

SHADES OF WHITE

by Nechama Stampler

Shades of White¹

Moshe took them from their palms and offered them on the altar in addition to the olah. They are inaugural offerings, as a pleasing fragrance, a fire-offering to Hashem.

Rashi: Moshe served all seven days of the Mishkan's inauguration in white vestments.

Maharal: Rav Eliyahu Mizrachi ponders Rashi's timing in telling us about Moshe's role. This is not the first verse that puts Moshe at the center of the avodah during the inaugural week.² Why did Rashi wait till this point to tell us that Moshe performed as a kohein during this period? We might also puzzle over Rashi's description of Moshe's wardrobe. Rashi is committed to addressing issues of basic pshat. Why did he feel it was necessary to throw in the detail about Moshe wearing white garments?

Although earlier pesukim described Moshe's role in the early stages of the days of miluim, his performance does not support the conclusion that he served as a kohein. Having been instructed by Hashem, Moshe was the only person who fully understood the details of the avodah. Of necessity, he had to demonstrate to Aharon and his sons how to perform various parts of it. We could think that Moshe served not so much as a kohein, but as a master teacher substituting for a kohein at a time that no one else was available.

This theory falls apart when we arrive at our pasuk. In commenting on a similar avodah, Rashi,³ citing gemara Menachos, tells us that three different kohanim orchestrate the tasks between slaughter and placing of the meat on the altar. Although a single kohein could conceivably do all of them himself, the King is honored through the service of a greater number of attendants. Why, then, during the miluim week, did Moshe perform all the tasks alone? Even as a temporary instructor, he could have guided another two kohanim to work alongside him. Our pasuk points, therefore, to a different role for Moshe. He was not a stop-gap instructor, demonstrating technique to a class of eager new kohanim. We can only conclude that during this week, Moshe was by design the only one qualified to do the avodah. That made him not a teacher, but a kohein - a kohein designated as the sole officiant in this avodah.

But what kind of kohein would that make him? Kohanim can usually be differentiated from each

other by their vestments. Ordinary kohanim wore white garments. The kohein gadol wore an additional four that are called golden, because they contained some gold components. On Yom Kippur, some of the avodos called for the kohein gadol to wear only white garments, one of which was different than those of the ordinary kohein. Rashi's interest in what Moshe wore was not incidental. He was trying to more accurately define the nature of Moshe's kehunah during the inaugural week.

Rashi opts for white begadim, similar to those of the kohein gadol on Yom Kippur, pointing to his lofty stature on the one day that he is allowed to enter the Kodesh Kodashim. Now, we know that the ordinary kohein also wore white begadim. How can white begadim serve both the special (the kohein gadol) and the ordinary (the common kohein)?

Context determines how the same object can symbolize different things. Watching multiple kohanim perform the daily avodah, we would be struck by the uniformity of their dress. The plain white garments pointed to the commonality, the shared sameness of what they were all doing. In general, elements that are common to a system are more basic; the avodah-in-white of the everyday kohein shows the basic importance of their tasks to our national purpose.

The white of the kohein gadol's garments on Yom Kippur makes a different statement. It underscores his specialness, not his sameness. This is conveyed only in conjunction with the laws that governed those Yom Kippur garments. They were indeed special. No other kohein could use them, not even another kohein gadol on a future Yom Kippur. In fact, the kohein gadol himself could not use last year's set on a future Yom Kippur! The begadim spoke of his unique role, standing before Hashem as their representative at that moment.

Moshe's begadim testified to his having attained the level of a pure, unadulterated, unencumbered intellectual force. His sechel had become purified enough to be able to receive sechel and chochmah directly from Hashem. The gemara⁴ teaches that Moshe's cloak had no hem. This means that it lacked anything curved, crooked, doubled over. Moshe's sechel was straight, pure, simple. Similarly, it was white because to the eye, white has no admixture of any hue or tint. Again, the symbol is simplicity - in this case appropriate to Moshe's unique accomplishment as a sechel pashut. His garments therefore pointed to how he was different than others (similar to their purpose for the kohein gadol), not to how similar he was (like the vestments of the ordinary kohein).

We could add another element that seems to be different, but really amounts to the same thought. A hem is the finishing touch on a garment. Moshe's lacked a hem, just as he lacked the finishing touch of a human being. We are differentiated from the animals in our capacity for complex speech. The gift of speech is the final stamp upon the human form that makes its recipient truly human.

The gemara⁵ tells us that a person studies all of Torah in utero. When he is ready to emerge from the womb, an angel strikes him on the mouth, and he forgets what he learned. Why the mouth? Why

does he need to be struck?

Chazal call applying the final touches to a utensil *makeh bepatish*, or smoothing out the last imperfections with the blow of a hammer. The angel does the same to the emerging fetus. The final blow, the finishing touch that fashions him into a full human being, is the power of speech. It is a wonderful gift, but it also points to human limitation. Speech is a window to the intellect. It projects inner thoughts to the external world. It transforms pure intellect into something physical. This is perfectly consistent with the role of a human being on his journey through the world, a physical body containing a spiritual soul.

Moshe, as we know, was deficient in his speaking ability. This seeming imperfection, we realize in hindsight, was really a sign of his specialness. His inner spirit, his intellect, was not limited by and mired in the physical. He functioned as a *sechel hapashut*.

His garment lacked the finishing touch of the hem, just as he lacked the ordinary finishing touch of ordinary human speech. In his case, this displayed his lofty specialness.

Sources:

1. *Based on Gur Aryeh, Vayikra 8:28 and 7:4; Gevuros Hashem chap. 28*
 2. *See above, lines 15-16*
 3. *Vayikra 7:30*
 4. *Taanis 11B*
 5. *Nidah 30B*
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