

“My Wedding Kittel”

It was somewhere around the first or second sip of slivovitz on an empty stomach and seeing Ashirah for the first time before we entered under the Huppah, that I realized something crucial was missing.

This was our wedding day, and we, as untraditional Jews who loved Jewish tradition, were putting a new spin on several of the traditional rituals. Instead of the all male bonding ceremony called the tisch where the groom's buddy group attempts to get him drunk while regaling him with song and spiritual advice, ours was co-ed, Ashirah sequestering herself with her friends in one room, and me in another, with mine. Then walking backwards, guided by friends and family, toward one another to meet in what could loosely be called the Bedeken, or unveiling ceremony - Ashirah without a veil at all - we turned to face one another.

It was then - knowing me as well as she did - that Ashirah could sense something was wrong.

“I think I forgot it,” I whispered to her as we walked over to sign our Ketubbah.

By it, I meant my Kittel, the long white garment traditionally worn not only on your wedding day, but here on Yom Kippur as well. And this was and is no ordinary Kittel. Picked out for me by Ashirah's maternal grandfather, Papa Jack, a Holocaust survivor who was the patriarch of her family, it was not merely an accoutrement to the ceremony, but an essential element.

Thus began a mad dash by my friend and colleague Rabbi Shawn Zevit, who without further thought, jumped in his car and zipped up twisty, windy Lincoln Drive to recover the crucial garment from where I left it on a hanger by the door of our apartment. It had snowed that morning, and in my haste to get out to the Philadelphia Botanical Gardens where our wedding took place and worried about driving through all that white stuff

(something I was definitely not used to at the time) I had inadvertently left the Kittel behind.

So, while I berated myself profusely for my mistake, our guests gleefully danced the Hora just outside the room where we had just signed the Ketubah. Without a doubt, this was a rabbinic wedding - half the guests either married to rabbis or rabbis themselves. And, after a delay of what felt to me like hours, and was likely thirty minutes or less, I proceeded down the aisle in my white Kittel, later to be covered by the Tallis of Ashirah's father of blessed memory, which Ashirah and I both had draped over our shoulders during the ceremony.

I think of this moment every single Kol Nidrei, when I stand before you in the very same Kittel Papa Jack gave me that day. In this traditional Jewish uniform, I am covered nearly head to toe with my ancestors' blessings, and his love.

Tonight, all Jews - whether leader or participant - can don their talitot, a tradition elevating the Kol Nidrei service from all other nights of the year. This sacred ritual garment offers the warmth and comfort of a thousand generations that came before us.

Adorned in our L'Dor VaDor, we are not alone, but have a direct connection between past, present and future, each strand conveying a message of Jewish Peoplehood and solidarity. This is not just a spiritual connection, but a physical one. The strands of our Tzit-Tzit are meant to be grabbed. (Ashirah told me how much she loved to wrap the strands of her father's tallit when she was growing up.)

There is a tradition of taking the strands of our Tzit-Tzit together before reciting the Shema, about which my friend Rabbi Danielle Parmenter offers the following meditative ritual:

First, she said, take one strand, one Tzit, feel it, connect to it. This is the experience of an individual Jew, isolated and perhaps disconnected from their fellow Jews.

Now, bunch one section of the Tzit Tzit together. This is the experience of an individual community, isolated from other communities, also feeling alone in the world.

Next, take all four Tzit Tzit together, this is the larger Jewish world. Realize you are not just an individual community, but part of the bigger picture so much bigger than ourselves.

And, finally, now connect these collective Tzit Tzit with the larger garment. The Tallit for her, representing all of the many generations of Jews who came before us, bound together in the wholeness of the cloth.

Each of us may be just one individual strand, an individual Tzit, but together we are connected to something so much larger than ourselves. This, for Rabbi Danielle, is what it means to wear our sacred vestments.

What a beautiful message of solidarity for our increasingly fractured time. Sadly, for me, and for many of you, the fabric of our Jewish identity feels like it is beginning to fray.

I feel it tear whenever I am notified of yet another antisemitic incident in our country, and in our own community. Just last week, there was a fire bombing of a synagogue in Florida, along with several reports of swastikas in area schools.

I feel it tear a little whenever I am notified by one of my children that they or one of their classmates is being harassed and intimidated, physically threatened, just because they are Jewish, even going so far as to tell one of my children that “all Jews should die”.

I feel it tear a little whenever one of our members has their window broken, a swastika painted on their property, the chanting of “From the River to the Sea” at a public event.

I feel it tear a little whenever a campus protest erupts, like the incident last week at a Syracuse fraternity on Rosh Hashanah.

I feel it tear a little whenever I need to tell a reporter filming in our sanctuary to stay clear of our Israeli flag, for fear of the potential negative attention it will bring.

I feel it tear a little when I am told Jarah’s BBYO trip to Eastern Europe had increased security and it was suggested she hide any markings of her Jewish identity when walking in the city.

I feel it tear a little whenever a new security detail is added outside our own synagogue, or worse, one of our events is forced to change locations altogether out of a safety concern.

I feel it tear a little whenever I look into my rabbinic listserve, and I see a colleague spewing hate and insults at another colleague because of their views on Israel.

And I feel it tear a little whenever Israel or Gaza is not spoken about for fear of the consequences of our own disagreements.

No, this is not an easy time to be a Yid.

In times such as these, how do we hold our Tzit-Tzit together? How do we maintain a sense of our collective identity, even as our community and world sequester off in increasingly fragmented silos. How do we maintain our communal pride?

This is where I wish I could turn to Papa Jack for advice.

It was no accident that his final gift to me was a Kittel. Fabric was a central piece of who he was.

He, as an expert tailor, always had his needle and thread ready to repair loose buttons or torn sleeves. He, who always wore his Jewish pride on his sleeve every day, in spite of all that he had gone through. Yes, he was a survivor, losing almost all of his family at the hands of the Nazis, but more than that he was an inspirer. Every day, for him, after all that he had endured, had to be a good one.

Born in Praszka, Poland in January 1910, a picturesque small Polish town on the German border, population of 900, Papa Jack lost his mother after she had given birth to his youngest sibling when he was just nine. Shortly after his Bar Mitzvah, he was sent off with his older brother to apprentice as a tailor. In no time, he and his brother had established a thriving tailoring business, selling men's suits off the rack and made-to-measure suits for wealthier clients.

In 1937, as the Nazi movement in Israel was growing to dangerous levels, Papa Jack sold his share of the business to visit his sister Helen in Paris. Arriving there in style, in trendy three-quarter length golf pants outfit with matching socks that he himself had designed, he immediately got to work looking for a job, finding one at a makeshift clothing factory nearby. Producing twice as much as his co-workers did, but only being paid half because of his lack of a work visa.

When the Nazis finally came, he jumped out windows and ran away from jail cells. He also fell in love, meeting his beloved Rose, and getting married in a makeshift ceremony at a courthouse, and then stopping a random stranger on the street who looked Jewish to perform the Sheva Brachot, Seven Wedding Blessings. Later, when separated from her, Papa Jack walked a hundred miles barefoot to get back to her. The only thought that kept him going was to get back to his beloved Grandma Rosie.

After many harrowing adventures that would nearly cost him his life several times, he and Grandma Rosie eventually escaped to Portugal on one of the last ships to America, the S.S. Navemar, a cargo ship meant to carry only fifteen passengers, but was forced to carry 1,200. Nicknamed the “Ship to Hell,” it was a harrowing trip in which a number of people died.

Arriving in New York City, under the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, they did not look like refugees who had lost everything. Using his needle and thread, he stitched together outfits that made them the talk of the town. In their new home in the Bronx, Papa Jack worked double shifts, often more than sixteen hours a day, six days a week, as a tailor and foreman in the needle trades, later opening his own factory, manufacturing children’s coats. His skill as a tailor helped him both escape the Nazis and build a life for his family in America.

And, if you ever asked him how his life was, “beautiful,” was his only response. His entire family, community, world, wiped out by the Nazis, and still life was beautiful. As he always said, “It has to be good.”

The Yiddish folk song "Hob Ikh Mir a Mantl" (I Had a Little Overcoat), tells us about a garment, constantly worn down and having to be transformed into something new until all that is left is a button. And soon even that button is lost, all that is left is a song:

*Hob ikh mir a mantl fun fartsaytikn shtof Tra la la la
Hot es nit in zikh kay gantsenem shtokh Tra la la la
Darum, hob ikh zikh fartrakht Un fun dem mantl a rekl gemakht Tra la la*

*I had a little mantle that I made long ago It had so many patches there was
no place to sew, Then I thought and I prayed and from that coat a little
jacket I made....*

*Now I had a little nothing that I made long ago, It hasn't any patches, there
is nothing to sew, From that nothing this little song I made*

The lesson of the song is that you can always find a way to make something out of nothing, both an allusion to the way God created the world, and to the plight of the typical Jewish immigrant forced to start completely from scratch in the new land of America.

Papa Jack taught me our sacred vestments are stronger and more resilient than we could ever imagine. They have withstood war and genocide, expulsion and revulsion, derision and destruction. When they get dirty, they can be cleaned. When they are no longer usable, they can be restored. And, when they tear, they can be repaired.

It is easy for a Jew to feel hopeless in times like these. Our collective Kittel is marked with our pain and suffering. Just remember that Papa Jack, like so many survivors, people who lost their entire families at the hands of the Nazis, never lost hope.

Seeing all of your Magen David and Hamsa necklaces hanging over your necks helps sew together my Jewish Neshamah.

Seeing the pride, you have in your faith and community helps sew together my Jewish Neshamah.

Seeing how strong you have been, despite our struggles, helps sew together my Jewish Neshamah.

Seeing you show up again any time you are asked and even when you are not, helps sew together my Jewish Neshamah.

Seeing your kindness and compassion not just to one another, but to our larger Western New York helps sew together my Jewish Neshamah.

Seeing your voice raised both to fight injustice and to right wrongs helps sew together my Jewish Neshamah.

Seeing all of us gathered again on Yom Kippur helps sew together my Jewish Neshamah.

When I realized I had forgotten my Kittel at my wedding ceremony, my first instinct was to go on without it. I felt so guilty that I was delaying the wedding and sending my friend Shawn off on a wild goose chase, I thought it would be easier to just proceed ahead with the wedding. But, my wise bride, Ashirah, informed me that the wedding guests could wait, taking time to retrieve it, not only because it meant something to Papa Jack, but that it was important to the two of us.

This year on December 4th Ashirah and I will mark our twentieth anniversary of our wedding day, and I must acknowledge just how right she was. This thin piece of ornate fabric has served me well these past two decades and hopefully will continue to serve me well in the decades to come. I feel the presence of Papa Jack, as well as her love for me, every time I wear it.

Tonight, we are adorned collectively in our L'Dor VaDor, generational garments. Wear them with pride knowing how much has gone into their creation, knowing that no matter what struggles we face in the future, we simply need a needle and a thread to start again.

An easy and meaningful fast, a happy and blessed year, a hopeful year ahead! May you be written and sealed in the book of a life well lived!