

Our Inner Priestly Fabulousness
Parashat Tetzaveh 2008
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Tonight I want to dedicate my simple words to two young people – a fifteen year old and a five year old.

Lawrence King, a gay junior high school student in Oxnard, CA. was shot at E.O. Green Junior High School on Tuesday morning and pronounced brain dead yesterday around 2 pm.

According to reports from friends of Lawrence King speaking to the Los Angeles Times, the victim self-identified as gay and recently began wearing make-up and feminine jewelry. He became the target of ridicule by some of his classmates.

I dedicate my remarks to another child, very much alive, a vivacious Kindergarten classmate of my daughter's. In an essay entitled *My Pink Boy*, appearing in the SF Chronicle a couple years ago, here's a snippet of what his mother wrote about her gender variant son:

“From the time he could talk, it was clear Liam was different from other boys. Watching "Dragon Tales" on PBS, he identifies with Cassie, the smart, shy girl dragon. Although he's becoming interested in medieval weaponry, he also spends a lot of time imagining he's Tinkerbell. He was a fairy for Halloween, complete with gauzy skirt, gossamer wings and jeweled tiara. When Liam's grandma asked what he most wanted for Hanukkah this year, he said, without a moment's hesitation: a pink princess dress. So his loving, accepting, open-minded grandmother bought him one. He prances around our house wearing it, with pink Converse sneakers, brandishing the homemade sword his father fashioned out of bamboo from our yard.”

I'd like to believe the ten years between the two boys will make it easier for my daughter's classmate than it's been for Lawrence King, may he and his family be comforted in their sorrow and this great tragedy.

Eleanor Roosevelt said "Do one thing every day that scares you.”

Yesterday I wore a tie to work. Hardly a big deal when I come to Sha'ar Zahav. But yesterday, I went out into the mainstream Jewish community. I went to J, the Jewish newspaper, Board Meeting, where I have the honor of offering a torah teaching each month to a group of primarily conservative, corporate Jews dedicated to the Jewish community's growth and vitality. I have served on the board for 4 years now and I sometimes question the value of my contribution. Lately, I've decided that I would ratchet it up a notch by taking more of a risk in the torah I teach. So, yesterday, I wore a tie.

Just before going into the meeting, I called our rabbinic intern, Reuben, for a torah pep talk figuring he knew a little something about the transgression I was about to commit.

He helped me talk through my plan and gave me the measure of confidence I needed.

As I entered the Board Room, I felt all eyes on me. When it was my turn, I spoke, a bit nervously at first, about my intentional decision to wear a necktie, aware that it was a first for me with them. You see, I said, I wear ties with some frequency – on days when my comings and goings revolve around Sha’ar Zahav and our members. But whenever I have duties in the larger community, I leave the tie in the closet. I’m afraid of being an easy target for assumptions; I fear being treated with less respect, which would translate into having less power and I want to represent our synagogue in the best light, in a way that earns us a most honorable place in the community.

How does the professional lesbian rabbi navigate the age-old norms of gender in our society?

Our torah portion this week has something to say about the rabbi’s wardrobe. Well, it’s about significance of the priestly garments of Aaron the high priest and his sons.

The torah goes into great detail concerning the priestly attire. He is to wear an ephod, a breastplate of judgment, a blue robe, a fringed linen tunic, an embroidered sash and jeweled headdress with colorful accessories. Sounds a little like drag to me!

And the point of the priests’ fabulous dress is to distinguish them as special and unique in their duties and responsibilities. Now, given that we no longer have a priestly class, but rather identify as a nation of priests, each and every one of us is obliged to dress in a way that honors our inner sense of fabulousness. We are to honor our unique divine spark.

A couple weeks ago, on a Monday, my day off, I had adorned myself in a tie. I went to pick up my daughter at her Jewish Day School and just as I was getting out of the car, it dawned on me --- I was wearing a tie. I paused and considered the consequence. Parents, teachers, administrators judging me, assuming I’m ... I don’t even know what all.... Hesitating, I remembered my daughter’s classmate. Now 5, he has faced awkward and no doubt painful moments in his classroom – wearing his pink dresses, keeping his hair long. In solidarity, I marched proudly into the school, knowing I was willing to risk my reputation for his young sake!

I’d like to believe, or more importantly, act as if I believe that with the nearly 40 years between us, I have acquired the resources to wear my heart on my sleeve, or my tie as the case may be; to be myself freely and openly. I want Liam to see and to know that there are adults in his constellation, who do not hide their inner fashion fancy even as it goes against the grain; adults, who gaily move forward in life, respectfully holding public positions of authority and mixing it up with gender presentation.

I like wearing ties.

Sometimes, I like wearing skirts, stockings and even dresses. I used to wear the femme costume nearly everyday in my NY congregation. Women in slacks were off limits on the Rodeph Sholom bima in those days.

I like wearing a tie because it gives me a certain charge. It feels like this simple yet transgressive act that challenges society's narrow conventions about male and female. As a Jew, I consider it part of my job to live this challenge. We have a priestly, presidential job to do – to get past gender, to vote past gender, to recognize the manifold variations we inhabit in being created in the Divine image.

Rabbi Menachem Mendl of Chernobyl, a Hasidic writer and teacher in the 18th century asks: “What is the world? The world is God, wrapped in robes of God, so as to appear to be material. And who are we? We are God, wrapped in robes of God, our task is to unwrap the robes and to discover, uncover, that we are God,

For many of us, this may sound like a mystical, esoteric understanding of God and the world. We so often are caught up in the world's mundane aspects that we forget that God's presence is among us even as we read this. The metaphor that “robes: or “clothing” conceals God from us is common in Jewish mystical writings. We need to go beyond the immediate and “unwrap” the many layers that “hide” the essence of life – whether it be God's presence or the core of our own being. Let's not be intimidated or deceived by these outer garments, but rather go beyond them to discover what lies beneath their surface.

PS. They liked my tie. A lively discussion ensued. One woman talked about the challenges of raising a tomboy. Another man spoke about how odd it is to think that his close friends in college were afraid to come out to him, which gave me the opportunity to say that actually gender and sexual orientation are two different issues. But that's another drash.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts about all this. I invite you to honor your inner priestly fabulous and be true to your unique self – and do something a little scary, push yourself for the sake of making a little ripple in the world of repair.

Shabbat Shalom