



SERMON ACHAREI MOT:¹ THE KUTONET MUSEUM

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 21 March 2018
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 Name a famous Biblical coat. Anyone?
- 2 Yep, it's got to be Joseph's, hasn't it. The coat of many colours. The technicolour dreamcoat. The word the Torah uses for it, kutonet,² is the same as the word for the High Priest's special Yom Kippur tunic in this week's parasha.
- 3 But the story of Jacob giving the technicolour dreamcoat to Joseph wasn't the first time coats appeared in the Torah. Way back at the very beginning, as soon as Adam and Eve realised they were naked, Genesis 3:21 tells us that God made kot'not for them; garments of skin.
- 4 And here's something that blew my mind when I read the theory:³ what if they're all the same coat? I mean, obviously they're not all the same coat because that would be ridiculous, and the fact that they're all called 'coat' is irrelevant. But just humour me for a moment: darshanim, the rabbis who wove not garments but stories in and around the Torah, have stitched together this amazing narrative.
- 5 First, God made Adam and Eve their first clothes – out of the skin of the serpent, indeed.⁴ Then, when Adam died, he passed these Godly garments to his son Seth, who passed them on to his son, and so on and so on until Noah passed them to his son Ham, who passed them to his son Cush, who passed them to his son Nimrod.⁵ Nimrod, generally portrayed as a brutish



dictator and idolater, was eventually killed by Esau, who took the kuttonet from him as a victory trophy.⁶

6 Now, as we remember, Esau was the world's first victim of identity theft, as Jacob dressed up to impersonate his twin and steal the birthright. The Torah tells us,⁷ "Rebecca took the choicest garments of Esau." What was Esau's choicest garment? The kuttonet, of course.

7 And, I hope you see where this is going: when Jacob came to want to give his son Joseph a wonderful, amazing coat as a token of his love... Yep. It's all one coat. And it's easy to see, from Joseph, how the kuttonet made its way down the generations to form the basis of the High Priest's vestments.⁸

8 Of course, at some point, this original, Adamite kuttonet must have stopped being used, because our parasha today was a clear instruction to make a fresh tunic for the High Priest's use. The Mishnah, the first wave of rabbinic commentary on the Torah, took one look at the description of the Yom Kippur robes and concluded: "The High Priest's clothes should be worth thirty maneh [which is a Mishnaic unit of currency]." But, it added, "if the High Priest wishes to wear even finer garments, he may add to this fund out of his own pocket."⁹

9 The Babylonian Talmud, rabbinic commentary on the Mishnah's rabbinic commentary on the Torah, weighed in three or so centuries later: "After the Yom Kippur service," it said, "a priest whose mother had made him a special tunic must donate it to the community." (So they had Jewish mothers even in Talmudic times: "Gabriel! You're not going to run a Yom Kippur service dressed like that are you?!") The Talmud continued, "Even if he does not donate it nicely, with a giving spirit, it must still be donated."¹⁰



- 10 So something changed. In fact, two things. Firstly, the original kuttonet was retired; and secondly, a rule was introduced that priests were not allowed to use their own private wardrobes on Yom Kippur: rather, anything they chose to use had to be ceded to the community.
- 11 What's that all about? I think there might be two possible answers. Taking the 'donate it to the community' rule on its own, we might suppose that it was introduced to prevent priests exploiting their position for personal gain. Just as footballers can sell the shirts in which they scored World Cup-winning goals for tens of thousands of pounds, it might have been feared that a retired and impoverished High Priest would want to monetise his old vestments: "Don't miss this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to wear the Yom Kippur cloak, genuinely used by Eleazar ben Charsum!"
- 12 But if we take the two rules together, I think there might be something else behind it as well. What if the Israelites actually wanted to keep the High Priest's old garments? Not just wanted to hold onto them so as to prevent exploitation, but actually wanted them for their own worth? What if the Israelites decided to retire Adam's primeval kuttonet into storage, and begin building up a collection of later kot'not?
- 13 At some point, every society discovers the idea of heritage. Archival. Cold storage. History. Time capsules. Keeping things because the future might be interested in them. Heritage, says William J Murtagh,¹¹ a leading American conservator, "engages the past in a conversation with the present over a mutual concern for the future".
- 14 I think the Israelites were making a museum. Divine or not, the original kuttonet would have fallen apart eventually – so they took it out of service to preserve it for subsequent generations. Every Yom Kippur was such a



special occasion that, if the community didn't already own the vestments worn by the most important person, they made provision to take ownership to make sure they would remain in public hands for posterity, much like how listing a historic building protects it from destruction by whoever owns it.

- 15 The Temple service ran for so many years that fashions must have changed in that time. Adam's original coat must have looked totally bizarre by then: they'll have looked on it the way we look at the sort of thing they wore in the Bayeux Tapestry. But the early kotnot will have looked a bit odd too. And just as Jews have always recorded our history in writing – from the earliest travel diary of the Israelites in the wilderness to Holocaust testimonies being transcribed by modern researchers – a time came when it had to be recorded practically as well. A written account of the fractional difference between one year's kuttonet and the next would be useless. But a gallery of Yom Kippur robes, in chronological order, so that Israelites could stroll down the aisle and see the development of Temple worship through the years? That would really have been something.
- 16 I think this parasha is the moment we discovered heritage. But there's another side to heritage as well: it's not just about recording natural and inevitable changes. It's about recording the deliberate, conscious changes that we make.
- 17 Ceramic restorers – the people who piece together fragments of Roman pottery – have two fundamental rules.¹² The first is that their work must be visible: nobody looking closely at the 'whole' pot should be lulled into believing that it was dug up that way. The second is that their work must be reversible, in case future historians discover that the fragments should fit



together differently, or decide that they would rather have the pieces un-restored.

- 18 These days, in modern Judaism, we don't really have anything like the kuttonet, that changes subtly from year to year with changing fashions. Nobody is going to want to memorialise my clothes. But as Liberal Jews we so often make changes to our practice: the decisions we take, the prayers we alter, the grooves we cut through the siddur with the way we tend to use it – that we sit down after L'ma'an Tiz'k'ru even though the 'instructions'¹³ say we should sit down before – that is the sort of thing to which we should pay attention and remember.
- 19 Because our children might grow up thinking ours is 'the' way that the service works, whereas in fact it's not. Are our changes visible? Are they reversible?
- 20 The first set of clothes was passed down from Adam to Seth to Enosh to Kenan to Mahaleel to Jared to Enoch to Methuselah to Lamech to Noah, and on and on and on. But then our ancestors decided they wanted a change – but they made sure to let us know all about it.
- 21 We should do the same. What will go in our Kuttonet Museum?

Check against delivery.

GW 21.04.18

¹ Leviticus 16:1-7

² Genesis 37:3

³ Beautifully presented by Rachel Adelman in *Primeval Coats: the fate of the first clothing in the hands of Adam, Nimrod, Esau, Jacob, Joseph & the High Priest*: <<http://thetorah.com/primeval-coats/>>

⁴ Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer 20

⁵ Ibid, 24



⁶ Ibid

⁷ Genesis 27:15

⁸ Tanchuma A, Tol'dot 12

⁹ mYoma 3:7

¹⁰ bYoma 35a

¹¹ William J Murtagh, *Keeping Time: the history and theory of preservation in America* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 1988): 168.

¹² Noémie Jennifer. "The art of mending ceramics disasters" in Vice (3 May 2016): <https://creators.vice.com/en_uk/article/8qv3jz/mending-ceramics-conservation-lab>

¹³ In Liberal Judaism's *Siddur Lev Chadash*