



## Tzav 2022

### The Clothes Make the Man

5 minute read | Straightforward

From all over the world, Jews would come to the Mishkan and Beis HaMikdash for spiritual healing and engagement with the divine transcendence. Offering services far beyond the regular public programming and sacrifices, the Kohanim, the priests on duty, would attend to people's private spiritual needs, helping them bring sacrificial offerings to find atonement or thanksgiving, whatever their personal circumstances.

The Torah describes a plain and simple uniform that all on-duty Kohanim would wear: linen shorts with a matching long-robed shirt, with a belt and turban.

The uniform was deliberately modest and minimal, but like all dress codes, uniforms pose a challenge. The way we choose to dress is a form of self-expression; doesn't imposing a uniform dress code stifle individuality and human freedom?

To be sure, clothing is an essential form of self-expression, and self-expression is vital to emotional growth and wellbeing. We use freedom of expression, including clothing choice, to cultivate the ability to make all manner of choices about how we express ourselves, an integral part of learning a wider responsibility for our choices and healthy personal development in general. If you've ever seen a child put up a big fight about getting dressed, you've seen just how important it is, emotionally speaking, to be able to control your own outward appearance as part of being in control of your identity. There should be no question that you can definitely tell something about a person as reflected in how they dress. While imprecise, it's directionally accurate.

Yet, be that as it may, the nature of a public-facing service job is that you have to check yourself at the door somewhat. There's plenty of time for self-expression, but it might not be the right moment to express yourself in all your fullness when a client or patient requires your advice and compassion.

Humans have certain behaviors hardcoded into our biological makeup – we make snap judgments from very thin slices of information, including the conclusions we draw from the way someone dresses. These are powerful drives, and we'd be lying to ourselves if we thought we could suppress subconscious instincts; they are sub-conscious. So while there are plenty of highly successful or learned people who avoid formal wear on principle and achieve incredible heights wearing gym clothes and flip flops; the fact remains that when you're trying to impress, regardless of your merits, everyone knows you're better off in a suit than pajamas.



How someone dresses is, of course, not a reliable or proper way to judge a person at all, but the fact remains that appearances matter. If you're sitting in the emergency room with a troubling health concern, it might throw you off a little if the doctor walks in with ripped jeans and spiky chains over a tank top. He's still the same doctor whether in scrubs or a clown costume, but what that means then, is that scrubs aren't just for the doctor; the scrubs are also for you.

When you're at the hospital, and you see someone in scrubs in the hallway, you instantly know an incredible amount of relevant and useful information about that person – they work at the hospital, they know their way around the building, they know a lot about health and the human body, they can direct you where you're trying to go. But most importantly, you know they're there to help you; the hospital dress code utilizes nonverbal communication to foster a sense of comfort and gravity that helps patients and their families feel comfortable and at ease, all before a single word needs to be said.

And it's no different for spiritual health and wellbeing.

The Torah mandates a simple dress code for on-duty Kohanim, consisting of a plain and simple uniform, spirit scrubs if you like, out of concern for the weary and troubled souls who came from far and near.

Dress codes are effective. Dress codes work. While it's not an absolute and immutable law, it is a pretty good rule of thumb, a heuristic that primes us to act a certain way. And to be sure, what we're discussing is absolutely superficial – the textbook definition, in fact – but that's human nature and psychology; we have a strong bias and inclination towards the superficial. The way you present yourself matters.

Dress codes level the playing field by peeling away the distractions, removing barriers to people getting what they need. Uniforms aren't intimidating in the way fancy clothes are; uniforms aren't off-putting the way old, raggedy clothes are. Everyone on duty appears equal, at least in an outward sense. Uniforms also create a psychological bond, building a group identity that motivates individuals to do more; you see this in the military, police, school, and work. It can help engender feelings of support: you see others working with you, and you recognize that they aren't just doing it as individuals for personal reasons. When you are servicing the public, it is not about you because you are specifically not representing yourself. Tellingly, the uniforms were procured with public funds and owned by the Beis HaMikdash endowment.

There is nothing inherent about dress codes or uniforms that makes you better at what you do for wearing those clothes, but the fact you're wearing them signals, at least to some people, that you're willing to put them first. And even if you don't personally think that's true, it is still a reason somebody else might think is true, and that's reason enough.



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Like other uniforms, the Kohanim's uniform conveys information and fosters comfort and security, setting the tone for a meaningful and high signal interaction with spiritual seekers. But like a doctor in scrubs, the dress code is only skin deep.

It's important to stress that appearance isn't everything – far from it. No two doctors or people are the same, even though they may wear the same uniform. They each have different personalities and sensitivities, and assuming a basic threshold of competency; they distinguish themselves with their bedside manner – what they're like to interact with. Our Amida also has a uniform structure, morning, noon, and night, Sunday through Friday, yet no two prayers are alike – the feeling we invest in each word is different each time. R' Shlomo Farhi highlights that even as similar as the Kohanim's uniform was, each set of clothing still had to be tapered to the contours of the wearer's body, with no loose fabric. No two people are alike, and even two conversations with the same person aren't alike; uniformity doesn't mean homogeneity, common form is not common substance.

Shakespeare wrote that the clothes make the man, but if that's a little wide of the mark, it's probably correct to say that the clothes set the tone. In your own house, in your yard, or the office, do whatever and be whoever you like. Who's to say otherwise? But in other-facing, client-facing, or public-facing positions, you should be mindful of how you look to people who don't know to give you the benefit of the doubt. Plenty of major companies have relaxed dress codes for non-client-facing positions, but you can be certain that the client-facing positions are suited and booted!

The value articulated by a dress code or uniform policy is that while they may not help everyone, they seem to provide substantial benefits to portions of the population disadvantaged in certain contexts.

So perhaps dress codes don't compromise individuality or self-expression at all; maybe they curb the outermost and superficial part of ourselves, and that's the part we can afford to sacrifice for other people's comfort in public service.

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## **The Eternal Flame**

3 minute read | Straightforward

The ancients understood that water is the source of life, that rain and water are life-giving, and that water symbolizes cleansing, regeneration, renewal, fertility, birth, creation, and new life.

Rain is a powerful symbol in the covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people; unlike Egypt, where the water comes up from the Nile and beneath feet, Israel is a land where people must look up to the heavens for rain.



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Given rain's prominent role in an agricultural economy, it follows that rain features in our daily prayers; but there was one time of year when the rain had a unique prayer.

The Kohen Gadol would enter the inner sanctum of the Beis HaMikdash once a year on Yom Kippur and perform the ritual service and say one single prayer – the only prayer ever said at Judaism's holiest site – about rain.

But where we might expect the foremost religious leader and representative of an entire generation to request the right amount of rain at the appropriate time and place, we find that instead, the prayer simply asks God to ignore the prayers of travelers who don't want to get wet on their way.

Given the central importance of rain, why is that the most important thing to say?

There is an interesting directive in the laws of sacrifices about a fire that had to burn in all weather conditions, even in the rain:

אֵשׁ תָּמִיד תִּוְקַד עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא תִכָּבֵה – Burn an eternal flame on the altar, it can never burn out... (6:6)

On its face, this is a simple instruction to the attending Kohanim on duty to regularly stoke and fuel the flame.

There was nothing magical about it; it could not and did not burn on its own. It required a complex and dedicated logistical operation with constant maintenance and monitoring with round-the-clock shifts year-round, rain or shine, snow or wind.

Pirkei Avos suggests that their efforts were met with divine assistance; when it rained, the rain would not quench the fire, which is to say that our sages specifically understood the divine assistance to take the form of rain that wouldn't put the fire out, as opposed to no rain at all over the fire. The Kohanim would still have to work the fire in adverse weather conditions; God would make sure their efforts were successful.

This strongly implies that no rain here, there, or anywhere is not a viable solution.

Do not deny the crucial role consistency, perseverance, and perspiration play in your life. Like the eternal flame, the miracle only happens after you've exhausted your efforts.

As R' Chaim Volozhin teaches, while we can't choose our circumstances, we can control our direction and velocity.

This eternal flame, fueled as it was by raw human willpower, was the source of fires in all the year-round services, from the Menorah to the incense, the crescendo of the Yom Kippur service when



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the Kohen Gadol said his prayer for the rain. The eternal flame wasn't just something that lies in the external world; it comes from within.

R' Shmshon Raphael Hirsch suggests that this illustrates that the heat and warmth of the special moments of life are only fuelled by the grit and consistency of our daily grind. It wasn't an eternal flame so much as a perpetual flame – אש תמיד.

R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik suggests that it is a human's duty to broaden the scope and strengthen the intensity of their efforts – השתדלות – because the aggregate of all outcomes is contingent on our efforts.

Our sages understood the true miracle of the eternal flame; determined willpower and enduring efforts blessed with success. The Yom Kippur prayer affirms our worldview; we reject the immaturity of the fair-weather traveler, who does not accept that it will rain. We live in a world where there is rain, a world where it must rain, and people are going to have to be a little wet and uncomfortable.

For the blessing to have a place to land, you need to do all you possibly can; ask not for a lighter burden, but broader shoulders.

You must do your best; you can only hope for the rest.

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*I present TorahRedux l'ilui nishmas my late grandfather, HaGaon HaRav Yehuda Leib Gertner ben HaRav HaChassid Menachem Mendel.*

*I hope you enjoyed this week's thoughts. If you have questions or comments, or just want to say hello, it's a point of pride for me to hear from you, and I'll always respond. And if you saw, heard, read, or watched anything that spoke to you, please send it my way - Neli@TorahRedux.com.*

Neli

*PS If you liked this week's edition of TorahRedux, why not share it with friends and family who would appreciate it?*

**Redux:** *adjective* – resurgence; refers to being brought back, restored, or revived; something familiar presented in a new way. Not to see what no one else has seen, but to say what nobody has yet said about something which everybody sees.