



Haftarat Shabbat Chanukah: Wearing Our Proper Robes

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander
President and Rosh HaYeshiva, Ohr Torah Stone
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The themes appearing in the Haftarah for Shabbat Chanukah come across as especially well fitted for the occasion. Taken from the book of Zechariah, whose prophecies address the early years of the second Beit Hamikdash, the Haftarah opens with a vision of the exuberant celebration of the return of the divine presence to Jerusalem and the Temple, and closes with the angelic lighting of the Menorah, along with the fitting Chanukah message of “not by might, not by power, but by my spirit” (4:6). Finding the connection to the holiday seems pretty straightforward.

The middle of the Haftarah, though, feels mostly like filler material, less directly related to the holiday’s themes. Zechariah addresses Yehoshua, the son of Jehozadak, the high priest at the time of the construction and dedication of the second Beit Hamikdash, under the leadership of Zerubabel. Despite Yehoshua’s stature and position, even complimentary described by the prophet as “a brand plucked from the fire,” (3:2) Yehoshua is reprimanded for wearing “soiled garments,” which are replaced with more dignified “robes” in the prophetic vision (3:4).

Throughout the Torah portions that are potentially connected with this haftarah – namely Shabbatot that can fall out on Chanukah – the clothing of protagonists often serves as a symbolic language. It communicates messages of transition, moral turpitude, or elevated stature. This recurring motif enriches the haftarah’s message, with Yehoshua’s soiled and then purified robes reflecting a transition from sin to spiritual renewal.

While the commentators agree that these soiled garments in our haftarah are a reference to some sinful behavior, they debate what act is referenced here. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 93a) claims that Yehoshua was punished for the fact that his children married non-Jewish women, as we are told in Ezra 10:18, a behavior that is especially unbecoming of the high priest’s children. The sin, represented by the dirty garments, is his future, which is soiled due to the fact that Yehoshua does not reprimand his children for this behavior.

Yet Abarbanel, in his commentary (Ch. 3) to Zechariah, points to another sin: it would be committed by the Hasmonean descendants of Yehoshua. Abarbanel claims they would defy the division of roles between the king and spiritual teachers and the priests. Following the defeat of the Greeks, the Hasmoneans asserted power, taking claim not only of the priesthood, but also of the monarchy. This is a sinful contradiction to the requirement that the monarchy stay in the hands of the Davidic line from the tribe of Judah, as Ramban similarly notes in his commentary to Parshat Vayechi (Bereishiet 49:10).



It is for this reason, Ramban notes, that the Hasmoneans are eventually punished, losing their power and status in the later years of the Second Temple period. The role of the priests, Zechariah insists, is to retain the sanctity of their priestly robes and be concerned for the spiritual future of the people and not to dirty themselves with the politics of the monarchy.

At the heart of this prophetic vision addressing the Hasmonean kingdom is the principle of the separation of powers. A surplus of power and dominance for any one person or group, a lack of checks and balances, poses a major threat to the strength of a society, as the history of the Hasmonean dynasty demonstrates.

Yet even for us, at the more personal level, separation of powers has great meaning as well. In Zechariah's vision, the danger of the priests serving as kings is that they will fail in the completion of their priestly mission as spiritual leaders of the people. They will be unable to maintain the purity of mind and deed that being the spiritual teachers of the Jewish people requires. All of us have a range of skills and capabilities, yet we would be mistaken if we attempted to stretch ourselves beyond our unique abilities. Our goal to achieve success is to focus on our unique capabilities while working with others who have different responsibilities and different unique capabilities.

Chanukah offers us a reminder to direct our energies to those areas where we are best fitted to shine, rather than trying to do it all and finding ourselves failing in activities in which we have no competence. Each of us has been blessed by the Divine with certain strengths and with a certain mission.

Rather than working to overstep into someone else's role and engage in activity that is not natural, we should find within ourselves the capacity to live out our own missions to the fullest in fulfillment of the divine gifts bestowed upon us.

While each of us is called to shine through our unique capabilities, we must also recognize that our individual lights are not meant to compete with or diminish one another – but rather to collectively illuminate the world. In our current era of deep divisions and polarization, the message of Chanukah becomes even more relevant: just as each of the Menorah's individual flames stands alone (in fact, a candle with two wicks is forbidden), they create a unified radiance as they burn together. So too must we learn to honor our distinct paths while working together toward our shared goals.

Indeed, we are charged to light up the world – each of us, through our own unique light, contributing to a greater, stronger brilliance.