

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## *Masking and Unmasking Ourselves: Interpreting biblical Texts on Clothing & Identity*

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### **Introduction**

If Polonius is correct in saying that “the apparel oft proclaims the man,” when have you noticed that clothes reveal an individual’s identity, position, status, or desires?

On the other hand, can you also think of examples when clothing masked a person’s true identity?

### **Chapter 1**

The midrash suggests that the garments God made for Adam and Eve when they left the Garden of Eden were fashioned from the skin shed by the serpent. What can you learn from the notion that the very object that reminded them of their sin, their frailty, can be used to cover and protect them, thereby ensuring their survival?

Do you yourself carry reminders of past actions of which you are not proud but which can serve as goads to change?

### **Chapter 2**

Noah is described as living in the tension between his higher self, represented by the Divine garments from Eden which he wore, and his primitive self, represented by his uncovering himself in a drunken stupor. In what way does this resonate with your own ambivalences? How can we hold out a picture of what we can be even as we live with our failures and shortcomings?

Witnessing their father’s nakedness, his imperfection, had a lasting impact on Noah’s sons. What impact did your parents’ less-than-stellar actions have on you? How did you respond when you witnessed or became aware of your parents’ shortcomings?

### **Chapter 3**

The garments of Eden are pictured as being passed down from generation to generation. What “garments” were you bequeathed from your parents and grandparents—and have you preserved them?

Have your children made the “garments” you strove to give them a part of themselves or are they hidden away in the closet never to be worn?

Does the midrash about Esau wearing his special garments when he served his father, Isaac, resonate with you? What were your feelings when you were the caregiver to your parent or to someone else whom you love?

### **Chapter 4**

Who might be the Joseph in your family? Why?

Joseph's coat resulted in his brothers hating him. What "garments" have individuals in your family worn that have caused tensions in your family?

Sometimes the garments that we wear mask our vulnerability, as it may have in Joseph's case. Have you ever donned a mask to camouflage difficult feelings on your part?

### **Chapter 5**

Tamar disguised herself in order to appear "other" than who she was. When have you encountered individuals who are facile in donning masks to appear caring, sincere, present, though this may be studied and purposeful?

In what ways can you identify with Tamar and what she must have felt as she sat alone and vulnerable on the road to Timnah waiting for Judah to pass by? Judah came to recognize himself because of Tamar. Have you have been forced to see yourself more clearly due to another person?

### **Chapter 6**

According to several midrashim, it was Joseph's ego and vanity that got him in trouble with Zuleika (Mrs. Potiphar). Do you recall an instance when you were the cause of trouble for yourself?

When accosted by Zuleika, Joseph leaves the tattered coat in Zuleika's hands; he finally does abandon the mask (the coat which symbolizes his ego and boastfulness) that he wore. What enabled him to do that?

Have you ever struggled to let go of a "mask" that you wore, an aspect of yourself which may have become deeply ingrained?

### **Chapter 7**

The tradition suggests that when the Israelites encountered the High Priest in the Sanctuary wearing his white priestly garments, God's Presence rested upon him. Have you ever felt God's Presence when you were in a worship setting?

The priest's sacred garments could not be worn outside the Sanctuary because their holiness had to be preserved. Have we today lost a sense of the sacred as we seem to be more casual about ritual?

When Moses saw Aaron handing over his high-priestly role and core identity to his two sons, he lamented that his own sons did not follow in his footsteps. To what extent have your children embraced that which is meaningful to you, your values, your life commitments?

### **Chapter 8**

King Saul desperately grabbed hold of the prophet Samuel's garment when he told the king that God had rejected his kingship. Have you ever "grasped at straws" to hold on to a relationship following your own inability to live up to the expectations of the other?

David refused to wear Saul's armor when he went out to fight Goliath since it did not fit him. Have you ever attempted to assume a role that didn't fit you or, did you, like David, realize that the "clothes" didn't fit who you were?

### **Chapter 9**

Prophets wore distinctive garments which enabled the people to identify them. What are the "garments" that contemporary leaders wear that make them stand out? What are the distinct traits that leaders must possess?

The transferring of the prophet's mantle was the way a successor was inaugurated (Elijah passed his garment to Elisha) and it guaranteed his success. In what ways must today's leader ensure the smooth transition of leadership and help the new leader succeed?

### **Chapter 10**

Esther was reticent to go to the court of King Ahasuerus, reveal her Jewish identity, and speak on behalf of her persecuted people. Can you identify with Esther's anxiety? Were you ever afraid to confront power and authority, to stand up for what you believe, even when important issues were involved?

Initially, Mordechai refused to dress in royal garb; he was not comfortable donning garments of royalty. Have you ever felt uncomfortable assuming a particular role, wearing "garments" to which you are unaccustomed?

Mordechai's sudden change of role forces us to think about how we adjusted to changes in our lives and positions. When you have experienced such changes, have you felt deserving or capable of your newly acquired status?

### **Overview**

What were the most important insights you gained from the book?

What did you learn about the Bible and midrash and their relevance to your life?

Which citations drawn from classic literature or examples from modern life did you find most enlightening?

How did the metaphor of clothing work as a means of gaining entree into the meaning of the biblical text?