



Parashat Tetzaveh

Much of Parashat Tetzaveh is devoted to the topic of the *bigdei kehuna*, the priestly vestments worn by the *kohanim* as they performed the ritual service in the Temple. God issues the command, "You shall make sacred vestments for Aharon and his sons – for honor and glory" (28:2). Maimonides, in the *Hilkhot Kelei Ha-mikdash* section of *Mishneh Torah* (8:4), interprets the phrase "*le-khavod u-le-tif'aret*" ("for honor and glory") as mandating an honorable and dignified appearance. Citing this verse, Maimonides requires that the priestly garments be new and comely, adding that a *kohen's* Temple service is invalid if his garments did not fit or were soiled or torn. Any sacrifices offered by a *kohen* wearing *bigdei kehuna* of this kind do not fulfill the given ritual obligation, and must therefore be offered anew with the proper attire.

Many later writers were troubled by this ruling of Maimonides in light of a seemingly contradictory remark he makes in the subsequent section of *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Bi'at Mikdash* (1:14). There Maimonides addresses the law introduced in the Book of Vayikra (10:6) forbidding a *kohen* from performing the Temple service with overgrown hair or rent garments – the characteristic expressions of bereavement. Maimonides writes that as the verse in Vayikra implies, a *kohen* who performs the service in such a state is liable to *mita bi-dei Shamayim* (death at the hands of God, as opposed to court-administered execution), adding, "even though his service is valid and has not been defiled." In this context, then, Maimonides writes explicitly that performing the service with torn garments – while violating a Torah prohibition – nevertheless suffices as far as the fulfillment of the given obligation is concerned. At first glance, this ruling directly contradicts his earlier comments, in *Hilkhot Kelei Ha-mikdash*, where he disqualifies any Temple ritual that a *kohen* performs wearing torn or soiled garments.

Scores of writers have addressed this seeming contradiction, and it appears that the most common approach taken distinguishes between the situations Maimonides addresses in the two contexts. In the first context, where Maimonides describes the obligation of *le-khavod u-le-tif'aret*, he speaks of a garment that has been subjected to nothing more than wear-and-tear. Here he requires that the *kohen* assume a dignified, aristocratic appearance as he dons the priestly garments, as indicated by the phrase *le-khavod u-le-tif'aret*, and he therefore disqualifies any service performed with tattered garments. In the second context, however, in *Hilkhot Bi'at Mikdash*, he refers to a *kohen* wearing new, elegant *bigdei kehuna*, but who made a tear in the garment as an expression of mourning. A single tear expressing grief does not necessarily undermine the quality of "honor and dignity" required when donning the priestly vestments, and therefore, the service performed with such a garment is valid. The Torah forbids performing the service with such a garment because the Temple rituals must be performed strictly out of a sense of joyful and festive devotion to God, and may not be tempered by feelings of personal loss. Nevertheless, since the garments were, after all, honorable and dignified, the tear does not invalidate the service. This approach in resolving Maimonides' rulings is taken by numerous writers, including the Radbaz (Rabbi David Ben Zimra, Egypt, 1480-1574, responsum 1,462) and the *Beit Halevi* (Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik of Brisk, 1820-1892, vol. 1, 2:6).

A possible basis for such a distinction, as noted by many writers, is the different terminology Maimonides employs in the two contexts. In *Hilkhot Kelei Ha-mikdash*, Maimonides speaks of garments that are *mekura'in*, whereas in *Hilkhot Bi'at Ha-mikdash* he uses the term *keru'ei begadim*. The different expressions he employs in reference to rent garments likely reflect two different situations: where the garments have torn with time, and fresh garments that have been torn in

response to tragedy. Furthermore, it should be noted that in the subsequent passage in Hilkhot Bi'at Mikdash, Maimonides further discusses this law and mentions "garments that are torn in the manner of tearing for the dead," suggesting that he speaks in this context of otherwise suitable *bigdei kehuna* that were rent as part of the process of bereavement.

It turns out, then, that these two rulings correspond to two different requirements concerning the proper aura and mindset that must be maintained while performing the Temple service: nobility, and festivity. The *kohen's* appearance must reflect the noble quality and importance that we must afford the service of God; in addition, he must perform his duties with the joy and fervor appropriate for this sublime task, somehow leaving behind his personal grief and sense of loss.