

## Commentary on Parashat Tetzaveh

By Bettijane Eisenpreis

*"I will sanctify the Tent of Meeting and the altar, and I will consecrate Aaron and his sons to serve me as priests. I will abide among the Israelites, and I will be their God. And they shall know that I the Lord am their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might abide among them, I the Lord their God."*

Exodus 29:44-45

Most of Parashat Tetzaveh is taken up with describing in mind-numbing detail the elaborate vestments that Aaron and his fellow priests are to wear. We learn about the ephod, the robes, the breastplate of decision, the Urim and Thummim, and many more sacral items. And, even though we are told that no word of Torah is unimportant to us as Jews, there comes a time in the reading of this portion that we are tempted to ask, "What's the point?"

The point comes in the paragraph quoted above. Not once, but three times, God stresses that He will be and is the God of the Israelites. While He has already said as much in the First Commandment," this is not as simple as it appears on first reading. The text states that God is the God of the Israelites, but it doesn't say that God is the Supreme Being for anyone else. Aaron and his sons have to dress in a certain way and behave in a certain way because they are serving the God of Israel. What does that mean for the rest of the world?

At this point in the narrative, the rest of the world is not important. Exodus tells the story of a nation that has been enslaved for over 400 years, has been freed by God and must now make a most difficult journey across a wilderness to establish its own nation. In order to remain free and

to survive Israel must agree to its part of the bargain. It's a two-way street: God will protect Israel; Israel will observe God's commandments. God knows He is asking a lot of this newly liberated people. That's why the assurance is so necessary – "I am the Lord their God."

The God of Exodus dwells right in the middle of the Israelites, is present in the Holy of Holies, and tells them when to travel on and when to stay in one place. Since God is present among them, it is important that the priests are clothed and behave with due reverence. The elaborate description of their clothing is understandable because the people believed God was right there in the Holy of Holies and could see, hear and smell the elaborate ceremonies.

If it seems unfair that God's power and protection are only limited to the Israelites, it is also true that only the Israelites are obliged to follow the elaborate catalogue of laws laid forth in the Five Books of Moses. The rest of the world, as viewed by the Torah, only had to obey basic principles. Of course, we no longer believe this limited idea; nor do we think that one religion has a direct path to God and salvation.

But the story of Exodus is still a remarkable story. And to pay adequate tribute to a powerful God, who led Israel "out of the Land of Egypt, out of the House of Bondage" the Bible has to depict an elaborate Tabernacle and priesthood.

When I was a teenager going to Temple in Wilkes-Barre, PA, I would no more go to Friday night services without my hat and gloves than I would go naked. We're more relaxed now, and that reflects the general attitude of society. But every once in a while, I wonder if I should be worshipping without my hat on. There's something to be said for dressing up for God, like the priests of old.