

Dimensions in Chumash

Parshas Tetzaveh

Making a Material Difference – Lessons from the Bigdei Kehunah

The first half of our parsha is devoted to the manufacture of the *bigdei kehunah* (priestly garments). Seemingly, this section is of no practical relevance to most of the Jewish people: Four of the eight garments are worn only by kohanim, while the other four are worn by the Kohen Gadol specifically, with none of them currently being worn at all in the absence of the Beis Hamikdash! However, if we look deeper, we will discover that these garments have much to teach us concerning fundamental aspects of Torah outlook and behavior.

Comparing Bigdei Kehunah with Korbanos

We begin by referring to a most intriguing statement in the Gemara,¹ which notes that the Torah's presentation of the *bigdei kehunah* is juxtaposed with that of korbanos. The reason, says the Gemara, is to equate the two. Just as the korbanos bring atonement for the sins of the Jewish people, so, too, do the *bigdei kehunah*. For example:

- The *ephod* atones for idol-worship.
- The *choshen mishpat* for perversion of justice.
- The *me'il* for lashon hara.

And so on.

Needless to say, this idea requires our reflection. Can it be that simple – the kohanim wear their clothes and all is forgiven? That doesn't sound too hard at all. It sounds like as long as the Kohen Gadol's wardrobe is in order, *everything* is in order?

What does all of this mean?

¹ Zevachim 88b.

The Best Kind of Atonement

One of the classic commentators from among the late Rishonim, Rabbeinu Yitzchak Arama,² in his work *Akeydas Yitzchak*,³ explains as follows. When the Gemara says that the priestly garments are capable of effecting atonement, it means that each of the garments contains a message regarding a particular sin. If heeded, this message can help us avoid that sin in the future, and thus allow us to achieve atonement for past wrongdoings.

Let us consider some of these messages.

The Choshen Mishpat – Judging in Truth

The Gemara states that the *choshen mishpat* (the breastplate worn by the Kohen Gadol) atones, as its name suggests, for perversion of justice.

What lessons does the *choshen* impart regarding fairness in justice?

The *Akeydas Yitzchak* explains. An incorrect ruling can come about for one of four reasons:

1. The judge favors one of the litigants.
2. The judge is afraid of one of the litigants.
3. The amount involved is not significant enough in the judge's eyes to warrant investigating the case thoroughly.
4. The judge is not sufficiently expert in that area so as to be clear regarding what the ruling should be.

The *choshen* contains messages cautioning against all the above shortcomings:

1. The *choshen* contains twelve stones with the name of one of the tribes engraved on each of them.⁴ The Torah states that these names are to appear in the order the tribes were born. Although some of the tribes enjoy positions of authority, such as kingship with Yehuda and the priesthood

² Spain (c. 1420-1494).

³ Shaar 51. The *Akeydas Yitzchak* follows the weekly Torah portion, with the discussions divided between treatises on philosophical questions that relate to that parsha and a discussion of the contents of the parsha itself. This was one of the earliest works to adopt the format of opening with a list of questions and then answering them as the discussion unfolds.

⁴ 28:21.

with Levi, they are not favored or given precedence over the others. This is to teach us that when it comes to judgement, no one is to be favored over anyone else due to their position.

2. Inside the folds of the *choshen* are the *Urim ve'Tumim*,⁵ which Rashi explains are Names of Hashem. This teaches that a judge should be mindful of the fact that he is representing Hashem in dispensing judgement and should fear no man in fulfilling this Godly endeavor truthfully.
3. Some of the stones on the *choshen* are significantly more valuable than others, yet they all have an equal place. This teaches that one should judge all cases with equal care and thoroughness, regardless of the amount involved.
4. One of the functions of the stones was to have their letters illuminate when a question was asked of the *Urim ve'Tumim* regarding something that affected the Jewish people. The judge, too, should see to it that his knowledge is sound to the degree that he can illuminate the case before him with authority and clarity.

If the judges heed the messages of the *choshen* to rid themselves of the above failings, then they will be deserving of atonement in the event that a true error in judgement occurred. Moreover, as we know, even those among the Jewish people who are not in the judiciary often face situations where the above principles apply, even if not in a formal setting. In this broader sense, the *choshen* addresses each individual, enjoining him to act forthrightly and fairly, having first pursued whatever means required to determine the correct course of action in that situation.

The Me'il – Bells, Pomegranates and Lashon Hara

The Gemara states that the *me'il*, the blue coat worn by the Kohen Gadol, atones for the sin of lashon hara. How are these two connected? Our parsha describes how at the hem of the *me'il* is a row comprised alternately of gold bells and pomegranates spun from different materials.⁶ Says the Gemara:

Let an item which produces a sound [the me'il whose bells chimed when the kohen gadol walked] come and atone for a matter involving a sound [lashon hara].

⁵ Verse 30.

⁶ Verse 33.

Once again, this is no magic cure, with every round of lashon hara ending by the gossiper being “saved by the bells.” These bells contain a message aimed at helping us avoid lashon hara from the outset. What is that message?

As we mentioned, next to each bell is a pomegranate. The Gemara elsewhere⁷ tells us that the pomegranate is an expression of everything that is good about the Jewish people: “Even the empty ones among you are full of mitzvos, like a pomegranate is full of seeds.”

How can someone be both “empty” and “full of good deeds” at the same time? The answer is, there will always be redeeming features in any person. If you choose to ignore these positive points, you will see the person as empty. You may come to speak slander about your fellow because you feel there is nothing good to say about him. To this end, the Torah places a pomegranate next to each bell, as if to say, when you “ring your bell” and make a sound about a fellow Jew, see to it that it is a “pomegranate sound.” There is plenty of positive in others if you are prepared to see it. This is the antidote to *lashon hara* – and the pathway to its atonement.

Let us suggest an additional point to this idea. While there are bells and pomegranates at the hem of the *me'il*, the *me'il* itself is made entirely of *techeiles* — sky-blue thread. Let us ask, what role does this play in the message of positive speech?

The color *techeiles* is described by the Gemara⁸ as having a certain spiritually evocative quality. Commenting on the requirement to put a thread of *techeiles* in the *tzitzis*, the Gemara explains: “*Techeiles* resembles the sea, the sea resembles the sky, and the sky resembles the Throne of Glory.”

If people generally possess both positive and negative qualities, what would impel a person to ignore all the positive and focus solely on the negative? Typically, one who denigrates and devalues others does so because he wishes to promote himself. To this end, the garment to whose hem the bells and pomegranates are attached is made entirely of *techeiles*. Acquiring and maintaining a vision which is

⁷ *Berachos* 57a.

⁸ *Menachos* 43b.

working for the Glory of Hashem will help release a person from the compulsion to denigrate others, and moreover, encourage him to see how that person, too, has qualities which can be used to further Hashem's glory.

How interesting to note that the paragraph which we recite after the Megillah reading describes the joy of the Jewish people, "בראותם יחד תכלת מרדכי" – When they saw, all together, the *techeiles* of Mordechai." Absorbing the message of the *techeiles* allowed them to rise above the fault-finding which had kept them apart from each other, and to rejoice in the miracle of the eternity of the Jewish people – all together!