

CONSTANT REMINDER

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

You shall place the two stones on the shoulder-pieces of the ephod, remembrance-stones for the Bnei Yisrael. Aharon shall carry their names before Hashem on his two shoulders as a remembrance.

Be'er Yosef: Rashi explains that the two stones function as a reminder, as it were, to Hashem. When He sees the names of the *shevatim* inscribed on the stones, He will remember their righteousness. Rashi takes the equivalent position in regard to the twelve stones of the *choshen mishpat*. The Torah instructs,² "They shall be on Aharon's heart when he comes before Hashem. Aharon shall always carry the judgment of Bnei Yisrael on his heart before Hashem." Rashi explains that Aharon will carry a symbolic declaration that the Jewish people submit to the Torah's judgment and limitations in deciding whether to act or not. The stones, therefore, "remind" Hashem of the Jewish willingness to live according to His Will, as expressed by His *mishpat*, or His laws.

We could, however, explain both of these *pesukim* differently. The two sets of stones serve as reminders to the *kohen*, not to Hashem.

The *ephod* stones prod the *kohen* to pray for the needs of Klal Yisrael. The gemara³ relates how the *kohen* would daven on Yom Kippur for the needs - both general and specific - of the people. The two *ephod* stones sat in his field of vision, reminding him of his responsibility to be an intercessor between Hashem and His people both for the all- important spiritual needs (the stone of the right), and the secondary, supporting material needs (the one on the left). He carried both on his shoulders, symbolizing his bearing the burden of the people. He assumed responsibility for their well-being as a personal obligation to pray effectively on their behalf. (In fact, when the gemara⁴ inventories the garments of the *kohen gadol*, explaining how each atoned for a different transgression, it means precisely this: as he donned each garment, he was supposed to think of that transgression and daven that Hashem forgive each person who had been guilty of it.)

Similarly, the *choshen*-stones reminded the *kohen* to take to heart all the needs of the people. This is best illustrated by the gemara's telling us⁵ that the *kohen gadol*'s mother used to provide food and clothing to those who were exiled to the cities of refuge. As part of their penance for having killed someone inadvertently, they were sentenced to remain within those cities. They were freed from this sentence only when the *kohen gadol* died. Not wishing those killers to pray for the speedy demise of their sons to release them from their exile, the mothers showered them with gifts.

The gemara explains why the *kohen gadol* should be vulnerable to what seems to be the cruel and self-serving prayer of the residents of the cities of refuge: "The *kohen gadol* should have prayed for his generation and he did not do so." In other words, had the *kohen* done a better job of fervently praying for the good of the people, no one would ever have died through the negligence of the inadvertent killer. G-d would have seen to it that the mishap would never have occurred. Because he failed to uphold the responsibility of his office, a case could be made for his guilt in the eyes of Heaven. Any prayer for his death stood a better chance of being heard favorably.

We can demonstrate how extensive was the *kohen's* responsibility to daven. The gemara tells us that if a *kohen gadol* died between the time of the killing and the pronouncement of the sentence and a new *kohen gadol* is appointed in his place, the killer is freed from his sentence with the death of the latter. The gemara reacts quizzically to this law. In this case, what could the *kohen gadol* have done the fate of the killers should be tied to his life and death? The gemara concludes that here, too, the *kohen gadol* must have failed in his role as master davener for the nation. He should have prayed that the court that sat in judgment of the fate of the killer would find some reason to acquit him.

This passage shows the extent of his responsibility, reaching even to the legal consequences of a death he could not have prevented, since at its time he was not yet a *kohen gadol*! His davening is supposed to be so complete that it would prevent any tragic occurrence - even the pronouncing of an unpleasant sentence upon a guilty party. The Torah alludes to this in stating, "Aharon shall always carry the judgment of Bnei Yisrael on his heart." Even the judgment of the people had to be his concern. He ought to daven that court judgment of individual cases should turn out favorable rather than harsh.

This last fact makes it clear that the responsibility of the *kohen gadol* to daven for the people applied around the calendar. While the earlier part of the gemara could conceivably apply to the prayer of the *kohen gadol* inside the *kodesh kodoshim* on Yom Kippur alone,⁶ the latter part cannot. The death of the new *kohen gadol* cancels the sentence of exile even if he never had a chance to perform the *avodah* on Yom Kippur! We must conclude that as soon as he assumed the role of *kohen gadol*, he became responsible to carry the totality of the needs of the people in his heart and on his lips.

The special garments of the *kohen gadol*, exquisite in their fashioning and adorned with precious gems, serve to bring "honor and splendor" to the one who wears them. His responsibility to continuously seek the well-being of the people in every detail of their lives, however, seems to hold others in esteem, not the *kohen* himself. Upon reflection we realize that this is precisely what the Torah means to say. There is no greater honor and splendor of a person than that his heart and soul be given over to the care of his people.

¹ Based on Be'er Yosef Shemos 28:12; Bamidbar 35:25 ² Shemos 28:30 ³ Yoma 53B ⁴ Zevachim 88 ⁵ Makos 11A ⁶ See Targum Yonoson to Bamidbar 35:25

