

DRESSING THE PART

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

Amongst the instructions for the Kohen (priest) performing the olah offering is, "He shall remove his garments (of service in the Mishkan/Tabernacle) and he shall wear other garments, and he shall remove the ashes to the outside of the camp, to a pure place." (Vayikra/Leviticus 6:4) Rashi quotes the Talmud (1) that the changing of the clothes for the removal of the ashes is not an actual obligation, but an act of derech eretz (appropriate conduct), as the clothes used to perform a duty in which he gets soiled should not be used to perform a duty that must be done in a dignified manner. Just as a king's steward would not wear the same attire worn during the cooking of a feast during the service of the meal, so too the Kohen would change into different clothing for the removal of the ashes.

Sifsei Chachomim (2), with many other commentaries on Rashi, expounds the source for this insight is that the Torah did not need the verbiage "other clothes"; more terse language is used elsewhere. Consistent with the maxim that the Torah contains no extra letters, no less extra words, these extra words are present to teach us the added insight that both sets of clothes were of equal sanctity - this is not like the changing of clothes on Yom Kippur where holier clothes were worn for the entry of the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) into the Holy of Holies - but that propriety dictated a change. Levush HaOra (3) notes that the removal of ashes was no less part of then Divine service - holy garments, not mundane personal wear, were mandated for this act. Nevertheless, prior to the Kohen's return to the altar, the focal point of the service where the olah was actually offered, the sullied garments needed removal.

From this Rashi and the associated comments, Darash Moshe (4) understands that propriety becomes a de facto obligation. In today's idiom, this concept is manifest in our dress at times of prayer. The Jew needs to contemplate and appreciate that prayers are not simply a regimented recital of a laundry list of needs. It is a unique privilege: a private audience with the King of Kings to request provisions for our every need. More so, it provides us the special opportunity to hone our G-d consciousness by realizing that ultimately all that we do are simply efforts, but it is G-d Who, in His infinite kindness, provides us with all that we need for life. If we had the opportunity to approach an earthly king with a personal petition for some special wish, would we not dress in our finest attire? With the cognizance of the Master of the Universe before us at times of prayer we dress accordingly.

But the Torah is a guidebook for all facets of life. The mitzvos (Divine commandments) are not limited to the realm of ritual. Honesty in business, giving charity and refraining from disparaging speech are no less mitzvos than observing the Sabbath, keeping Kosher and reciting blessings. Mitzvos extract the holiness inherent in our most mundane acts. When the financial resources gained from a day's work are used to provide children with Jewish education, to provide the poor with charity, and to provide ourselves with food and shelter - not as mundane self fulfillment, but with the intention of facilitating our continued life and growth as G-d conscious Jews - then those nine hours at work are infused with holiness; they are no less Divine service. While the clothing worn in prayer must be additionally elevating, when our task of the moment dictates changing into "other clothing", those, too, need to be equally holy and appropriate for a servant of the King.

Have a Good Shabbos!

(1) Tractate Yoma 23b

(2) Supercommentary on Rashi's Torah commentary, by Rabbi Shabsai Bass, 1641-1718

(3) Supercommentary on Rashi's Torah commentary, by Rabbi Mordechai Yaffe

(4) Rabbi Moshe Feinstein; 1895-1986; Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of Mesivtha Tifereth Jerusalem in New York City; the leading Halachic/Jewish legal decisor of his time and one of the principal leaders of Torah Jewry through much of the last century

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