



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayeishev

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December 13, 2014

Vayeishev

Torah Lessons from a Garment



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

As the frosts of winter settle upon us, we dust off our coats and reacquaint ourselves with their downy warmth and furry coziness.

As with all things in creation, the coat has more than material properties; the coat is also a symbol of a spiritual sort. So what can a coat teach us about our souls? What can a coat teach us about our lives? What can it teach us about our Judaism and our relationship with God?

This week, we read about Joseph’s multi-colored, multi-faceted, multi-dimensional coat, the one Jacob had fashioned just for him. What can this coat teach us about shielding our families and our selves from the cold of cynicism?

How can we wrap ourselves in the divine fur of heaven while simultaneously lighting fires and warming up the world?

COLOR-COATED: TORAH LESSONS FROM A GARMENT

1. Coat Shop (Joke)

A sad, beaten-down man walks into a very posh Park Avenue furrier with a zaftig woman on his arm, twice his height and weight and three times as loud. The woman keeps badgering the man, “Hymie, you never buy me any presents? Hymie how come you have no money? Hymie you’re always working and never home.”

“Show the lady your finest mink,” says Hymie to the furrier. So the owner of the shop goes in the back and comes out with an absolutely gorgeous full-length coat.

As the lady tries it on, the furrier sidles up to the guy and discreetly whispers, “Ah, sir, that particular fur goes for \$65,000.”

“No problem!” says Hymie. “I’ll write you a check!”

“Very good, sir.” says the shop owner. “Today is Friday. You may come by on Monday to pick up the fur, after the check has cleared.”

So the man and the woman leave. On Monday, the fellow returns. The storeowner is outraged: “How dare you show your face in here? There wasn’t a single penny in your checking account!”

“I know and I am truly so sorry for that,” said the sad man. “I just had to come by to thank you for the most wonderfully peaceful weekend of my life.”

2. Winter Coat

As the frosts of winter settle upon us, we dust off our coats and reacquaint ourselves with their downy warmth and furry coziness.

The coat truly is a wonderful thing – it shields us from the elements and protects us from life’s storms. Sometimes a \$65,000 coat (or the promise of one) can bring a henpecked man a precious weekend of peaceful bliss.

As with all things in creation, the coat has more than material properties; the coat is also a symbol of a spiritual sort. So, what can a coat teach us about our souls? What can a coat teach us about our lives? What can a coat teach us about our Judaism and our relationship with God?

It turns out it can teach us a lot. Indeed, this week's Torah reading focuses on one particular coat – a multi-colored, multi-faceted, multi-dimensional coat, the one that Jacob had fashioned just for his son Joseph.

3. Parshat Vayeishev

In this week's Torah reading – *Parshat Vayeishev* – we read that, after much traveling, journeying and struggling, Jacob and his family finally settle in the city of Hebron.

Although *Vayeishev* means “to settle,” as this *parsha* progresses, it gets less and less settling:

Joseph has dreams and is almost killed by his brothers. Then he is sold to the Ishmaelites. The curious episode of Judah and Tamar occurs, whence the royal line of King David is born. Joseph ends up a slave in Egypt, then is thrown into a dungeon for refusing the advances of his boss's wife. Once in prison, Joseph interprets more dreams.

It is indeed a wild and exciting *parsha*. But it all begins with settling in the city of Hebron. And it is there that the Torah gets fashionable:

And Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was a son of his old age; and he made him a fine coat (ketonet passim).¹

As we see in the Book of Samuel,² *ketonet passim* suggests a royal garment, a regal vestment that princes and princesses would wear. Thus Jacob fashioned a royal garment for his son Joseph.

¹ Genesis 37:3.

² II Samuel 13:18.

If we break the words down, the Hebrew *ketonet* is pretty straightforward – it means a “garment,” like a tunic or a coat. *Passim* is a more unique word, more difficult to translate. Various Torah commentaries dissect this word and translate it in different ways. And we find that in this word lies a very relevant and pertinent message for our lives today.

4. Passim

Some commentaries interpret *passim* as referring to the garment’s pattern and design, and so they read it as meaning “colorful,”³ “striped,”⁴ “embroidered,”⁵ or “picturesque.”⁶ Other commentaries see *passim* as denoting the garment’s size, as a long garment, coming down to the palms of the hands,⁷ and the soles of the feet.⁸ Alternatively, the word could read to refer to the material out of which the coat was made, which was either fine wool⁹ or silk.¹⁰

If we consider all those interpretation together, the coat that Jacob had custom-made for Joseph was a striped and colorful garment that was embroidered with images. It was made of ultra-fine wool or silk (or both), and it reached to the palms of his hands and the soles his feet.

Another significance of the word *passim*, which Rashi brings from the Midrash,¹¹ is that its four Hebrew letters, *pey*, *samach*, *yud*, *mem*, form an acronym for the pains that Joseph would endure:

³ Radak.

⁴ R’ Yonah Ibn Janach, Radak, Sherashim.

⁵ Ibn Ezra; Bachya; Ramban on Exodus 28:2.

⁶ Targum Yonatan.

⁷ Rashbam; Ibn Ezra; Baaley Tosafoth; Bereshith Rabbah 84.

⁸ Lekach Tov.

⁹ Rashi.

¹⁰ Ibn Janach.

¹¹ Bereishit Rabbah 84:8.

- *pey* for Potiphar, the Egyptian minister who would throw Joseph into prison
- *samach* for *sochrim*, the merchants that would purchase Joseph from his brothers and sell him into slavery
- *yud* for Yishmaelim, the Ishmaelites that would make Joseph a slave and take him to Egypt, and
- *mem* for Midianim, the Midianites who pulled Joseph out of the pit and sold him to the Ishmaelites¹²

This coat is obviously more than just an haute couture garment. This coat obviously makes much more than a fashion statement.

Indeed, the Torah finds it important to mention that before throwing Joseph into the pit, his brothers stripped off his *ketonet passim*,¹³ and, after bloodying it, submitted it to their father Jacob as evidence of Joseph's tragic demise. Seeing the tattered royal garment, Jacob rent his own clothing and began to sit *shiva* for his beloved boy.¹⁴

It is clear that the *ketonet passim*, the royal, colorful, patterned, embroidered tunic was much more than just another coat.

But what was it?

5. Special Protection

As hinted in the acronym of the word *passim*, the coat was meant to protect Joseph not only from the natural elements (like all coats everywhere) but also from the unnatural elements – the elements of darkness, the elements that would be antithetical to Joseph's purpose in this world and that would try to influence him away from his divine mission.¹⁵

¹² As the verse later in our portion states: Then Midianite men, merchants, passed by, and they pulled and lifted Joseph from the pit, and they sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites (Genesis 37:28).

¹³ Genesis 37:23.

¹⁴ Genesis 37:31-35.

¹⁵ See Sefer Hasichot 5752, Vayeishev (pp. 203-4).

The coat, given to Joseph while still in the warm embrace of his father, was meant to shield and protect him from all the harshness he would face – being sold into slavery, being imprisoned in Egypt and, ultimately, being appointed by the Pharaoh as the viceroy of the world’s worst idolatrous civilization.

So what was this coat really?

This royal garment that Jacob made and fashioned for his son Joseph was all of the Torah, the divine wisdom and Godly understanding of the world.¹⁶

This is explained by the verse – *And Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons, because he was a son of his old age* – and Rashi’s commentary to it:

Rashi, the great 11th century Torah commentator, cites the biblical translator Onkelos that this means that whatever Jacob had learned in his youth at the academy of Shem and Ever, that fine institution of divine wisdom, he gave over to Joseph – *and he made him a fine coat (ketonet passim)*.

An additional explanation that Rashi provides from the Midrash is that Joseph’s features resembled those of Jacob.¹⁷ Indeed, Joseph was literally identical to his father. Joseph was an extension of his father, continuing the tradition of wisdom began with Shem and Ever. Jacob fashioning a coat for Joseph was Jacob wrapping Joseph in the warm garment of Torah. Why? So as to protect him in the darkness of Egypt, in the places of negative influence in which Joseph would find himself.

All the other sons would remain in the comfort of their father’s land, while Joseph – and Joseph alone – would descend into the dark lands of false gods and idolatrous knowledge. Thus it was Joseph who would require a garment that was more powerful, more beautiful, more dynamic, more picturesque, more fine, more textured, and more royal than anything he would encounter.

¹⁶ Ibid. fn. 116.

¹⁷ Bereishit Rabbah 84:8.

6. Application to Our Lives Today

Let us apply this to our lives today.

The world in which we live is all too often a highly challenging place. We wish all would remain sheltered, innocent and pure. Unfortunately, this is not always the case.

Here is not the place to enumerate all of life's challenges and difficulties – and, please God, may they never be as tumultuous as those of Joseph – but, when we self-reflect, we all know that, daily, we face things that can influence us in ways that are not exactly holy.

To this, says our father Jacob, “I have gifted to all of you in this room, all of you who encounter daily the modern incarnation of Egyptian darkness, and of the modern-day Ishmaelites, Midinites and Potiphars – I, Jacob, have gifted to all of you the *ketonet passim*, a royal garment, a regal vestment that princes and princesses wear.”

From the most devout Jew to the most cynical, by virtue of our tradition passed down from our forefathers, we have all been dressed up in a tailor-made coat of divinity called the Torah. This coat is meant to shield and protect us from any negative influence we may encounter.

And, as Jacob did for Joseph, we must tailor-make this coat for our children, to fit them and make it theirs.

7. The Many Features of Torah

As with the many commentaries on the word *passim*, the coat, the Torah has many, many features:

It is beautifully colorful; it has many patterns and stripes; it is embroidered with soul; it is full of heavenly imagery. Its material is the finest of the fine, the most refined of the refined, the most sublime and subtle of all materials. This ethereal coat embraces us completely, all the way down our arms to the palms of our hands, and all the way down our legs to the soles of our feet.

A multi-colored coat, a true royal garment is one that protects (in addition to our bodies, also) our souls.

The episode of this magical coat is related in the beginning of our *parsha*. The rest is chockfull of excitement, challenges and changes. When we begin with the security and knowledge of the coat that shields us and protects us, then we can overcome and transform any challenge that comes our way with confidence and certainty.

8. A Tzaddik in Peltz

The Chassidic Master, Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk, once referred to a certain rabbi as a *tzaddik in peltz* – “a saint in fur” – a righteous person all decked out and warm in a luxurious fur coat.

What is a *tzaddik in peltz*, a saint in fur?

In a freezing cold house, there are two ways a *tzaddik* (or anyone else) may warm himself: 1) he may don a fur coat and be warm while everyone else around remains bone-chillingly cold; or 2) he can build a fire, where he is warm and so is every else in the house.

The world is a spiritually freezing house, replete with hate, death and ungodly darkness. There are two ways, we may warm oneself: 1) we may don the fur coat of Torah, becoming warm ourselves but everyone in the house remains bone-chillingly cold; or 2) we can build a fire of Torah, where we are warm and so is every else in the house.

A *tzaddik in peltz*, is a person who wraps himself in the warm cocoon of spiritual bliss – but ignores the desperate pleas of the spiritually freezing people around him.

As we see from Joseph’s unbelievable life story, the *ketonet passim*, the royal garment, is meant to protect and warm us – but only so that we may protect and warm the world.

Sure, we must wrap ourselves in the fine garment of Torah, but only so that we may light up the world with the soulful fire contained therein.

9. Royal Coat for the World (Conclusion)

As the many explanations of the word *passim* demonstrate, our royal coat, our princely tunic, the Torah, has many, many facets: it is multi-colored, multi-layered, it covers us from head to foot, from palm to sole, it is the finest of fine materials, it paints a picture of how God envisions the world.

Perhaps it is difficult to embrace all the facets of Torah at once. But we have to know that this royal coat shields us and protects ... we have to know that it is a gift from our forefathers. Then, over time, we can begin to embrace the many, multi-dimensional facets of this divine garment.

As the title of this week's *parsha* promises, may we indeed settle in the land of our forefathers, in the land that God promised us, and continue Jacob's and Joseph's legacy.

And may we indeed do our best to spread the divine coat of Torah, the royal garment of God's wisdom, all over the planet – lighting, warming and coloring this earth with the vibrancy of heaven. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!

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