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THE HIGH PRIEST: FACE • INNER FACE

A Dance Essay

Maya Dunsky

Photography: Ofir Mordov

The images in the following pages are drawn from a video dance comprising two films, each about five minutes long, shown simultaneously on adjacent screens. They were filmed in November 2002 in the caverns of the Bell Cave in Beit Govrin, Israel. As the performer and choreographer of the dance and the creator of the costumes and the sound track, I would like to share my sources of inspiration.

One screen shows the figure of the High Priest, dressed in a rough linen garment, engaged in his internal work: the preparation of the “inner Temple” to encompass the spiritual and psychic powers demanded by his role.

The second screen shows the figure of the High Priest in his purified state. He stands in the center of the gateway to the Holy of Holies, dressed in layers of white, mediating between external and internal realms and between heaven and earth.

The High Priest is identified with the sanctity of the House of God. The cloth of his garments was identical to that of the curtains in the inner sanctum and the *parokhet*, which were made of forbidden blends of fabric. The garment is the home, the dwelling—this is the concept that guided me to an understanding of the dress of the High Priest.

In the left-hand screen, the High Priest’s clothes are made of a combination of delicate, transparent fabrics, over which he wears a vest of woolly fur. Upon the vest lies a breastplate made of white handmade paper, branded by twelve burnt holes symbolizing the twelve stones described in the biblical account. The white figure of the High Priest stands in the center of twelve large golden circles (mounds of gold-colored cornmeal), symbolizing the breastplate. This dazzling figure, identified with the cave’s light-colored

chalk walls and the different-textured layers of white cloth, converges with the changing natural grains of the walls and strata of the cave.

The gold and purple of the High Priest's biblical garments are evoked by round stains of yellow and purple imprinted on the palms of the figure's hands, in the place where the eye appears in the *hamsa* amulet.

The film begins with the smearing of these stains of yellow and purple on the figure's hands and the anointment of the High Priest's head with oil. In the biblical account, the sanctuary and its appurtenances were also daubed with oil, and all the priests were anointed with oil—but only upon their clothes. The High Priest alone was anointed upon his head, a further sign of his royal stature.

Throughout the dance, the white figure of the High Priest as it appears in the screen on the left bears in its hands two stones. The notion of the two stones borne upon the biblical High Priest's shoulders, upon each of which were inscribed the names of six of the tribes of Israel, was especially intriguing to me. This figurative symbolization of the High Priest's burden and responsibility as the mediator between the people and God guided me to keep holding these two stones, now bringing them up to the white phylactery upon my forehead, now holding them before my eyes in declaration that the people of Israel are the apple of the High Priest's eye, now drawing them to my heart and uniting them with a clap.

In the right-hand screen, the High Priest's vest is loose at its four corners, opening out like a canopy. At its corners are fastened long cords to which four smooth stones are tied, so that they almost touch the ground. Here, again, the garment evokes a house or a canopy, defining a space and forming a gateway.

Spiraling movements of the hands, wrapping the cords of the vest around them until they hold the stones, symbolize the ceremony of donning phylacteries.

Throughout the dance, the figure in its rough linen garment marks out a course connecting the belly, the breast, and the face, tracing two inverse triangles to form a Star of David.

This figure, too, wears a breastplate made of linen, branded with twelve holes. On his forehead lies a phylactery, also made of rough linen, with delicate twigs at its center. He grasps the cords tied to the vest to pull it up to his face. Bowing his head toward the stones of the breastplate, he looks as though into a mirror.

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This wild figure in the right-hand screen, looking as though made of materials found in the earth, moves horizontally around the open space, in contrast to the white figure in the left-hand screen, which stays in one place, moving in inner space, at the center of a natural stone arch symbolizing the Holy of Holies. Here, with the High Priest in his purified, representational state, a pinpointed, minimalistic dance develops, with the character of a trance, expressing his capacity for emotional exposure, for the peeling away of the layers of his being.

This ongoing intense state of the High Priest is reflected in the simultaneous presentation of his inward preparations and his agentive, penetrating presence in his role of representing and connecting the people to God, thus highlighting the infinite cyclical process of peeling away the layers that make up his essence, so that his internal and external worlds commingle and mirror each other.

“The High Priest: Face • Inner Face” was presented at the “Concealed and Revealed” exhibit produced by the Artists’ Beit Midrash of the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, held at Mishkenot Sha’ananim, Jerusalem.

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