

Shabbat shalom,¹

You might be familiar with that saying, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” This is not a Jewish saying.

In this week’s double-Torah-portion of Vayyak’hel Fekudey (וַיִּקְהַל-פְּקוּדֵי), we come across a curious phrase that appears only twice in the Torah. The phrase *lo yikka-REY-a* (לֹא יִקְרַע), meaning “shall not rip” (as in “it shall not rip”) appears in only two places: once, in our portion a few weeks ago, when discussing the *efod* (אֵפוֹד)—that special tunic worn by the High Priest; and once, in the portion we will read tomorrow morning, also when discussing the *efod* (אֵפוֹד).² In fact, these two verses

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1. Written to be delivered by a congregant on one Shabbat when I was unable to show up due to my attending to a family member’s health.
 2. Respectively Exodus 28:32 and 39:23.

of the Torah are nearly identical in their description of the *efod*. It could be that whoever wrote the Torah just said the same thing twice unconsciously. Or, it could be that whoever compiled the Torah as we have it now deemed this phrase *lo yikka-REY-a* (לא יִקְרָע) so important that they **needed** to repeat this. Yet another possibility is that, if we believe, as many biblical scholars and many liberal Jews do, that the words of the Torah are written by more than one person, we have reason to believe that the different schools of thought and the different Jewish thinkers who are responsible for our Torah felt that our religion must be based on a text that emphasizes that the *efod* of the High Priest *lo yikka-REY-a* (לא יִקְרָע) “shall not

rip.”

So, nu, what’s so important about the *efod* not ripping?

If we look back at the earliest words that our sages say about what *lo yikka-REY-a* (לא יקרע) means beyond its literal meaning, we turn our attention to the Jerusalem Talmud. You might know that the Jewish people have not one Talmud but two Talmuds: the Babylonian Talmud, and the Jerusalem Talmud. The Babylonian Talmud is a collection of rabbinic teachings written in exile, in the Jewish Diaspora of Babylonia, in present-day Iraq. The Jerusalem Talmud on the other hand, being both an earlier collection of rabbinic teachings and being a product of the Holy Land, is concerned with a variety of laws that

weren't as much of interest to Jews who lived in Exile. For Jews in the Exile of Babylonia, there was little hope that the Temple in Jerusalem would ever be rebuilt and that the Temple would be back to employing *Kohanim* (כֹּהֲנִים)—that is, the priests—and the *Leviyyim* (לְוִיִּים)—that is, the Levites, the assistants to the priests, the members of the tribe of Levi who did not merit the priesthood. But, in the Land of Israel, there was more optimism that the Temple could be rebuilt after its destruction in the year 70 C.E.. Though centuries went by without any progress, the authors of the Jerusalem Talmud still were preoccupied with how best to preserve the rituals, laws, and lore of the Temple of old—with the

hope that the Temple may be rebuilt.

In the Jerusalem Talmud, we learn that, as much as the rabbis of the Land of Israel still wanted to hold onto the memory of the Temple and as much as they wanted to stay on top of Temple law as described in the Torah, they could not remember why there was a commandment that the *efod* not rip. The rabbis, in reading and rereading about the *efod* not ripping, determined that ripping is something that can ruin the purity of certain ritual objects: including, but not limited to the *efod*. But they still wanted to understand the basis of the original statement, which they even interpreted to be a law, such that someone who ripped the *efod* would have been flogged. They asked: Did the Torah state that the *efod* shall not rip

because it would be a violation of the law if somebody ripped the *efod*? Or, did the Torah state that the *efod* shall not rip because it would be that the *efod* must be made so that it shall not rip?

Further, the rabbis of the Jerusalem Talmud asked: If the *efod* is by definition something that cannot rip, then why did some rabbis come along and determine that there was actually a punishment for someone who would rip the *efod*? And, conversely, if the Torah intended to make it a law that the *efod* shall not rip, then why is this stated in a passive voice, that the *efod* “shall not rip,” rather than an active voice of “you shall not rip the *efod*?”³

As the rabbis are often wont to do, they ask some

3. Megillah 12a.

pretty good questions about this, but they come to no real answers in the Jerusalem Talmud. Nearly a millennium later, around the 13th Century, we read more of an answer in an anonymously written book called *Sefer Ha-Hi-NUKH* (סֵפֶר הַחֲנוּךְ), which attempts to list the 613 *mitzvot* that make up Jewish living. In *Sefer Ha-Hi-NUKH* (סֵפֶר הַחֲנוּךְ), we read that the law that the *efod* not rip so that the High Priest understand the gravity of his job, such that even a small rip to his garments would be a sin.⁴ But beyond this, the rabbis teach us very little about the religious significance of this sinful rip for the next few centuries.

If you're familiar with Rabbi Abraham Joshua

4. Mitzvah 101/מצוה קא.

Heschel, who marched with the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, then you might also know that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who lived in the 20th Century had an ancestor also named Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Hasidic master who is now known by the name of his central work *Ohev Yisra'el* (אוהב ישראל), “The Lover of Israel”. That senior Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that the no-ripping law was symbolic of another part of Jewish life that would be easy to violate: speaking ill of others, and spreading lies about our peers. For *Ohev Yisra'el*, splitting that sacred tunic with the smallest tear was symbolic of the spreading of malice through just a few wrong words.⁵ Another Hasidic master,

5. Tetzavveh.

Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomir taught, pertaining more to the spiritual and ephemeral, that the tearing of the High Priest's garb paralleled the split we can experience when we feel that we are no longer at one with God—that our mouths are no longer speaking sacred, kind and true words: a manner of speech that he would consider God's very Presence speaking through our mouths.⁶ Turning more inward towards the corporeality of this law, the Hasidic Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polnoye taught that the prohibition on ripping didn't apply to the *efod* itself, but to the garb of our souls: which is to say, our own bodies. For Jacob Joseph of Polnoye, we were commanded to take care of our bodies, for they are the very precious

6. Or HaMe'ir, Tetzavveh.

vessels that house our holy souls.⁷ And, because it is mostly the Hasidic masters who took interest in the spiritual significance of these laws, it is worth our considering the words of yet another Hasidic teacher, Sh'lomoh HaKohen Rabinovich. Rabinovich suggested that the prohibition on ripping the *efod* was put in place so that the entirety of the High Priest's garb, which included ringing bells, would stay in place. Wherever the High Priest would walk, people could hear the jingle of the bells. Those bells raised others' awareness—including God's awareness—that the High Priest was ready to participate in the Temple service and to pray. The bells that rang as he prayed could help the High Priest make

7. תולדות יעקב יוסף שמות פרשת תצוה.

sure that his prayers resonated on a higher level.⁸

It is a beautiful treasure to have a tradition that provides so many different, thoughtful and sometimes even inspiring answers to one question. But it also comes at a certain cost, which is: we still might not have figured out why we have opted into a religion that for some reason emphasizes that the *efod* not rip.

For us tonight, it might be worth our considering that the *efod* is symbolic of something far greater than the tunic of the High Priest, and even greater than the entire garb of the High Priest, and even greater than our speech, and even greater than our bodies. The *efod* is perhaps symbolic of the fabric of our religion. The rabbis were

8. תפארת שלמה על פקודי.

careful to state that we must build fences around our Torah: buffers that guard us from getting too close to the intent of the Torah so that we never violate the Torah. It is better that we violate a law designed by humans than a law that must have been decreed by God. The *efod* is a garb envisioned by God but fashioned by humans, just as the *Torah* on its own is a system that has its origins in the divine inspiration that moves us towards greater sacred altruism, but it is we who ultimately must make the choice to buy into the system of the Torah.

When we choose to accept a Torah that says we may not rip the *efod* of the High Priest, we are choosing to accept a religion that says that we are accepting the full Torah with all of its inner weavings. We might add to it

some layers of interpretation and some security measures that keep us far from violating Jewish law, but we never destroy the Torah itself so much as we find ways to re-envision and to reread the layers we add to the Torah.

The way that we practice the Torah today might be different from the way our ancestors wore their religion 200 years ago or 2000 years ago. We may have taken the Torah, our *efod* to the tailor who has reinterpreted our Torah so that Jewish law can respond to the ever-changing questions of modernity, but we have never asked the tailors of our tradition—our laypeople and our scholars—to throw out the Torah and replace it.

This thing we call Judaism is something that we have to come around to and get fixed from time to time.

Sometimes it doesn't fit right, but the truth is that our Torah has never broken; it has never been a broken system. We have had to add new layers to our *efod* of Torah, so that our Torah fits the fashion of the times.

When it comes to Judaism as an evolving religion, we must know that—because our *efod* of Torah shall not rip even at the times when the Torah doesn't fit right—even when our Torah ain't exactly broke, through the historical layers of interpretation, we can find a way to fix it.

Shabbat shalom.