

WHITE ROBES AND INFINITY

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The first time I ever wore a *kittel* was as a rabbinical student, officiating at my father’s shul for the “overflow” High Holidays service.

It felt weird because I had never worn one before, and it was the *kittel* my father wore at my parents’ wedding. That *kittel* and the one I wear today are very similar: something like a hybrid between a choir robe and a lab coat, a big collar embroidered with what looks like Aztec hieroglyphics — not exactly my style of clothing. My *kittel* and I have been through a lot together through the years. It still feels other-worldly.

Kittels (and other white garments) are traditionally worn on several important occasions: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Pesach, at one’s own wedding, and for burial. These pieces of clothing communicate a number of messages:

- 1. White is a symbol of purity** — something we aspire to through *teshuvah* (repentance) and prayer.
- 2. The *kittel* is a symbol of equality.** During “*kittel*-moments” we are reminded that no one has superior access to God.
- 3. The *kittel* is also a reminder of our vulnerability,** and that life’s journey is sacred and limited. On Rosh Hashanah, we and the world are born anew; on Yom Kippur, we abstain from life-giving actions to remind ourselves not to wait until we die to self-actualize and connect; on Pesach, the slave in us dies as we are reborn as free people; at our weddings, we take new lives as couples; when we leave this world for the next, we transform one final time.

The power of the *kittel* is not in its complex majesty: it lives in its simplicity. A royal-looking *kittel* feels like a contradiction. So too is the idea that only religious leaders can (or should) wear a *kittel*. Wearing a *kittel* or something white during these holy moments is a practice that I invite each of us to experience. It serves as an equalizer, not limited to the select few.

The necessity of the simplicity of a *kittel* can be illuminated by connecting the Talmud to Sir Isaac Newton.

Regarding the mysterious properties of white clothing, the Talmud states:

"...It was taught: In the year in which Shimon HaTzaddik died, he foretold his own death. His students said to him, 'How do you know?' He replied. 'Every Yom Kippur there met me an old man, dressed in white and wrapped in white, who entered with me into the Holy of Holies and left with me; but this year there met me an old man, dressed in black and wrapped in black, who entered with me but did not leave with me.'" (Yoma 39b, adapted)

What any of us sees with our eyes is but a fraction of the infinite possibilities, and dark moments can make it harder to remember that there is light ahead.

In 1666 Sir Isaac Newton showed that white light was composed of colored light by passing a beam of light through a glass prism, dispersing the light into a spectrum of colors (the same way rainbows appear when it rains). Color, according to Newton, is the mind's translation of the few wavelengths human beings perceive from the infinite spectrum hidden within what we perceive as "white." The absence of visible light is experienced through human perception as a lack of color.

In other words, what any of us sees with our eyes is but a fraction of the infinite possibilities, and dark moments can make it harder to remember that there is light ahead.

The first time I ever wore a mask was April 2020. It was a late start of that basic safety practice because we were told to preserve personal protective equipment for front-line workers risking their lives each day. I remember feeling so strange, muffled as I put it on. My glasses fogged up with every breath I took and every time I spoke. I suddenly couldn't see the world the way I always had. It took time and effort to recalibrate my vision.

I believe something remarkable happened through the widespread use of masks. Vibrant colors and fabrics and shapes began to appear all around. Millions of expressions of identities and affiliations and affinities were on display. Yes, we've missed each other's faces, but perhaps our masks revealed things for the first time, even as they concealed what had been familiar. Perhaps we began paying closer attention to each other's eyes. Perhaps in countless Zoom meetings we've come to appreciate each other's faces more than ever.

Masks have reminded us that there is more to each person than what is immediately visible.

We might choose to interpret masks as a kind of *kittel*-moment, an equalizing outer layer, worn during a particular time. A special piece of clothing acknowledging universal vulnerability and personal uniqueness. Masks have reminded us that there is more to each person than what is immediately visible.

This year many of us will be wearing *kittels*/white garments *and* masks, intersecting symbols of vulnerability and possibility. This Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we will all be so very human in this way. We carry in our hearts hard-earned wisdom and a commitment to being part of a world reborn, where every person is seen as equally deserving of blessing, of protection, of health.

What the Talmud's mystery man wears suggests what lies ahead; his wardrobe signaled mortality to an intuitive (and worried) observer. Newton's theories of black and white dovetail powerfully with an ancient sage's sense of his own future. What an important lesson for us all, during these strange times.

May we remember, with our heightened awareness of the preciousness of life, that there is more light, more color, more potential than what is immediately observable.

This coming year, may we be part of the great rebuilding ahead.

May our world be blessed with renewed health, safety, and life.

***L'shanah tovah tikateivu veteichateimu* — May we all be written and sealed for a good year.**