

**Parshat Terumah: Divine Order**  
**Jennifer Zukerman, Class of 2028**

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This week, as we prepare for the festive anarchy of Purim, we read in Parshat Terumah about the precise and exacting construction of the Mishkan. It seems an unlikely pairing, but the fact that a parsha is always read at roughly the same time as a particular holiday invites us to examine what the parsha and the chag can teach about one another. In this case, the comparison provides insight into the power of discipline and divinely established order as HaShem's prescription for bringing moral structure to our world.

Parshat Terumah includes lavish descriptions of the materials used in constructing the Mishkan:

As for the tabernacle, make it of ten strips of cloth; make these of fine twisted linen, of blue (techelet), reddish-purple (argaman), and crimson woolen yarns, with a design of cherubim worked into them (Shemot 26:1).

You don't have to go very far into Megillat Esther to find a similar description:

[There were hangings of] white cotton and blue (techelet) wool, caught up by cords of fine linen and reddish-purple (argaman) wool to silver rods and alabaster columns; and there were couches of gold and silver on a pavement of marble, alabaster, mother-of-pearl, and mosaics (Esther 1:6).

Two similarities immediately become apparent: first, the lavish color terms techelet and argaman, and second, the surprising feature of shatnez, wool and linen woven together.

The terms techelet and argaman are used very rarely in Torah, and they appear only in connection with the holiness of the Mishkan. Shatnez, the combination of wool and linen, is explicitly forbidden for Jews to wear in their garments, except, again, in the Mishkan and when required for tzitzit.

But whereas the terms techelet and argaman are spelled out very clearly and "shesh" is used in both contexts to mean linen, neither source has a word that unequivocally means "wool." Fortunately, Rambam spells it out in Mishnah Torah (Vessels of the Sanctuary 8:13), even tying together for us the colors with the wool and flax:

Whenever the Torah uses the word shesh or bad, it is referring to flax, i.e., linen. Whenever the term techelet is used, it refers to wool which is dyed sky-blue, i.e., lighter than dark blue. The term argaman refers to wool that is dyed wine-colored.

Medieval commentator Rabbeinu Bachya, in his commentary on Vayikra 19:19, gives us some clues as to why this is important. He explains that wool comes from the dimension of the animal spirit and linen from the vegetative dimension. Circumventing that order, the order of the universe put in place by

Hashem, is dangerous business, and the interweaving of the two can be accomplished only in the service of Hashem. Tzitzit are rare exceptions to the prohibition against shatnez, as are the garments of the Kohanim performing service in the Mishkan, showing us that holy garments can bear this coupling of the animal and vegetative kingdoms.

Interestingly, as Rabbeinu Bachya points out, the Eshet Chayil (women of valor) is described as seeking out wool and flax and working with them enthusiastically (Proverbs 31:22). She is virtuous specifically because she can handle the holy job of reconciling the animal and vegetable spheres. As he says in his commentary, “When the entire orientation of a person is to fulfill the will of the Creator, as is the orientation of the Eshet Chayil described by Solomon, then, and only then, joining these symbolically diverse characteristics is permitted or even commanded.” Just as the interplay of these colors and textiles creates the garment, the beged, of a Kohen serving Hashem in the Mishkan and Beit HaMikdash, so too the woman of valor labors to properly configure and interlace the elements of diverse realms.

Given the rich commentary around techelet and argaman and flax and wool, we now come back to the palace of King Achashverosh. If those elements we talked about could create a beged for holiness and virtue, those very same letters can be re-vowelized to refer to the king who betrayed, or bagad in Hebrew, those ideals.

The palace of Achashverosh was the anti-Mishkan. In contrast to the seven-day initiation period for Aaron and his sons into the priesthood, Achashverosh mandated a seven-day bacchanal. He hosted the masses in the gardens of his palace, surrounded by opulent tapestries of linen and wool and techelet and argaman, offering exotic treif food and drink being served in the very vessels plundered from Beit Hamikdash. Whereas the Kohanim wore their vestments to enter the Holy of Holies on Yom HaKippurim, King Achashverosh paraded his riches in a display of human vanity.

The Megillah’s depiction of the kingdom of Achashverosh stands as the first and most detailed depiction of life in exile, representing our temporal lives as a distorted mockery of the spiritual lives we can attain. Exile has torn us away from Beit HaMikdash, and the exile experience tosses us aimlessly between the competing ideals of the nations. Queen Esther typified the Eshet Chayil in harnessing the trappings of exile to the will of Hashem, and between the chag and the parsha we find an exhortation to all of us to do the same.

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