

FITTING WORK

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

It is not a glamorous job, but somebody has to do it. And so the Torah begins this week's portion by telling us the mitzvah of terumas hadeshen, removing the ashes that accumulate from the burnt-offerings upon the altar. The Torah teaches us: "The Kohen shall don his fitted linen tunic, and he shall don linen breeches on his flesh; he shall separate the ash of what the fire consumed of the elevation-offering on the Altar, and place it next to the Altar" (Leviticus 7:3).

What is simply derived from the verse is that the service of ash-removal is done with the priestly tunic. What is noticeable to the Talmudic mind is the seemingly innocuous adjective "fitted." Rashi quotes the derivation that applies to all the priestly garments: they must be fitted. They can not be too long, nor can they be too short. They must be tailored to fit each individual Kohen according to his physical measurements.

The question is simple. The sartorial details of the bigdei kehuna (priestly vestments) were discussed way back in the portion of Tezaveh, which we read five weeks ago. Shouldn't the directive of precise-fitting garments have been mentioned in conjunction with the laws of tailoring? Further, if the Torah waits to teach us those requisites in conjunction with any service, why not choose a more distinguished act, such as an anointment or sacrifice? Why choose sweeping ashes?

My dear friend, and the editor of the Parsha Parables series, Dr. Abby Mendelson, was, in a former life, a beat writer for the Pittsburgh Pirates baseball club. In the years that we learned Torah together, he would recount amusing anecdotes and baseball minutia. Some of his stories have retained an impact on me years after I heard them. This is one of them.

Roberto Clemente was an amazing athlete who played the game of baseball with utmost dedication. One day, late in the 1968 season, he was playing outfield against the Houston team. The Pirates were no longer contenders, and the game had no statistical meaning.

A ball was hit deep toward the outfield wall. As Clemente raced back, it seemed that the ball was going to hit the wall way over his head. With superhuman strength he propelled himself like a projectile toward the wall. Speeding at a forty-five degree angle he collided with the wall at the same time that the ball hit it, two feet above his head.

Strictly adhering to the laws of nature, both Clemente and the baseball rebounded from the wall, the former's return to earth much less graceful than the latter's. While the white sphere gently bounced to the playing surface and rolled toward the infield, the much larger uniformed and spiked entity

came crashing after it with a resounding thud.

Bruised and embarrassed, Clemente clamored after the elusive orb and finally threw it to a less traumatized member of his team who completed the hapless mission.

In the post-game interview an innocent reporter asked Clemente, "Roberto, your team is out of contention. There are three games left. Why in the world did you try so hard to make that play? Was it worth bruising yourself?"

Clemente was puzzled. In a few short sentences he explained his actions. "I am not paid to win pennants. My job is to catch the ball. I tried to catch the ball. I was trying to do my job."

When the Torah tells us that the clothes have to fit perfectly for a particular service it is telling us that the job is exactly right for the man who is doing it. The ash-cleaner is not doing another Kohen's job, wearing an ill-fitted garment as if it were thrown upon him as he entered for the early morning shift.

What seems to be the most trivial of jobs is the job that must be done! That is the job of the hour, and that is exactly what the Kohen is designated to do. And for the job or service that is tailor-made for the individual the clothes must also be tailor-made for the job as well!

I once asked a high-level administrator of a major institution what was his job. He answered in all seriousness, "I do what ever has to be done to get the job done and that becomes my job."

Whatever we do, and however we do it, we must realize that the end can only come through the menials. Whatever it takes to get to the goal is as integral as the goal itself. It requires devotion and commitment, and it requires self-sacrifice. If you dress with dignity to collect the ash, if you approach every task with both with sartorial and personal pride and grace, then you are certainly up to any task.

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