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The Uniform of the Soul

The last five Parshiot of Sefer Shemot are filled with majestic detail as the Torah describes the construction of the Mishkan — the dwelling place for the Shechinah — and the sacred garments of those who would serve within it. Gold, silver, copper, acacia wood, curtains of blue, purple, and crimson wool, fine linen, goat hair, and animal skins constructed and woven by master artisans — all donated, crafted, measured, and assembled with absolute precision. No deviation tolerated.

What could be more extraordinary than a nation investing its wealth, talent, and skills solely to create a home for Hashem's Presence?

Among all these details, the garments of the Kohen and the Kohen Gadol stand out. The Torah devotes verses upon verses to the



garments — each thread purposeful, each stone positioned exactly as commanded. Clothing here is not fashion. It is theology.

One of my mentors, Rav David Bagno שליט"א, once framed this through a powerful linguistic lens. The Hebrew word for garment is בגד from בגידה — betrayal. A garment can betray. Clothing can mislead. It can present an image that disguises the inner person.

A refined, ethical, and deeply educated individual might wear ripped street clothes and appear careless or unserious. Meanwhile, a laundering thief might dress in an elegant suit and project respectability. Clothing can obscure truth. It can create a false narrative. In that sense, it is בגידה — a betrayal of the inner self.

Yet Hebrew contains another concept: pekidah — פקידה. A charge. An appointment. A mission assigned with responsibility. If beged can betray, it can also declare. Clothing can express not who we pretend to be, but what we are tasked to do.

This duality echoes the linguistic approach of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, who explains that Hebrew roots often carry conceptual families connected through related letters and sounds. Letters such as ב and פ share articulation patterns, as do ג and ק; they can reflect variations of a core idea. A beged can slip into begidah — concealment or treachery. But with a shift of orientation, the garment aligns with pekidah — an outward expression of one's entrusted role.

Clothing, then, stands at a crossroads. It can conceal essence or communicate mission.

The garments of the Kohanim were the Torah's corrective to clothing-as-betrayal. The Torah commands: "...ועשית בגדי קודש" — "לכבוד ולתפארת" — sacred garments, for honor and splendor. These were not costumes. They were declarations. When a Kohen wore the bigdei kehuna, he was not dressing up; he was stepping into a sacred identity. The garments reminded the nation how to see him — distinct, elevated, entrusted with avodah on their behalf.

And they reminded the Kohen how to see himself.

This is why the garments were funded by the contributions of the entire nation. The Kohen did not serve privately. His clothing embodied collective mission. When he entered the Mishkan, he carried Klal Yisrael upon his shoulders — literally engraved in the stones of the ephod and choshen. His garments were his pekidah stitched into fabric.

One of my Binyamin's personal desires enumerated in his big list of aspirations and goals was the desire to "dress nicely." I laughed. His daily attire consisted of ripped work pants and grease-stained shirts. Hardly runway material. No check mark awarded, I thought.

But perhaps I was wrong.

Binyamin worked the land. He planted, built, repaired fences, grazed cattle, and stood guard to protect vulnerable Jewish communities. His clothing is practical, worn, sometimes torn — but it serves his mission. They are the uniform of someone whose hands are in the soil of Eretz Yisrael and whose back bears responsibility. His garments are not begidah. They are pekidah. Those hole-ridden pants are actually holy pants. They set out his mission and help him accomplish his purpose.

His alternate wardrobe was his army uniform. Shirt tucked precisely. Beret angled

exactly as required. Boots tied according to regulation. The uniform is not about style; it is about service. A soldier's clothing announces his charge: to defend, to sacrifice, to stand between danger and his people. It binds him to something larger than himself.

Uniforms do that. A police officer's uniform signals protection and authority. A nurse's attire signals care and healing. The clothing does not create the mission, but it reinforces it — for both wearer and observer.

The Kohen's garments operated on that same principle, but on a spiritual plane. They aligned outer appearance with inner responsibility. They prevented begidah by embedding pekidah into fabric and thread.

And perhaps that is the enduring message of these parshiot.

Does what I wear help me become who I want to be? Does it reflect my values, my aspirations, my responsibilities? Or does it mask them?

The Mishkan required immense investment — precious metals, artistic mastery, exact measurements — because creating a dwelling place for the Divine demands intentionality. So too, shaping ourselves into vessels for holiness requires care and thoughtfulness, even in something as external as clothing.

May we merit to dress our pekidah — to allow what we wear to support who we strive to be. And may our outer presentation harmonize with our inner calling, transforming clothing from potential betrayal into visible purpose. ■

The **Airleys** have built **Beit Binyamin**, a retreat center in Tzfat for those directly affected by the war. Soldiers, Zaka members, security forces, bereaved families and widows can come for respite, relaxation and rejuvenation. For more information and to donate, visit Beitbinyamin.org