



**SERMON T'TZAVEH:
NOT ALL HEROES WEAR CAPES**

Student Rabbi Gabriel Webber, Saturday 16 February 2019
York Liberal Jewish Community

- 1 As you may have noticed, I'm not one for formal dress. Even what I'm wearing right now is more formal than the sort of thing I would normally wear – to College, for instance, or when I'm teaching. I'm pretty sure that I was the first person in the 250-year history of the Board of Deputies of British Jews to wear a hoodie to a meeting of its Executive Committee.
- 2 I'd be perfectly happy going to my wedding in this... although I don't think anyone will let me do that. And there are plenty of synagogues that will not let me anywhere near them unless I was wearing a jacket and tie.
- 3 Why is it that so-called formal clothes are formal and so-called casual clothes are casual?
- 4 The necktie traces its origins to the Thirty Years' War. King Louis XIII of France had hired some Croatian mercenaries to bolster his own armed forces. The mercenaries arrived wearing traditional Croatian military getup, which included a red neckerchief, apparently to secure their collars (which didn't have buttons). King Louis was so taken by this look that he made it compulsory for guests at palace banquets, and he named the new item of apparel the cravat, in honour of its Croat origins.²
- 5 What this means is that, had France contracted with different mercenaries – Hungarians, for instance – the necktie would not be a thing. Those synagogues which currently expect rabbis to turn up wearing a tie would, in



this parallel universe, think it utterly bizarre if a rabbi turned up with a bit of cloth stuck round their neck.

- 6 Historical pathways and historical accidents determine what society considers to be formal and what society considers to be informal. There is nothing intrinsically formal about the tie. It's just down to chance and France.
- 7 My reluctance to dress smartly is in part a rebellion against the randomness of this process. I don't feel bound by the customs of Louis XIII in most areas of my life, so why should this particular one obligate me?
- 8 But more fundamentally, my reluctance to dress smartly is because I resent the idea that I am to be judged by my clothing. Whether I lead a good service or a bad service is for you to decide. But I promise you I lead exactly the same service whether I'm in a suit or in a hoodie. The suit-wearing rabbi does not have a monopoly on competence or seriousness. As the phrase goes, not all heroes wear capes.
- 9 Similar considerations apply to the High Priest. The detailed instructions given in this week's parashah are intended, we're told, to clothe the High Priest in "splendour and glory".³
- 10 But even assuming that we want our spiritual leaders to occupy a position of "splendour and glory" (what makes them more worthy than us?), surely, public respect for them and their office needs to be acquired, not embroidered. When the High Priest walked past, everyone knew, because the golden bells on his robe would tinkle.⁴ But should he not alert people to his presence through good deeds, wisdom and a pleasant personality? If you hold a position of authority, yet can only catch the eye of the public by ringing a bell, that suggests you're not discharging your authority correctly.



- 11 In fact, the absolute requirement that the High Priest carry a bell and dress in intimidating power clothes may have pleased him least of all. It cannot have been a comfortable outfit in which to work: not physically comfortable, and more importantly, not emotionally comfortable. Anyone who dresses unusually smartly by their own standards feels slightly on edge, a slight nervousness. It's questionable whether the advantage gained by putting on one's best clothes for a job interview is outweighed by the increased jumpiness and self-consciousness that often accompanies them.
- 12 It's very easy to read biblical texts about the "splendour and glory" of the oh-so-pure, high-and-mighty High Priest, and get the impression that he's smug, self-satisfied and far too proud of his fine linen robes.
- 13 I wonder if that's true. I wonder if, like many of us, he yearned to be able to do his job to his own satisfaction, in his own way, in his own clothes.
- 14 He never had that choice: the words of the Torah are even more prescriptive than the precedent set by King Louis XIII. But we do have the faculty and the power to ask questions. Questioning tradition and forging our own path is a worthwhile activity.
- 15 Why should heroes wear capes? They're impractical and overly conspicuous. It's nothing more than a ridiculous trope from comic book illustrators.
- 16 We can all make the choice to be a hero. The availability of a cape, and whether or not we fancy wearing it, is irrelevant.

Check against delivery.

GW 16.02.19



¹ Exodus 28:31-40

² Piers Letcher. *Croatia*, 4th ed (Chalfont St Peter: Bradt Travel Guides, 2003): 19.

³ Exodus 28:40

⁴ Exodus 28:33-34