

Parashat Tetzaveh

Chapters 25 to 31 & 35 to 40 of Exodus provide instructions for the building of the Ark of the covenant, which is to contain the stone tablets of the 10 Commandments - and for the construction of a Tent or Tabernacle to hold that Ark - together with regulations for the consecration and proper vestments of the high priest and his subordinates. Although Moses and Aaron are specifically involved in these wilderness arrangements, there is a school of thought that argues that in its present format this body of legislation dates mainly from during and after the Exile, more than 7 centuries later. In those 7 centuries, Israel had won and lost an empire, had seen its Solomon's Temple ransacked by Babylonian invaders, and its treasures carried away. The priestly exiles looked back lovingly to the Temple worship they had known and looked forward to a return to Jerusalem, when they would see the glories rise again from off the ashes of pagan devastation. Consequently, the argument goes, they painted much of the present picture; an idealised version of what had been and what was yet to be. The rich accoutrements of the priesthood, the precious stones and exotic spices, the rare woods and metals, to say nothing of their manufacture, accord ill, in their reckoning, with a motley band of fugitives from Egypt, living on the verge of starvation! Whatever, however, there is absolutely no argument about the fact that the word of God speaks powerfully in what is written in Exodus. Certainly, the historical basis is there, however much embellishment subsequent tradition may have imposed upon it, if indeed it ever was.

The Bible is a unity in common purpose and continuity of themes; not two distinct halves of Old and New. There is real relevance for us in the 21st century, of the symbolism of the Ark and the Tent of Meeting, and of the appurtenances of Jewish ceremonial, Jewish priesthood and Jewish sacrifice. These are the true line of faith and witness, which runs from Abraham through Moses and the prophets, to our Lord Yeshua and His Disciples. As we delight in the study of the Tabernacle we can easily feel ourselves bound in a community of faith with those who sought to hold fast to the moment of revelation at Sinai, when it seemed as if heaven opened, and the voice of God proclaimed His will in the stark "thou shalt" of the Decalogue. To wish to preserve that memory in tablets of stone, which would ever be a living witness to Israel's call and vocation, is a God-given impulse, whose significance we can still share. Indeed, it is this moving reflection that the ancient palladium of Israel had within it for centuries, whether in the desert or later, in Jerusalem itself - a symbol of the Word of God to humanity, which we still acknowledge today as binding on us, its members. As we picture Israel in its desert days, assembling round the Tent of Meeting to hear the continuing commands of God, and to come face-to-face with Him in worship, we can again feel the cords of tradition binding our own worship to theirs.

What emerges in the detailed instructions found in Exodus, is the passionate love of the compilers for "the glory and beauty" of the worship of God (28:2), their deep sense that the purpose of all the elaboration is that worshippers should "meet" and "commune" with God (25:22; 29:45), their conception that the function of a priest is to bear on his heart the needs of the people he represents (28:29-30), and their recognition that the words that were

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inscribed on the high priest's diadem preside in spirit as well as fact over the whole ceremonial: HOLINESS TO THE LORD (28:36).

Israel was destined to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, but there was the need of a priesthood in the nation itself that would stand between the people and God, with a developed consciousness of the holiness of God in their hearts. That is why Tetzaveh gives detailed instructions concerning the holy garments and sacrifices that were to be brought at the consecration of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood. Every detail of the priestly garments has its own significance and we will consider a selection. Upon the hem of the one piece blue robe of the ephod were blue/purple/scarlet pomegranates, with bells of gold between them. "And it shall be upon Aaron to minister, and his sound shall be heard when he goeth unto the holy place before the Lord, and when he cometh out, that he die not."

Then there was the ephod over the top, made of gold, blue and scarlet. Two onyx stones with 6 of the names of the tribes of Israel engraved on each, were to be placed on the shoulders of the ephod. Thus, they were on the High Priest's shoulders when he stood before God. The breastplate of judgment was worn on the ephod, with precious stones in 4 rows of 3. Each row bore three names corresponding to 3 tribes of Israel. Thus the High Priest represented the tribes of Israel before God. He "carried" them on his shoulders, to signify strength and authority. Also, the breastplate over his heart, to show his love for them. The God of power and love gave authority and love to his priestly representative.

We note in Tetzaveh that in the ceremony of the consecration of Aaron and his sons to the priesthood, three sacrifices were brought - a bullock for the sin offering, a ram for the burnt offering, and a consecration offering of a ram. The consecrated ram's blood was placed by Moses onto the tip of the right ear of the priests-to-be, the thumbs of their right hands, and the great toes of their right feet. Thus, the ear to hear God's Word, the hand to do God's will, and the foot to walk in God's way. It is true of consecrated leaders to this day, even if the sacrifices are long gone - the symbolism is eternal. In Exodus 30, Moses details the altar of incense. There were two altars. The one in the Court of the Tabernacle on which burnt offerings were made, without which there was no right of entry to the tabernacle at all. In the Holy Place, divided from the Holy of Holies by a veil or curtain, stood the altar of incense, symbolising prayer and worship to God. In Psalm 141 David prays, "Let my prayer be set forth before Thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice." The priestly service at these two altars was of prime importance.

The symbolism of all this is crystal clear. At the heart of Israel's religious life is the covenant relationship with God (the tablets of Testimony). The throne of the invisible Lord of the universe (the mercy seat), shrouded in mystery (the cherubim), rests upon the historic tokens of His providential care for His people (the pot of manna) and of the authoritative priesthood (Aaron's rod). Cleansed from the contamination of the world (the laver), the priests offer on behalf of the people perpetual sacrifice of prayer (the altars), and thanksgiving for the fruits

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of the earth (the table of shewbread), in worship that never ceases because God is always present (the menorah).

The priesthood and the sacrifices were needed to cause a realisation of God's presence in the midst of His people. However, our reading of Hebrews 7:23-8:10 indicates the snag that the priest himself was flesh and blood. Sin was present in him also. Indeed, over the centuries, the priesthood deteriorated and the system became a formal institution without moral and spiritual backbone. Additionally, priests die, which precluded spiritual continuity, as it still does. Vital as the Law was, it made nothing perfect. In God's good time, we have Jeremiah speaking of a new covenant and David announcing a new priesthood, when he says, "The Lord hath sworn and will not repent, Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." Note, not the order of a flawed Aaronic/Levitical priesthood but one offering a High Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.

And so, a new order and a new hope were brought in to guide a struggling humanity - by which we may all draw nigh if we so chose, for the preceding Law had made nothing perfect. Thus, in Hebrews 7:26-28, it is written, "...This is the kind of *cohen gadol* that meets our need - holy, without evil, without stain, set apart from sinners and raised higher than the heavens; one who does not have the daily necessity, like the other *cohanim g'dolim*, of offering up sacrifices first for their own sins and only then for those of the people; because He offered one sacrifice, once and for all, by offering up Himself....."

The priesthood instituted under the Law has passed away. Another High Priest, without sin and not subject to death, lives forever. He is at our side, to guide and help us. Lord Yeshua brings to the light the "glory and the beauty" of Judaism and is the perfect fulfilment of the Jewish Law, writ large so long ago by Moses, at God's command.

"I beseech you," says Paul, "present your bodies a living sacrifice." The point to decide is this - "Do I agree with my Lord and Master that my body shall be His Temple, His Tabernacle?" If so, then for me the whole of the Law for the body is summed up in this revelation, that my body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit.

Messiah Yeshua - Redeemer, Saviour, High Priest, Helper, Friend, and Divine Guide.