Living Up To Our Uniforms: Thoughts for Parashat Tetsaveh

View PDF

By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Tetsaveh

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

People wear uniforms…athletes, police, firefighters, surgeons, clergy. Graduates don caps and gowns. Marching bands have their uniforms. Top hats and tails, formal gowns, business attire…each uniform is meant to define a particular role or a particular occasion. When people dress casually so that they think they are not wearing uniforms…they are wearing casual uniforms! The way they dress is meant to reflect their conformity with or rebellion from the current fashions.

The Torah goes into great detail about the uniform of the priests of the Mishkan, and especially about that of the High Priest. The latter's garments were quite impressive and were meant to evoke "honor and glory." When Israelites entered the Mishkan, and later the Temples in Jerusalem, they witnessed a priesthood with elaborate costumes.

Uniforms serve a functional purpose. They indicate to outsiders what roles the uniform-wearers are playing. But uniforms also serve a psychological role. When we see someone dressed in a particular outfit, specific emotions arise within us. Our moods and behaviors are influenced by the uniforms; in a sense, the uniforms are symbols of roles that evoke emotional responses from us.

When Israelites entered the Mishkan or Temple precincts, they witnessed priests performing the various services. When they saw the High Priest in his fancy regalia, they not only knew that he was the High Priest; they also felt the "honor and glory" that was associated with him. They had a Pavlovian reaction: here is a man who stands close to God, who represents us in our relationship with the Divine.

How did the High Priest feel as he wore his distinctive uniform? Ideally, the special clothing would have evoked within him a heightened feeling of reverence and responsibility. He knew that everyone who saw him thought of him in lofty terms; he had to live up to their high expectations. The priestly uniform was not merely intended to impact on the Israelites, but on the priest himself. He had to live by the highest standards, to live up to the uniform he wore.

However, there may have been (and there were!) High Priests who did not live up to their uniforms. Rather, they somehow came to feel that the uniform served as a camouflage. Instead of the uniform inspiring greater piety and integrity, it was a place to hide. They wielded authority by virtue of their external costume, not by virtue of who they were.

When the priesthood's authority depended on vestments rather than on personal piety and integrity, then the public lost respect for the priests and for all that the priesthood was supposed to represent. The Temple service, as many of our Prophets lamented, became a hypocritical sham. Priests went through the specified rituals and offerings, but the feeling of the presence of God was lacking. The priests became functionaries, not religious personalities who could teach and inspire. The Israelites' religious leadership had become a group of uniforms, empty suits.

Whatever our particular uniform and our particular roles in life, it is essential that we not allow ourselves to become costumes rather than genuine, honest people. Just as clergy desecrate religion when they do not live up to their uniforms and their callings, so everyone undermines personal integrity when they depend on play-acting and costumes to impress others.

The great 20th century teacher and literary critic, Lionel Trilling, wrote of "the satisfaction with the thing that looks like the real thing but is not the real thing." People are too often satisfied with false images and do not demand the "real thing." But wise people see through the falsehoods and the play-acting. Eventually, most people will come to demand the "real thing," at least so we must hope.

Do we demand the "real thing" in others? Do we live up to our own uniforms, up to our roles in life, up to our potentialities? Do we demand the "real thing" in ourselves?

Angel for Shabbat