

There is that, upon which we cannot gaze,
and that, upon which we must not.

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Weekly Parsha

Tetzaveh

RABBI BERNARD FOX

"And you shall make sacred
garments for Ahron your
brother for dignity and glory."
(Shemot 27:2)

The garments of the Kohen
Gadol - the High Priest - were
designed to create an impressive
visual appearance. Halacha also

(continued on page 6)

IN THE DARK

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

My friend Jessie was reviewing the Incense Altar in Parshas Tetzaveh. She wondered why it was omitted from inclusion in last week's Parsha Terumah, where the other vessels were discussed. The Incense Altar is one of four vessels located in the Temple. The other three are the Ark, the Showbread Table and the Menorah. Why was the Incense Altar not included in the discussion of the other three vessels?

I started to look over this section and noticed that the command to burn incense is connected to both; the cleaning and lighting of the Menorah, each morning and evening respectively:

"And on it Aaron shall fumigate a spice incense every morning, when he cleans the lights, he shall incense it. And when Aaron lights the lights in the evening, he shall incense it, a regular incense before God for your generations."
(Exod. 30:7,8)

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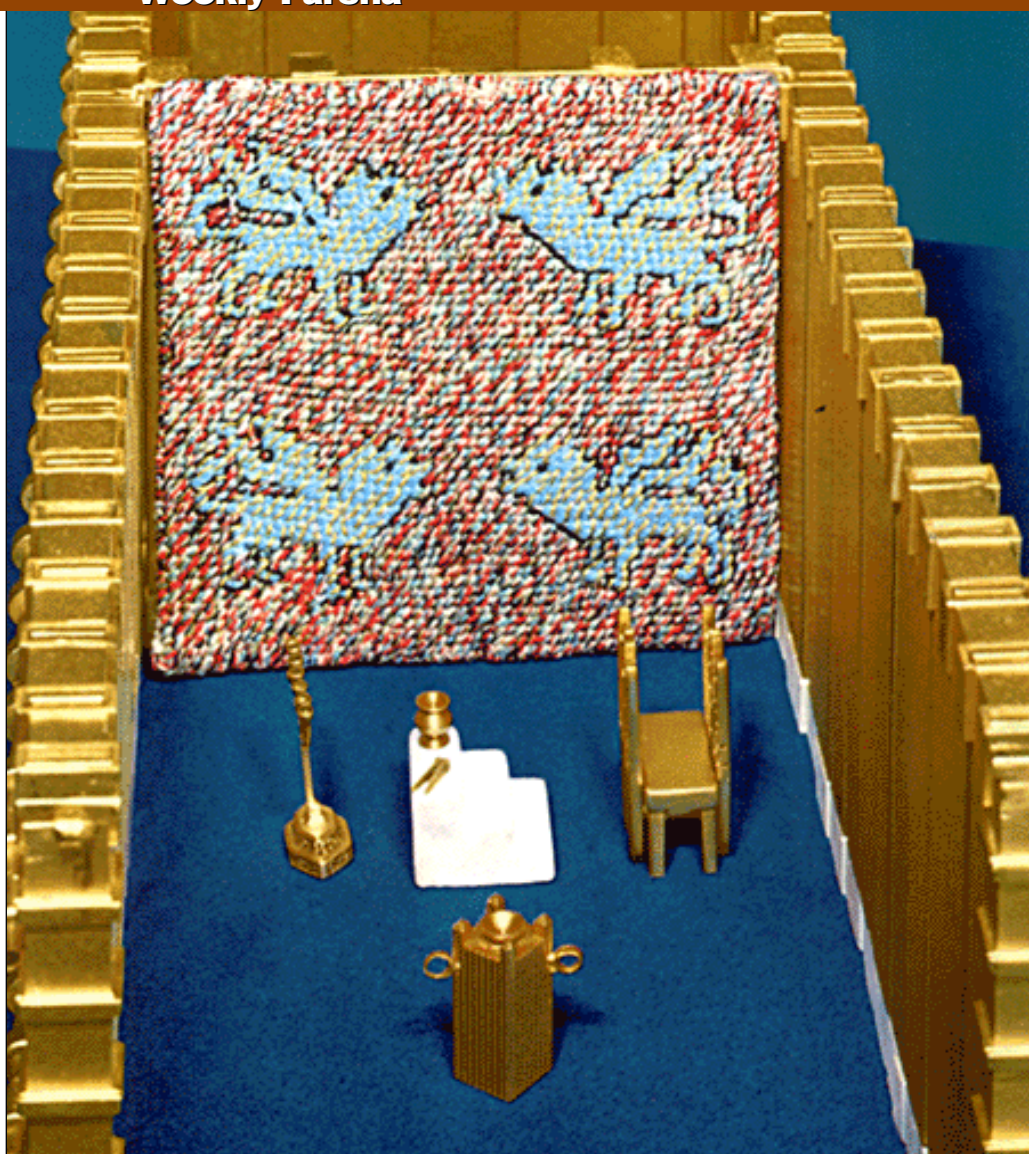


(In the Dark continued from previous page)

Weekly Parsha

*Pictured at right:
Vantage point of the
priest as he enters the
Temple: the Incense
Altar is met first
(foreground) with the
Menorah at left and the
Table at right.
The Parochess curtain
hangs in the
background, veiling the
Ark of the covenant.*

*Bird's-eye view: page 5, bottom
right, along with the Temple's
other vessels.*



What is the connection between the Incense Altar and the Menorah? Is the burning of incense only accidentally tied to these two parts of the day, or does something in the incense require this timing? The Talmud teaches that the incense is to be burned quite literally “during” the cleaning of the Menorah: the priests would clean the wicks and ashes from 5 of the 7 bowls of the Menorah; interrupt their cleaning with the lighting of the incense, and return to clean the remaining two bowls. What is the reason for this interruption? Which demands which: does Menorah demand incense, or does incense demand Menorah? Perhaps, they require each other. Reading the actual verses below, it appears to me that the Incense Altar follows the ‘lead’ of the Menorah: it is fumed, only when work is done with the Menorah. So we conclude that the time of burning incense is subordinated to the Menorah. What is this

relationship? What purposes do these two vessels serve? God’s laws must be reasonable.

Another interesting point is the Torah’s law regarding the Incense Altar’s position. It is actually described first:

“And you shall place it before the Parochess, which is over the Ark of Testimony; before the Kaporets which is on the Testimony, by which I meet you there.” (Exod. 30:1)

Of course we wonder why two relationships are stated. The Incense Altar is to be placed, 1) before the Parochess (separating curtain) and, 2) before the Kaporets (the Ark’s cover with the golden Cherub figurines). So which one is this Incense Altar to be placed in front of: the Parochess or the Kaporets? And why is its position considered “before” the Parochess? It is in fact not directly in front of

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it: this Incense Altar is further away from this Parochess curtain, than are the Menorah and the Showbread Table. Rashi answers: it is equidistant from the left and right walls as one enters the Temple. In contrast, the Table was at the north side at the right, and the Menorah on the south side at the left, not centered, as was the Altar. Rashi states that “before the Parochess” teaches that one must align the Incense Altar to be directly in line with the Ark’s position. This means that there is a relationship between the Altar and the Ark. What is it?

An interesting chapter in Maimonides work, the “Guide” is apropos at this point.

Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed – Book III, CHAPTER IX

“THE corporeal element in man is a large screen and partition that prevents him from perfectly perceiving abstract ideals: this would be the case even if the corporeal element were as pure and superior as the substance of the spheres; how much more must this be the case with our dark and opaque body. However great the exertion of our mind may be to comprehend the Divine Being or any of the ideals, we find a screen and partition between Him and ourselves. Thus the prophets frequently hint at the existence of a partition between God and us. They say He is concealed from us in vapours, in darkness, in mist, or in a thick cloud: or use similar figures to express that on account of our bodies we are unable to comprehend His essence. This is the meaning of the words, “Clouds and darkness are round about Him” (Ps. xcvi. 2). The prophets tell us that the difficulty consists in the grossness of our substance: they do not imply, as might be gathered from the literal meaning of their words, that God is corporeal, and is invisible because He is surrounded by thick clouds, vapours, darkness, or mist. This figure is also expressed in the passage, “He made darkness His secret place” (Ps. xviii. 12). The object of God revealing Himself (on Sinai) in thick clouds, darkness, vapours, and mist was to teach this lesson; for every prophetic vision contains some lesson by means of allegory; that mighty vision, therefore, though the greatest of all visions, and above all comparison, viz., His revelation in a thick cloud, did not take

place without any purpose, it was intended to indicate that we cannot comprehend Him on account of the dark body that surrounds us. It does not surround God, because He is incorporeal. A tradition is current among our people that the day of the revelation on Mount Sinai was misty, cloudy, and a little rainy. Comp.” Lord, when thou wentest forth from Seir, when thou marchedst out of the field of Edom, the earth trembled, and the heavens dropped water” (Judges v. 4). The same idea is expressed by the words “darkness, clouds, and thick darkness” (Deut. iv. 11). The phrase does not denote that darkness surrounds God, for with Him there is no darkness, but the great, strong, and permanent light, which, emanating from Him, illuminates all darkness, as is expressed by the prophetic simile, “And the earth shined with His glory”. (Ezek. xliii. 2).”

Maimonides makes it quite clear that God orchestrated Revelation at Sinai with clouds. This was done precisely to teach our ignorance of what God is. One might think – especially at Sinai – that he has received some positive knowledge of God. Therefore, God cloaked that event amidst darkness, cloud and rain. He desired no one to walk away, assuming they acquired any positive knowledge about Him. Moses too reminds the people: “you saw no form” when referring to that awesome event. So disastrous is the fallacy that we might know anything about God, that God killed 57,000 people when they looked into the Ark upon its return from the Philistines. Once someone feels there can be something “seen” in relation to God, he has forfeited his life, as he errs in the most primary of all areas: what God is and what He is not. He is worthy of death.

Clouds

God manifests His providence over Israel via cloud - both in the Temple, and during the Exodus. God uses cloud to embody the idea that He cannot be understood: His true nature is “clouded” by our very physical natures, as Maimonides stated. On Yom Kippur the High Priest smokes the entire Holy of Holies, lest he too fall prey to a notion that something may be seen in connection to God, in that exalted room housing the stunning Cherubs and the miraculous Ten Commandments.

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Ramban's Equation

The first Ramban on Parshas Terumah states that if one were to study the account of Revelation at Sinai, he would understand the Temple and Tabernacle. I did not uncover that, to which Ramban alludes. His equation is strictly limited to a parallel between the Temple and Sinai, and nothing else. However, I did notice some other eye-opening parallels:

- 1) The Jews left Egypt behind them – where, via the first Passover sacrifice, they denounced animal worship.
- 2) Upon their exit from Egypt, the Jews were led by God's cloud by day, and His pillar of fire at night.
- 3) They were sustained with Manna, God's miraculous bread.
- 4) All of this took place en route to Sinai where the Torah was given.
- 5) Sinai took place amidst a flaming mountain.
- 6) God's words emanated from the darkness.

Now compare those 6 to these 6:

- 1) The priest leaves the altar behind him outside the Temple – where animals are killed.
- 2) Upon entrance in the Temple, he first encounters the Gold Altar of incense, which makes clouds only by day, while he lights the Menorah only at night.
- 3) In the Temple is the Table housing the showbread, twelve loaves correspond to the Twelve Tribes.
- 4) All of this is en route to the Holy of Holies, where God's Torah is housed.
- 5) The Ark is a golden structure that mimics the flames. (*Ramban*)
- 6) God's words emanate from the concealed Holy of Holies.

History Reiterated – Temple Embodies God's Providence

I am not offering a conclusive explanation here. I merely wish to suggest my observations. But I do find them intriguing. Why do we reiterate the cloud, the pillar of fire, Manna, and Sinai in the Temple's vessels and design? These events imparted to us levels of knowledge of God's providence – this is how God works. Such knowledge is our objective: to arrive at an ever growing knowledge of God's ways, His justice, kindness, mercy, and all other methods. These historical events become eternally solidified in the Temple's vessels. Each one alludes to

some aspect of how God relates to man, teaching us more truth about the Creator. Although we never experienced it first hand, all future generations benefit from what God imparted to those Jews who left Egypt, by studying or experiencing the Temple. The Divine providence they experienced, teaching them new truths about God, is also available to us through studying the Torah's record of those events, and through Temple.

Subordinate to the Menorah

I again suggest inconclusively. Besides recalling the pillar of fire, perhaps the Menorah's light also alludes to "knowledge of God". Its seven branches certainly remind one of Creation's seven days...an allusion to God's wisdom. Light too in Torah is equated to Torah knowledge, "For a flame is a mitzvah, and Torah is light". (Proverbs, 6:22) Perhaps then, our limited knowledge of God must be tempered by the Incense Altar's cloud. As Maimonides taught, cloud always encompasses God. Similarly, cloud must encompass light. The Altar must always provide cloudy fumes when actively working with the Menorah. That which embodies the knowledge of God – the Menorah's light – must be accompanied by the realization that we never achieve positive knowledge of God: He is cloaked, and thus, the incense must cast a veil with its billows.

For this reason, the Altar is to follow the Menorah's lead: when one works with the Menorah, only then does the Altar enter the picture. The Altar "negates" something, and does not exist of its own. It is therefore not recorded together with those other three vessels that impart positive concepts. The Incense Altar reminds man that he cannot possess any positive knowledge about God.

Not only is it true that we have no positive knowledge of God, but if we were to assume this, we would then follow with an additional error: we would 'project' onto God. It is man's nature that when he is familiar with something, that he assumes more than what reality dictates. You might meet someone new who is similar to an old friend, and then you might assume other similarities to exist, although you never witnessed such similarities. The same is the case in connection to God. If one were to make one false assumption, he would make others. Perhaps this is an additional reason why we are so careful not to make any assumptions about God. The very existence of this Incense Altar addresses the need to constantly reiterate never to cross that line.

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Placement

This approach would also answer the positioning of the Incense Altar. It was aligned with the Parochess, as this very “curtain” carried the same function as the Incense Altar: they both serve to “cover” something. I found the verse describing the positioning of the Incense Altar quite interesting. I will note it again: “And you shall place it before the Parochess, which is over the Ark of Testimony; before the Kaporess which is on the Testimony, by which I meet you there.” (Exod. 30:1) The verse keeps shifting what it is exactly that we place the Altar before: is it the Parochess, the Kaporess, the place where God speaks to us?

Perhaps the very structure of this verse alludes to the elusive nature of knowledge of God. We are not told to place the Altar before one, single object, but many references are given, as if to say, even in Temple, there is no such idea of “before God”. He is not physical. He takes up no space. He is not “in” the Temple.

On this point, my friend Shaye suggested this verse conveys “degrees of separation” between God and us. And this is conveyed only in the Temple. For it is only when a ‘relationship’ exists – in Temple – that degrees of separation may apply.

However, the Parochess is mentioned first in our verse because of its similar function to the

Altar. However, ultimately, we are to arrive at the purpose of the Temple: greater knowledge of God. Thus, the end of the verse refers to the place where God speaks from, from where knowledge emanates. This is the objective of Temple.

Addendum

On a micro level, Menorah and the Incense Altar create light and darkness respectively. Through them we are mindful of what we can and cannot know. On a macro level, again we see this parallel: God’s first creations included light and darkness. As if these two entities precede all others in importance, and rightfully so: knowledge is the purpose in God’s creation of a universe...for mankind to study His wisdom. The parallel continues even into man’s very workings: man’s conscious and unconscious minds deal with what is known, and what is hidden.

In Genesis, God created lights from the darkness. Of all his physical creations, most stupendous are His heavenly luminaries. Conversely, man moves in the opposite direction: declaring his ignorance of He who is all knowing. God created the great lights, while man strives to escape his “night”.

Perhaps we have shed some light on the fact that we are in the dark. ■



regulated other aspects of the Kohen Gadol's appearance. In these cases, as well, the purpose of the regulation was to assure a positive physical appearance. Our pasuk indicates that this attention to appearance was intended to assure that the Kohen Gadol would be treated with dignity and respect. This is surprising. Our Sages often taught the importance of not being impressed by superficial behaviors or appearances. Instead, we are to assess a person based upon the individual's inner self. Why does the Torah stress superficial aspects of the Kohen Gadol? More shocking is the prohibition against the Kohen Gadol's marriage to a widow. This prohibition is also designed to protect the public image of the High Priest. Why should the Torah acknowledge a shallow prejudice against the widow? Would it not be preferable for the Torah to allow this marriage? Such a policy would counter any social stigma attached to the widow.

These laws demonstrate one of the unique qualities of the Torah. Torah takes human weakness seriously. The Torah was created to govern an actual society. In the real world, prejudice and superficiality exist. The Torah recognizes these faults. At the same time, it attempts to correct human behavior. Both measures are essential. Failure to recognize human frailty would result in a system poorly equipped to deal with an actual human being.

The Torah also attempts to improve upon these human limitations. The garments of the Kohen Gadol are an excellent illustration of the Torah's method of dealing with this dilemma. The Torah requires that the Kohen Gadol wear beautiful garments. However, these garments are more than attractive vestments. Every detail of design is guided by an intricate system of halacha. The observer is attracted to the beauty of the garments, and hopefully, this initial interest leads to contemplation of the ingenious laws. The observer comes to recognize that the greatest beauty is not in the superficial material dimension. Instead, true beauty is found in the world of knowledge.

"And these are the garments that they shall make: a breastplate an ephod, a jacket, a patterned tunic, a turban, and a belt. And they shall make sacred garments for Ahron your brother and for his sons so that they will serve as priests to me." (Shemot 28:4)

The pasuk describes various garments of the Kohen Gadol. In total, the Kohen Gadol wore eight garments. Maimonides comments that the eight golden garments of the Kohen Gadol

consisted of the four worn by the common priest, plus the jacket, ephod breastplate and headband. This statement troubles the Kesef Mishne. In fact, only the four special garments included gold thread. The other garments worn by both the Kohen Gadol and the common Kohen did not include gold thread. Why, then, does Maimonides refer to all eight of the garments as "golden"? Perhaps, Maimonides wishes to teach an important lesson. The eight garments of the Kohen Gadol are not individual items. Instead, they merge into a single vestment. The four common garments join with the four woven with gold to create a new entity. This new, integrated, vestment is the "golden vestment" of the Kohen Gadol. In this case, the individual garments are not "golden" because they contain gold thread. They are golden through inclusion in the overall vestment.

"And you should make a Breastplate of Judgment of a woven design. Like the design of the Ephod you shall make it. You shall make it of gold, blue, purple, scarlet wool and twisted linen." (Shemot 28:15)

The Kohen Gadol wore eight garments. These consisted of the four garments worn by every kohen and an additional four special vestments. One of the special vestments was the Choshen Mishpat - the Breastplate of Judgment. The Choshen hung from the shoulders of the Kohen Gadol. The vestment was made of woven cloth. Embedded into the Choshen were precious stones representing the shevatim - the tribes of Bnai Yisrael. The Choshen had a unique function. Questions could be posed to the Kohen Gadol. He would respond by consulting the Choshen. Maimonides explains this process based upon the Talmud. The question would be brought to the Kohen Gadol. He would immediately be overcome with the spirit of prophecy. The Kohen Gadol would look at the Choshen. The response would be transmitted to him in a prophetic vision. The answer was expressed through the letters engraved upon the stones of the Breastplate. Not every issue could be resolved through the Choshen.

Rashi comments, in Tractate Eruvin, that questions of halacha were not addressed in this manner. In the Prophets we find that the Choshen was consulted on national issues. A king might refer to the Choshen for guidance regarding a military campaign. The limitations upon the use of the Choshen reflect an important principle of the Torah. Prophecy cannot be used to resolve issues of halacha. Such questions are the responsibility of the Sages and the courts. They must address these

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(Tetzaveh continued from previous page)

issues using the standards of halacha and their own intellects.

Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel makes an amazing comment that seems to contradict this principle. The Choshen is referred to, in our pasuk, as the Breast-plate of Judgment. What is the relationship between the Choshen and judgment? Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel explains that the Choshen could be consulted over legal issues! This seems to contradict the principle that issues of halacha cannot be resolved through prophecy. The last mishna in Tractate Edyot suggests a similar contradiction. Our Sages teach us that the Messianic era will be preceded by the reappearance of Eliyahu the prophet. The mishna explains that Eliyahu will help prepare the path for the Meshiach. Raban Yochanan ben Zakai posits that one of Eliyahu's functions will be to clarify issues of lineage. Maimonides explains that Eliyahu will identify those individuals who have become completely alienated from their Jewish roots. They will be welcomed back into Bnai Yisrael. In addition, impostors whose lineage is imperfect will be identified and excluded from the Jewish people. This would seem to be another example of prophecy used as a means to resolve an issue of halacha.

Rav Tzvi Hirsch Chayutz Ztl, based upon a careful analysis of Maimonides' comments, offers a brilliant response. He explains that the limitation of prophecy as a tool in halacha needs to be more fully understood. This limitation excludes prophecy from being used to determine the proper formulation of the law. For example, in order for a person to be punished by the courts for eating a prohibited substance, a minimum quantity must be ingested. Assume a person consumes less than this amount. Perhaps, the individual eats a portion of prohibited fat that is less than the size of an olive. Is this prohibited by the Torah or is this activity prohibited by the Sages? This issue is disputed by Rebbe Yochanan and Rebbe Shimon ben Lakish. The dispute revolves around the formulation of the Torah prohibition. Such an issue cannot be resolved through prophecy. Sometimes a question of halacha develops in a case in which the formulation of the law is clear. Questions of lineage often develop in this manner. The question does not stem from a dispute regarding the formulation of the criteria in halacha. Instead, the application of these laws is uncertain. Consider a case in which we simply do not know the lineage of the individual. Rav Tzvi Hirsch Chayutz suggests that prophecy is not excluded as a means for resolving these factual questions.

This explains the mishna in Tractate Edyot.

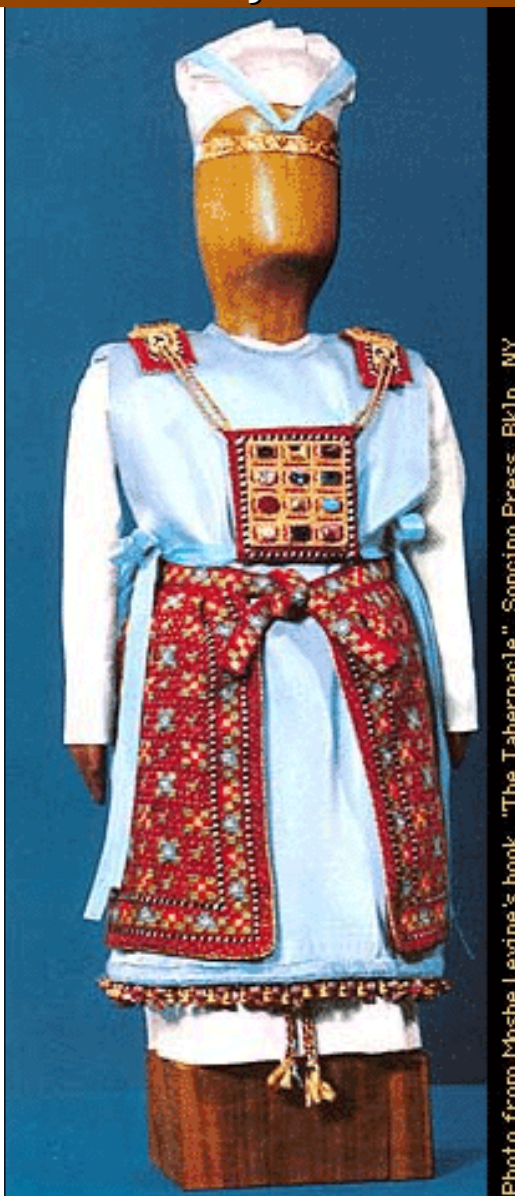


Photo from Moshe Levine's book, "The Tabernacle", Soncino Press, Bklyn., NY

Eliyahu the prophet will not resolve issues of lineage through altering the formulation of the law. This would indeed constitute a violation of the principle excluding prophecy from matters of halacha. Eliyahu will deal with factual issues. He will divine the true family history of the individual and determine the true facts in the case. This approach can also explain the comments of Rabbaynu Yonatan ben Uziel. There is a place in halacha for prophecy and the Choshen. This is the area identified by Rav Chayutz. Questions that are factual and not related to the formulation of the halacha could be referred to the Choshen.

"And for the sons of Ahron you should make tunics. And you should make for them sashes. And hats you should make for them, for honor and glory." (Shemot 28:40)

This pasuk enumerates three of the garments

worn by the kohen. The Jerusalem Talmud in Tractate Yoma notes that the plural is used in reference to the tunics. The Talmud explains that this alludes to the requirement to make two tunics for each kohen. These comments are difficult to understand. All of the garments in the passage are described in the plural. Yet, there was no requirement for the kohen to have two sashes or two hats. The plural is apparently used in agreement with the subject of the pasuk. The pasuk is describing the garments of the sons of Ahron. The subject - the sons of Ahron - is plural. Accordingly, the reference to each garment is in the plural!

Rashi, in his commentary on Tractate Yoma, discusses of the two tunics of the kohen. The Talmud explains that one of these tunics was of lesser quality. Rashi comments that each tunic had a specific function. The garment of lesser quality was worn when removing the ashes from the altar. This garment was then removed. The kohen dressed himself in the better tunic to perform his other services. This practice was designed as an expression of respect. The garment used to remove the ashes from the altar became soiled. It was henceforth unfit for the more elevated priestly services. Rashi's comments explain the need for two tunics. However, why must the first tunic be of lesser quality? Rashi apparently maintains that the requirement for two tunics was not merely practical. The first tunic was specifically of lower quality in order to distinguish it from the primary tunic. The primary tunic was worn during the offering of sacrifices. In order to emphasize the special significance of the primary tunic and the service associated with the garment, a secondary tunic was created. Its lower quality emphasized the sacredness of the primary tunic. In other words, it would have been inappropriate for the two garments to be of equal quality. This would fail to emphasize the elevated status of the primary tunic. From this perspective, it appears that the two tunics were not independent garments. Instead, they functioned as a single unit. The secondary tunic alluded to the sanctity of the primary garment. The two tunics are really one entity consisting of a primary and secondary element.

Now the comments of the Jerusalem Talmud can be better appreciated. The pasuk refers to this single entity of the tunic. However, the Sages created an allusion to the dual components of this entity through reinterpreting the pasuk in a non-literal sense. The passage now has a twofold meaning that accurately describes the tunic as a single unit composed of two parts. (Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon [Rambam / Maimonides] Mishne Torah, Hilchot Klai HaMikdash 10:11.)



Staring at Rainbows

For Sarah & Tamar

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Jessie: Today, Sarah saw a rainbow and I remember hearing that you are not supposed to tell someone when you see a rainbow. We found that difficult to understand because rainbows are beautiful and unusual, and we would want to share the experience with someone. Also, you make a blessing upon seeing one. So why wouldn't it be a good thing for another person to be involved in? If a blessing is recited over seeing a rainbow, there is a concept that a person can benefit from it. Thanks, Jess

Mesora: I believe the true violation is to "stare" ...not that you cannot recount what you saw. This makes sense, as the rainbow recalls the promise by God to never flood the

Earth again. It recalls man's evil nature. Staring might express a feeling of haughtiness, as if to say, "I am above this, I can look upon that which embodies the destruction of others." Instead, one should be humbled by God's generosity in promising not to destroy man again. Therefore, not staring demonstrates that humility.

Talmud Chagiga 16a states:

"Anyone who does not care about his Creator's honor, it would be a mercy to him that he should not have come to the world." In other words, better off that this person was never created. "Who is such a person? Rabbi Abba says this

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(refers to one) who stares at the rainbow. As it says, 'Like the appearance of the rainbow that will be in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the brilliance all around. That was the appearance of the similitude of God's honor'."

From here (Ezek. 1:28) all Rabbis derive the equation of rainbows to God's honor. In fact, the very verse makes an equation.

Further in Talmud Chagiga it is stated:

"There explained Rabbi Judah, son of Rabbi Nachmani: one who stares at three things, his eyes will grow dim; at the rainbow, at the prince, and at the priests: at the rainbow, as it is written, 'like the appearance of the rainbow that will be in the clouds on a rainy day'...'it is the appearance of the similitude of God's honor'."

Both statements relate the act of staring at the rainbow, to either a lack of honor for his "Owner" (kono), or for "God", respectively. Of course they both refer to God, but have slightly different meanings. But the main question is how staring at a rainbow is a lack of honor for God. Also, why does one Rabbi say it is preferred that this soul would not have been created, and the other, that the violator is met with some degree of blindness?

The latter opinion seems readily understandable: one's corruption is with his eyes, so God directs this violator to correct his flaw by underlining it, with blindness. But Rabbi Abba, the fist view, is not focusing on the "act" of the violation, but on the underlying corruption. One who stares at the rainbow, according to Rabbi Abba, has no regard for the honor of his Creator. Why does he refer to God as "Creator", in this specific capacity? The second rabbi did not do so. We must ponder this.

Finally, we must ask the most primary question: what is it about a rainbow – over all other creations – that beholds such status? Why is staring at this object a violation of God's honor? But if one stared at the sun, moon, meteor, or other objects or phenomena, he would not be in violation. Why? Wherein the rainbow lays its distinction? Let us read more of what the other Rabbis wrote.

The Hagahos HaBach possessed a different edition:

"Anyone who stares at the rainbow must

fall on his face, as it says: "Like the appearance of the rainbow that will be in the clouds on a rainy day, so was the appearance of the brilliance all around. That was the appearance of the similitude of God's honor. When I saw, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice speaking." (He continues) "In the West they cursed one who gazed at the rainbow, for it appears as heresy. Rather, a person should recite, 'Blessed (is God) He remembers his covenant'. A person who sees a rainbow must bless. What does he bless? Blessed (is God) He remembers his covenant. Rabbi Yishmael the son of Rabbi Beroka said (one should recite) 'Blessed (is God) He who remembers the covenant, He is trustworthy in His covenant, and He sustains His statements.'"

The Hagahos HaBach says that since the verse ends with a reaction of Ezekiel "falling on his face" in humility, we too must fall on our faces. What about seeing a rainbow demands such a response? Additionally, what is the concept behind this blessing?

The Maharsha says that the rainbow is one of three things that are manifestations of a similitude of God's "shechina", or presence. (Not to be confused with God Himself, who in no way exists in physical space) He quotes the verse; "For man cannot see me and live" teaching that staring at the rainbow is akin to being in a state where one cannot live. This explains, albeit factually, Rabbi Abba's strict response that one is better off never having been born.

How is a rainbow connected to God's shechina, to His presence, more than anything else? Prior to the Flood in Noah's generation, rainbows were already part of creation, as Rabbi once taught: "the Torah writes, 'My bow I have placed in the cloud'. It does not read, that I 'created' in the clouds." As the rainbow was already created, God only designated it ("placed it") to now serve as a sign of His covenant for future generation, that He would never flood the entire Earth as He had done.

The rainbow is beautiful. It appears precisely when rain might fall – as in the Flood. The presence of moisture in the clouds is essential to refract sunlight into the seven colors of the bow. We are reminded of the Flood. Perhaps due to its rarity, we are enamored by its presence, its height, its colors, its lofty expanse crossing miles and parading over mountaintops into the horizon. It is something so immense that dwarfs us.

But what is improper about "staring" at it? Rabbi Reuven Mann asked why it was proper, and even warranted, that the Jews stare at Moses' hands when battling Amalek, and at the Copper Snake when they were bitten. Why then is staring improper in regards to the rainbow? I feel the attractions just mentioned are at the root of the answer.

The rainbow is beautiful. But it is a reminder of that which is evil: our corruptions, which led to the Flood. As such, man will be tempted to see only the good in the rainbow, (i.e., its colors and magnificence) and lose all sight of its true designation as a reminder of God's mercy, and our faults. Therefore, the act of staring at it for beauty opposes God's will; that it be a reminder of evil. Staring is therefore philosophically prohibited.

We must recall God's exclusive role as our Creator, and fully grasp and appreciate that our lives are in His hands. He allows us to exist without visiting death upon us...again. Seeing the rainbow must generate in us the response of falling on our faces in complete humility. We now understand Hagahos HaBach and Rabbi Abba. Rabbi Abba said that we have no honor for our "Creator" when we gaze at the rainbow. "Creator" refers to the One in whose hands our "created life" abides. We therefore recite, "Blessed (is God) He who remembers the covenant, He is trustworthy in His covenant, and He sustains His statements." We recite this concept that God keeps His word; He has not abolished human life.

The rainbow signifies God's continued sustain of His oath. The rainbow represents God abiding with us, His "shechina".

Jessie: thank you very much! I discussed it with Sarah and Tamar. We thought of what we learned about Shemona Esrei. The Shulchan Aruch mentions that a person should daven (pray) with their head bowed, and we had discussed that it is inappropriate for the servant to look in the master's eyes, as that implies equality. Sarah mentioned that if the servant wanted to look at the master because the master was wearing beautiful clothes, the servant would only peek and would never stare. So we concluded that the rainbow reminds us of God's honor, and we behave like a servant in front of the master.

I very much liked the point about it being specifically the rainbow as the rainbow reminds us of God's mercy. It makes a lot of sense that when seeing a rainbow; a person would be struck by his smallness in front of God's honor and mercy. ■