchos Temidim U'Musafim* 3:2, and *Zevachim* 59a.) Therefore, even without the altar, one can still burn it in its place. On a symbolic level, we can still access the power of the incense by applying this sacrifice to our daily lives.

The incense, that sublime spiritual offering, represents transcending one's physical limitations and sense of self. Burning the incense is the ultimate sacrifice because it represents giving up the most important but least tangible part of who you are - namely, your sense of self-importance. It symbolizes transcending your subjective view of what is important and channeling this drive towards doing God's will. It stems from recognizing that the only true meaning in life is attained through sacrificing your personal agenda to become a vehicle to express God's eternal will. All else is really trivial and fleeting. Just as the incense becomes intermingled with the surrounding air, you, too, can become one with the Almighty by transcending your artificial

sense of meaning and importance and embracing Hashem's meaning and purpose.

## The Way to Get There

The way to reach this sublime level is through humility.

Most people have a mistaken understanding of what humility is. By way of illustration, imagine a person who is the paragon of humility walking into your home. How do you picture him? Meek, slightly hunched over, self-effacing, someone who hides in the back of a room, too shy to engage in conversation. Yet who was the most humble of all people? The Torah tells us, "Now the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any person on the face of the earth" (*Bamidbar* 12:3.) Can you imagine Moses walking into your home? The entire house would shake! He was the most powerful, charismatic leader in Jewish history, yet he is the paradigm of humility. Clearly, our concept of humility is wrong.

Humility does not mean denigrating your strengths and denying your inner greatness. It means recognizing that your strengths and inner greatness are a gift from Hashem. An arrogant person thinks it is all about him and all because of him. He has to work hard to keep up the façade that he has everything under control, when deep down he is consumed with doubt and insecurity.

In contrast, the humble person realizes it is all about God and all from God. He rises above petty concerns and does not care about gaining people's approval. He cares only about utilizing the gifts Hashem has given him to tackle the world's problems and make a real difference in people's lives. Humility actually generates charisma, because by nullifying your ego you attach yourself to God and become a conduit for His unlimited resources. No problem is unmanageable with God on your side.

## You are a Soul, Not a Body

The *Chovos Halevavos* teaches that the essence of humility is to live with the realization that you are a soul, not a body. The *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination, trips us up by getting us to identify with the physical, animalistic side of us that is a cauldron of raging desires and egotistical self-centeredness. When we live with the awareness that we are a lofty soul that yearns for meaning and connection to the Almighty, we gain the clarity to make the proper choices that create a deeply fulfilling life.

The battle for life is the battle for sanity. When we follow the dictates of the body we hurt ourselves and create a hollowed-out existence of degradation and shame. When we live as a soul we tap into the power of genuine meaning and pleasure. Every day, identify with the soul, not the body, by remembering that your body is a mass of bones, flesh, and skin that will one day be buried and disintegrate into nothing, whereas your soul is pure and stems from the Infinite Source of existence. It longs to return to its eternal source. All the pain and aggravation that your body feels, and all the sensations and physical pleasures it experiences, are fleeting and temporal. Your soul is eternal and the spiritual growth it attains in this world will last forever.

Like the incense's sublime power to reach spiritual heights, the path of humility enables us to connect to the soul's yearning for ultimate meaning.

1. The Abarbanel states that the burning of the incense was the most spiritual and holy of all the services performed in the Temple.



## Reflecting Light

Light is necessary for the survival of life. Without light, the Earth would be completely cold and dark, and vegetation could not exist.

Light can be produced from a source, but also can be reflected by another object. The moon's light is a reflection of the sun's light. There is also a different form of light: spiritual light. The Jewish People are compared to the moon. Just as the moon is illuminated by the sun, so too, the Jewish People are illuminated by God's infinite light and reflect it outward. The Torah given to us by God at Har Sinai is the perfect reflection of its Giver.

Light is a symbol for that which allows us to see, to know, and to understand. When there is light, we need not stumble along the obstacle course called life. The Torah's light provides us with insight and wisdom. It enables us to clarify concepts, integrate ideas, and clearly see reality. As corrective lenses are for the eyes, the Torah is for the soul; it maximizes the soul's inner vision.

The *Mishkan's Menorah*, candelabra, symbolizes multidimensional concepts, among them being the light of the Torah. Because the Torah's light is sacred, everything used to create the *Menorah's* flame is significant. From its placement in the *Mishkan* to the way it was kindled, every detail is precise. We were instructed to place the *Menorah* "outside the partition that is near the testimonial tablets."<sup>93</sup> Why outside the partition? The light of Torah should influence

us not only when inside the sanctuary involved in study and prayer but "outside the partition" as well. The Torah's light extends outward to guide our actions while at home, at work, and in our daily interactions.

*And you should command the children of Israel that they shall take for you pressed pure olive oil for illumination, to kindle the lamp until it burns continually.*

Only pure olive oil can be used for lighting the *Menorah*. A deeper meaning reveals that we must safeguard the Torah's light so that it is not influenced negatively by ideas that would compromise its purity. Once kindled, its flame must burn brightly. The Torah's teachings must be fully absorbed so that they will ignite an inner flame that will glow outward. Likewise, parents and educators must patiently and persistently strive to teach children Torah in a way that is both motivating and relevant.

The olives are to be pressed so that pure oil will emerge for lighting the *Menorah*. We can learn a great lesson from a small olive. Only when it's pressed can the olive produce pure oil to fuel the infinite light of holiness. When pressed, its value is not diminished but is elevated and increased. We can emulate the olive. It's specifically when we are pressed that the greatest strength which can light the darkness can emerge. Pain can be transformed to a greater purpose.

When King Solomon built the Beis Hamikdash (the Holy Temple) in Jerusalem, the architecture was influenced by the *Menorah*. Scripture states that "he made narrowing windows for the Beis Hamikdash." Windows were typically constructed to be wider toward the inside of a building so that the light from the outside would be diffused throughout the room. The Talmud cites a *Beraisa* that explains that in the Beis Hamikdash, the windows were wide on the exterior and narrow in the interior.

This symbolized that the Beis Hamikdash didn't need light—as it was illuminated by God's Presence—and that Presence was so strong that it could even light up the world outside the Beis Hamikdash.

The *Menorah* also symbolizes the nation of Israel and its mission to be “a light unto the nations.” The prophet Yeshayah (Isaiah) envisioned that God would restore the Jewish People to their ancestral homeland. This return will cause all of the nations to open their eyes to the Divine light of the one God of Israel. “A light unto the nations” is a designation of the Jewish People's collective role: to be spiritual and moral mentors to the entire world.

Torah is the source of Judaism. Through the Torah and its teachings, we serve as a “light unto the nations.” The Torah's guiding light provides an ethical and moral compass with which to navigate the most complicated and challenging life issues. Its instruction and guidance speak to each individual, as well as to the Jewish People as a whole. These meanings mesh together seamlessly and share an integrated meaning. As King Solomon described, “A mitzvah is a candle, and Torah, light.” Indeed, Torah is the source of spiritual illumination in the world. Embedded in its name is the Hebrew word for illumination and light: *orah*.

Always within our grasp, the Torah's light can help guide us toward our destination with greater positivity and faith. May we strive to actualize the Torah's wisdom, more and more, throughout our lives.

## Making It Relevant

1. Contemplate how you can reflect the Torah's light and wisdom. Choose to do so.
2. Increase your home's spiritual value. Don't allow negative influences, which could be toxic to your or others' souls, inside.

3. Conduct your own spiritual reality check. If you're feeling stressed and crushed by your challenges, find purpose in your pain. Amplify your inner light and shine it toward others.



## Beauty and the Kohanim

The Talmud tells the following story:

The great sage Rabbi Yehoshua was the **epitome of wisdom and kindness**. Which is why a Roman countess was so stunned when she met him and found that he was **so physically unattractive**. The countess commented on the tremendous contrast between his inside and outside. In response, Rabbi Yehoshua suggested that she pour some of her most precious wine into gold containers. She did this, and a few days later discovered (to her horror) that the wine had spoiled.

Rabbi Yehoshua explained that he meant to demonstrate how oftentimes a **beautiful external appearance can ruin a more important internal aspect**. The countess replied in protest that she knew many handsome men who were also good and wise! Rabbi Yehoshua responded that had these men not been so handsome, they might have been even more wise and kind!

While Rabbi Yehoshua clearly made his point, the issue is, of course, far more complex. For instance, the Torah itself notes the physical

beauty of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. Surely the Torah is not telling us of their limited greatness! Moreover, in Jewish mysticism, physical appearance is considered **reflective of a deeper spiritual makeup**. (The Kabbalists explain further that at the time of the Messiah, a person's physical appearance will reflect the level of enlightenment that their soul has achieved.)

As with so many other things, beauty is a double-edged sword. In the hands of such lofty individuals as the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, it was a device to help them attract others to learn about God. But in the hands of less erstwhile people, it can be an obstacle, proving a true hindrance to spiritual growth. For example, if a girl grows up constantly hearing compliments about her beautiful facial features, will she perhaps be **a bit less motivated** to develop other, inner aspects of her personality?

King Solomon said: *"Attractiveness is a lie, and beauty is worthless; but one who fears God is to be praised"* (Proverbs 31:30). On this, the Vilna Gaon (18th century Lithuania) explains: "Attractiveness is a lie, and beauty is worthless" when there is nothing else, nothing more substantial to back it up. But when "fear of God" is also present, then even the beauty is to be praised!

The issue of beauty is central to this week's Torah portion, Tetzaveh, which discusses the priestly garments worn in the Holy Temple. The Torah notes that the special clothes of the High Priest were for *"glory and majesty,"* which Nachmanides says were similar to clothes worn by a king.

The Sefer HaChinuch explains that the magnificence and beauty of the Temple served to inspire awe in the hearts of all who came, and as such brought them closer to God. In such an environment, anything that was **less than "beautiful" would be out of place and detract from the surroundings**. This

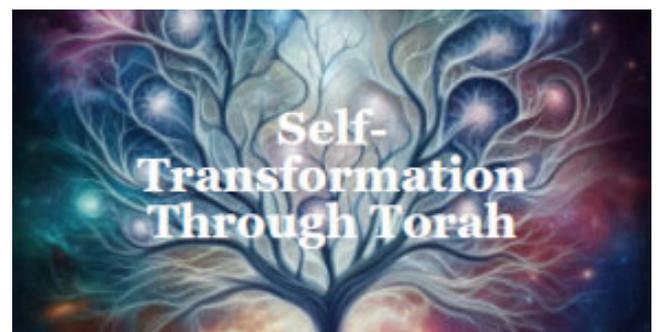
helps explain why Jewish law required that when the priest's clothing became soiled they could not be laundered and reused - but had to be replaced by new garments.

The Torah also says it is forbidden for a Kohen (priest) who has certain distinctive blemishes to serve in the Holy Temple. Is this because due to his blemish he is less beloved by God?!

Of course not. The reason why a Kohen with a physical imperfection was not allowed to serve in the Temple was because of visitors who may experience a loss of respect for the Temple as a result of **being distracted by the blemished Kohen**. God Himself does not look at the blemished Kohen with less respect; rather the Torah took into account the imperfect nature of people and realized that it was unrealistic to expect each visitor who came to the Temple to **focus only on the soul** of the blemished Kohen - even though that is the proper way to look at someone.

Precisely because it was God's house, everything in the Temple had to be beautiful. The menorah, the ark, and the other vessels in the Temple had to be beautiful. Even the priests themselves had to be of handsome appearance, since they were, so to speak, also "vessels" in God's Temple.

The beauty of the Temple is perhaps the best possible use of beauty: to remind us of the genius of **the ultimate architect, the Creator**.



## Dress for Success

The suit makes the man, or so they say. But in Judaism, it goes much deeper - clothing makes us human.

When God became the first fashion designer in the Garden of Eden, it wasn't about protection from the elements or even modesty alone. It was about something far more profound. In this week's Torah portion, this divine design philosophy reaches its peak with the High Priest's garments, crafted for "honor (*Kavod*) and beauty (*Tiferet*)."<sup>1</sup>

What secrets lie within these carefully chosen words? And what can they teach us about the clothes we wear today?

### The Original Cover Story

To understand clothes, we must go back to their origin. Adam and Eve were born naked and unashamed. The Sforno explains why: "They used their limbs solely for the service of their Maker, not the pursuit of base pleasures. Therefore, they considered marital relations no different than eating and drinking and their reproductive organs no different than their mouth or hands."<sup>2</sup>

The Zohar reveals that Adam and Eve were originally beings of pure light, their physicality barely visible. But everything changed with one bite of forbidden fruit. After the sin, their bodies became dense and corporeal, hiding all but a trace of their spiritual essence. Their bodies had transformed from instruments of divine service into triggers for animalistic desires. Suddenly, Adam and Eve felt shame.

To help them cope with their degradation and temper their newly awakened passions, God made them clothes. The Hebrew word for clothing, "*beget*," shares its root with "*boged*" - meaning traitor.<sup>3</sup> After the sin, physicality became a betrayer of our true essence. So we

sent in our own double agent - clothes - to redirect focus from our animalistic tendencies back to our divine core.

### Adornments of Honor and Robes of Royalty

This brings us to the High Priest's garments and their dual purpose: *Kavod* (honor) and *Tiferet* (beauty). *Kavod* is about revelation - not of the body, but of the soul. Think about it - do any of us really want to be loved for our looks? Our height? Our physique? No! We want others to appreciate our values, wisdom, and character. It's why traditional Jewish dress covers everything but the face and hands, our primary tools of expression.<sup>4</sup> This is *Kavod* - honor that reveals our spiritual essence.

But *Tiferet* reminds us that aesthetics matter. The High Priest's garments weren't just modest - they were magnificent.<sup>5</sup>

When I first came to yeshiva, my wardrobe consisted of athletic shorts and t-shirts. Comfort was king. But as I grew in observance, I began to understand that my clothing reflected my dignity. Imagine visiting a kingdom where the prince wore rags. What would that say about the king?<sup>6</sup> When you represent of the King of Kings, you dress for the position. *Tiferet* - beauty - isn't about attracting attention to our bodies; it's about reflecting the majesty of Whom we represent.<sup>7</sup>

### Dress for Success

During the Industrial Revolution, the productivity-obsessed society looked down on full-time Torah scholars. Concerned for his student's low self-image, Rabbi Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the headmaster of the Slabodka Yeshiva, took every new student shopping for the sharpest fashion available. When his students questioned him on this uncommon practice, he responded "The mission of the yeshiva is to bring out the greatness of each

and every person.” By dressing his students as the spiritual aristocracy they were meant to be, he helped them become exactly that. His legacy? The majority of today's Torah scholars trace their lineage back to his yeshiva.<sup>8</sup>

In today's world of Instagram filters and endless selfies, we've lost the art of true self-expression. We reveal our bodies while hiding our souls. But Jewish wisdom offers a different path: Use clothes not as a mask, but as a lens - one that brings your inner light into focus.

Your spiritual wardrobe refresh starts with two principles. First, *Kavod*: Let your clothes help others see past your physical shell to your true essence. Second, *Tiferet*: Carry yourself with the dignity of someone who represents divine royalty.

This week, choose one aspect of how you present yourself - your dress or your conduct - and add a touch more refinement. Not for fashion's sake, but for the sake of properly expressing who you really are. Because when we dress with purpose, we don't just change our appearance - we bring honor and beauty to ourselves, our people, and our Creator.

Shabbat Shalom!  
Avraham

*Inspired by the class of my Rosh Yeshiva,  
Rabbi Gershenfeld*

1. Shemos 28:2
2. Sforno on Genesis 2:25
3. The word for clothing in the Torah is "*Begeg*." There are two important insights we can draw out from this word. The first is that, in verb form, the word means betrayal. A "*boged*" is a traitor. Clothes hint back to the original reason for clothes - our betrayal of Hashem. In fact, Rabbi Sacks brings a whole list of different ways that clothes are associated with betrayal in the Torah: "There were the coverings of fig leaves Adam and Eve made for themselves after eating the forbidden fruit. Jacob wore Esau's clothes when he took his blessing by deceit. Tamar wore the clothes of a prostitute to deceive Judah into lying with her. The brothers used Joseph's bloodstained cloak to deceive their father into thinking he had been killed by a wild animal. Potiphar's wife used the cloak Joseph had left behind as evidence for her false claim that he had tried to rape her. (Joseph himself took advantage of his Viceroy's clothing to conceal his

identity from his brothers when they came to Egypt to buy food - I don't like this example as much as the others because there's no explicit mention of it in the Torah). So it is exceptionally unusual that the Torah should now concern itself in a positive way with clothes, garments, vestments. The very word reveals this fact: *Begeg* is made up of Beis, Gimmel, and Daled - the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th letter of the Hebrew alphabet. What's missing? The Aleph. Aleph is the first letter, representing the Oneness, the Ineffable - Hashem (for more on this idea, [see Rabbi Marcus' absolutely brilliant exploration of the letter Aleph](#)). That's what Adam and Eve ignored when they sinned. To fix up the effects of their sin, they needed to use clothes.

4. The other word for clothing is "*Lavush*." Our sages teach us that this is a contraction of the words "*Lo bosh*" - Don't be embarrassed
5. The Sforno teaches that the High Priest's beautiful garments inspired awe among the people
6. The Talmud teaches that a Torah scholar who goes outside with a stain on his shirt is worthy of the death penalty (not meant to be taken literally, but the message is clear!).
7. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, the great 19th century Torah leader of Germany, explains that *Kavod* (כבוד) refers to the aspect of clothing which reveals the spiritual and moral content of a person, whereas *Tiferet* also clothing the that requirement the sets (תפארת) satisfy the sense of beauty, in that they decoratively distinguish the High Priest in his position.
8. There's another absolutely magnificent story of the late Rabbi Shimon Schwab: On Shushan Purim 1936, the Rav was the subject of a libelous accusation that he had, in one of his sermons, publicly maligned Hitler, yemach shemo, and was brought before the Gestapo to explain himself. Making direct eye contact with the Nazi official, he forcefully explained that this was an outright lie. He had used the German word "vermittler" in his disparagement of the sin of the Golden Calf, which a spy had misunderstood as "Hitler." After this explanation, he was told that his case would be reviewed and that he would be advised of the outcome. Needless to say, the Rav feared for his life after that meeting. The Rav records in his diary that he was advised in the middle of lyar that the matter had been dropped. During this period of some two months, the Rav slept only fitfully, with his clothes on, for fear that he would be arrested in the middle of the night, taken to jail, or out in the woods to be beaten and left to die - as had already occurred to several others. If this was to be his fate, he would face it with dignity - and with his clothes on - as would befit that of a Jewish leader.