

FOR REDEMPTION AND FOR EXCHANGE

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Levin

Now this was the custom in former time in Israel concerning redemption and concerning exchange, to confirm all things: a man drew off his shoe, and gave it to his neighbor; and this was the attestation in Israel.-- So the near kinsman said to Boaz: 'Buy it for yourself.' And he drew off his shoe (4:7-8).

Boaz and the unnamed relative performed a ceremony that marked both the exchange of property and realignment of familial lines. The verse informs us that drawing off and transferring a shoe was the means by which all exchanges and dealings were sealed. Those involved in business and commerce know that bargaining and negotiations cannot be allowed to go on forever. There needs to be a symbolic act, be it a handshake or in our more sophisticated times, a memorandum of understanding, that puts an end to this process and marks the completion of the deal. The taking off of the shoe may have served such a purpose at that time.

Why the shoe? The Shelah (Siddur, Birchas Hashachar) suggests that wearing leather symbolizes man's mastery over his environment. Man hunts animals and rules over their bodies and their skins. Casting off a shoe made of leather and transferring it to another person a symbolic giving up of power and mastery. Before two individuals make a deal, each one struggles to extend his power over the piece of the world that is in the hands of the other. A completed business transaction is the recognition that just as I have a right to a sole ownership of a piece of this world so does the other party. The transfer of a shoe represents renunciation of claims and recognition of the limits to one's power and authority in the face of another human being (R. Shlomo Zalman Auerbach quoted in Shirat Levi).

An even more profound understanding arises from the comments of R. Elazar (Zohar III:180a).

"R. Elazar arose and said: '... certainly it was Torah Law (If so why was it only at that time and why was it later changed?). This was a profound mystery and because the early ones were righteous and saintly, this matter was revealed to them. Once the wicked increased in the world, this type of transaction was performed in a different manner so as to conceal that which stems from a higher levels'.

In itself this is the standard teaching of the Zohar, that many rites were given in several equally legitimate forms each one suitable and reserved for different generations, depending on each one's spiritual level and accomplishment. What is now of more interest to us is the explanation that derives from this teaching. We start by pointing out that casting of a shoe is the centerpiece of the

rite of chalitzah (refusal to engage in a levirate marriage) and it is also a prominent feature of approaching the Divine. This establishes a connection between the two concepts.

"Come and see. "...And He said, Do not come hither. Cast off your shoe"(Exodus 3:5). Why a shoe? He commanded Moses to separate from his wife and to attach himself to another woman, the light of the Most High, which is the Shekhina (Ibid, see also p. 148)."

The shoe then represents transition and exchange. This is why when a man elects not to wed his late brother's wife, to not rebuild his brother's line, to not remove his shoe and give it to her, it is she who takes off his shoe, revealing his lack of generosity and charity.

These inspired words of the Zohar yield the following understanding. The act of casting off a shoe is in essence an act of reaching beyond oneself. Just as the spiritual world spans the earth and heaven, so does man's spiritual form extend from earth toward heaven. "Thus says HaShem: the heaven is My throne, and the earth is footstool for my feet (Isaiah 66:1)". Similarly man's head reaches far into Heaven, his feet rest securely upon the earth, and his body spans the entire distance between the two. What separates man from the earth? Nothing, but his shoes! The act of casting off the shoe represents reaching beyond oneself to engage with that which is outside of him.

"Each thing that is higher and affects and influences the one that is lower, is called 'seller' and the lower one is called 'buyer'.. From this one derives that every trade and transaction partakes of joining and connecting of the giver and the receiver" (Mikdash Melech to Tikkunei Zohar 2:27, cited in Idrei Tzon).

No wonder then that the act of casting off the shoe fell into disuse as the elevated perception that engaging another human being means reaching beyond and outside one's limitations in order to give and not in order to take receded from the consciousness of human beings. When business dealings became all about winning, when even the love between man and woman could not bridge the distance between selves, the symbols that once meant so much lost all meaning. They no longer served their vital function and other symbols took their place.

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