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Rabbi Mordechai Yaffe: The Beautiful Garment of Torah

Rabbi Mordechai Jaffe, the "Ba'al Halevushim" was born in Prague in 5290 (1530) to his father, Rabbi Avraham Jaffe, the rabbi of Bohemia. He learned Torah in Poland from the Rabbi Moshe Isserles (the Rema) and from the Maharshal. Upon his return to Prague, he established his own yeshivah. In 5321 (1551), Rabbi Mordechai became the Rabbi of Horodna and later, of Lublin. He served as the head of the large yeshivah there and became one of the senior members of the Council of Four Lands. Later, he served as Chief Rabbi of Kremenitz. When the illustrious Maharal of Prague moved to Pozna in 5352 (1582), the Prague community called upon Rabbi Mordechai to succeed him. He remained the Chief Rabbi of Prague until his passing on the 3rd of Adar II, 5372 (1602). He was known as the Ba'al Halevushim (Master of the Garments) in tribute to the ten books that he wrote, all of them with the word 'levushim' in their titles: Levush Malchut, Levush Techelet, Levush Ateret Zahav, and more. His books discuss a wide range of topics, from Jewish law to Kabbalah and astronomy.

Rabbi Mordechai Jaffe was a very handsome man. A non-Jewish noblewoman took a liking to him from afar and found an excuse to ask him to come to her home. Once he was inside, she locked the door and attempted to seduce him. When he saw that he had no way to escape, Rabbi Mordechai insisted that he had to use the bathroom. The only way to escape from the bathroom was through the sewage ditch. He squeezed himself through, ruining the ten, fine, and expensive garments he was wearing. While running to safety, Rabbi Mordechai made a vow that if God saved him, he would write a book that would light up the world in exchange for each of his ten ruined garments. Each of those books had the word "garment" (*levush*) in its title.

Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Bander (in the book, *Ish Chasidecha*) added that after this trial, Rabbi Mordechai requested of God that for ten generations, his descendants would not be attractive. (Some say that Rabbi Mordechai's last name, Jaffe, which means "beautiful" (יָפֵה) in Hebrew, was given to him because he was so handsome.

Rabbi Bander related that he learned Torah in Poland in the same yeshivah as a Torah scholar who was a descendant of Rabbi Mordechai. This descendant was very handsome. Once, his father came to the yeshivah to visit him. It was hard to believe that the visitor was his father, for he was extremely unattractive. The young Torah scholar explained that his father was the tenth generation from Rabbi Mordechai and that he, himself, was the eleventh generation. Rabbi Mordechai's prayer for his descendants did not pertain to him.

In this story, Rabbi Mordechai's soul had been impregnated (called *ibbur* in Kabbalah) with a spark of the soul of Joseph the Tzaddik. This spark from Joseph's soul helped him to overcome temptation. Like Joseph, Rabbi Mordechai Jaffe was handsome. Like Joseph, he faced and overcame temptation, and like Joseph, his garments were ruined in the process. In the introduction to his books, Rabbi Mordechai calls himself "the tailor" (התופר). Like a tailor, he was figuratively sewing garments, like Joseph, who stitched together the torn fragments of dreams and interpreted them; Joseph saw how to make the fragments into a meaningful whole, as he said to Pharaoh, "Pharaoh's dream is one." In Hebrew, the word for "one who interprets" (פותר) is an anagram of "tailor" (תופר)

Rabbi Mordechai ran outside, and the wellsprings of his Torah teachings also reached outside, far and wide. Ashkenazic Jewry enthusiastically accepted his rulings on Jewish law. Just as he was beautiful on the outside, his books (that he called "garments") are also beautiful works of art. They exquisitely explain the reasons and roots of Jewish law, with unique artistry. In his *Shulchan Aruch*, the Alter Rebbe followed in the footsteps of the Rabbi Mordechai the *Ba'al Halevushim*, bringing the reason for the law, as well as the legal ruling.

The reasoning behind the law

Delving into the reasons for a Jewish law is a messianic endeavor. Mashiach will reveal the reasons for the *mitzvot* and the Torah's hidden meanings. The *Levush*, as Rabbi Mordechai Jaffe is referred to eponymously, focused mostly on the reasons for the laws and is comparable in this respect to Mashiach, the son of Joseph. The Alter Rebbe focused on the practical application of the law, comparable in this respect to Mashiach the son of David.

Rabbi Mordechai's name for his books—*Levush*, meaning garment—serves as a symbol for visualizing his books' textual layout. The laws from the *Shulchan Aruch* and the *Rema* are printed as the body of the page. Rabbi Mordechai's commentaries are printed around the body of the text, like garments enclothing the body and beautifying them. This garment shows the sometimes-hidden source of the ruling. It is no wonder, then, that Rabbi Mordechai was also deeply vested in Kabbalah, the Torah's inner dimension.

The root of garments in Kabbalah is the soul's near-surrounding-light known as the living one (*chayah*). This light is inaccessible to the intellect. It hovers above our conscious intellect and is described as "touching and not touching" (מטי ולא מטי). Rabbi Mordechai's commentary-garment reveals the secret and gives the background for the ruling, which was not always understandable or visible. It adds atmosphere and inspiration to the ruling, above and beyond the various details that comprise it.

With all this beauty, why did Rabbi Mordechai want his descendants to be unisghtly? The garment, which surrounds the body, is not only meant to highlight and beautify it, but also to conceal it. By diverting the mind from exterior beauty, the unseemly garment can focus the observer's perspective on the inner beauty. In a similar manner,



the Talmud, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananyah likened the Torah preserved in an ugly person to wine preserved in the crude and dispicable clay vessel, which unquestionably is known to improve the wine's flavor and aroma, far more than even the most splendid golden vessel.

Initially, Rabbi Mordechai was externally beautiful and even wore ten elegant garments, apparently to honor the Torah and its scholars. But after he saw how his appearance had impacted his surroundings, he exchanged physical beauty for ugliness and elegant garments for the beauty of the Torah's inner meaning.