

PARSHAS ACHAREI MOS - WHAT GOES UP MUST COME DOWN

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What Goes Up Must Come Down¹

He shall don a sacred tunic...he shall immerse himself in water and then don them.

Changing into bigdei kehunah of pure white does not take place in a vacuum. Mostly, it takes place in water - the water of the mikveh and the kiyor. The same holds true for changing from the bigdei lavan to bigdei zahav.

In our pasuk, we meet up with the first of these transitions. Before entering the kodesh kodashim, the kohen gadol removes the golden garments of the everyday avodah, and dons those of white. Before doing so, he immerses himself in a mikveh. The two are conceptually related. The white begadim stand for simplicity and purity, of a humble soul stripped of any pretense and haughtiness. In order to personalize their message, the kohen distanced himself from the entire universe of tumah-capability, by entering the mikveh, whose waters symbolize the raw, shapeless beginnings of time in the early stages of Creation, before the faults and foibles of Man could leave their imprint. This immersion helps the kohen understand how imperfect he is, and how distant he stands from the most elementary demands of the mikdosh.

The pattern will repeat itself. Each change from gold to white, and from white to gold will require another immersion. Counting a rabbinically instituted tevilah upon first entering the azarah, there will be a total of five immersions. This, however, is only part of the kohen's liquid avodah. Halacha dictates that the kohen perform a kiddush yadayim v'raglayim/ wash his hands and feet using the kiyor before he removes one set of garments, and repeat the process after immersing in a mikveh immersion and dressing in the other set. Each tevilah, then is framed by a kiddush before and after. In the course of Yom Kippur, this means that the five immersions will be accompanied by ten kiddush-performances.

What does this all mean? We require two more ideas to allow us to construct an answer. The first concerns the dueling garments - the tension between gold and white in the course of the day. Earlier we asserted that the white garments indicated to the kohen that he should enter the Holy of Holies humbled by feelings of his personal insignificance. The gold garments told an opposing story. In acting as the representative of the Nation in the daily avodah, the kohen acted as a symbol of perfection, of the attainment of the precious values and attributes that Hashem expects of His children. Gold, as king of metals, symbolizes the highest attainment of these values and their radiant

perfection.

The second idea is the realization that if kiddush is mandated before and after removing a set of garments, then this removal is itself an avodah. Preceding and following it with a kiddush emphasizes its function as a bona fide avodah (and not just a preparatory step towards the next conventional avodah). Tevilah is important enough in its own right that it requires a mini-tevilah before and after, as preparation and response.

Putting these two ideas together, we could say that taking off a set of garments is as important as putting them on. It, too, is an avodah.

We readily understand that once a person has internalized the lesson of the white, i.e. that he is far less important than he might want to be, he is ready to consider serious growth. Stripped of delusions of his accomplishment, he can pursue genuine accomplishment.

We can also understand that something similar holds true of the other road that leads in the opposite direction. A person who has mastered the lesson of the gold garments, i.e. has been left breathless after beholding what heights a human being can attain, is ready to take some of that inspiration and apply it to his state of "whiteness" and ordinariness.

By turning every removal of a set of begadim into an avodah, the Torah seems to stress that the two opposing messages of those garments are entirely interdependent. While each theme is important, it can also be incomplete or even harmful. Looking towards the majesty of what a human being can become can be helpful and inspiring, but it can remain an academic exercise. Any inspiration will wither and die, unless it can be meaningfully applied to a person who is dissatisfied enough with his present impoverished reality to do something about it. On the other hand, dwelling on one's insufficiency can keep a person humble, but it can also paralyze with depression, unless he has a reasonable plan of working towards the ideal.

Thus, taking off the golden begadim is itself an avodah. A person has to work at not dwelling academically on the role of the model person. He has to be prepared to take something of that model and apply it to himself. This is the avodah of removing the bidgei zahav.

Removing the white begadim is also an avodah. A person who has done such a thorough job of internalizing mussar lessons about his own insufficiency has only begun the journey. Even if he has crushed and ground up his formerly inflated sense of ego and self-worth, he is far from where the Torah wants him to be. Now he must take upon himself the avodah of replacing his former self-image with a model of growth and perfection. This is the avodah of removing the bigdei lavan.

One immersion strikes us as fundamentally different from all the others. When all is done, the kohen removes his holy garments for the last time of the day, trading them for his ordinary street clothes. This immersion may be the most important of them all. Everything that the kohen has experienced and learned is valuable only to the extent that it can be carried back home with him, distilled into a

form that can be applied to life outside the mikdosh, to the challenges of daily living.

1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Vayikra 16:4
