



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Shemot

Parshat Tetzaveh

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Atonement through Clothing: Understanding the Function of the Priestly Garments

By Tommy Weinberger

The *parshiyot* of *Terumah* and *Tetzaveh* form one unit detailing the construction of the *Mishkan* and all that is needed for service therein. *Terumah* focuses on the physical construction of the *Mishkan* and its vessels. *Tetzaveh* discusses the *bigdei kehuna*, the garments worn by the Kohanim while serving in the *Mishkan*. In what appears to be a textual anomaly, the order of presentation in Torah is as follows: *bigdei kehuna*, *korbanot*, and ancillary vessels associated with the *Mishkan*. It would seem more appropriate for *korbanot* to come after the instructions for building the *Mishkan*.

The Talmud (*Zevachim* 88B) addresses the relationship between the *korbanot* and *bigdei kehuna*. “Rav Inini bar Sasson says, Why was the passage in the Torah that discusses offerings juxtaposed to the passage that discusses the priestly vestments? It was juxtaposed to tell you that just as offerings effect atonement, so too, priestly vestments effect atonement.” Rav Inini bar Sasson delineates each garment and the sin for which it effectuates atonement:

1. The *ketonet* (tunic) atones for murder.
2. The *michnasayim* (trousers) atone for forbidden sexual relations.
3. The *mitznefet* (turban) atones for arrogance.
4. The *avnet* (belt) atones for improper thoughts of the heart.
5. The *chosehn* (breastplate) atones for corruption in the courts.
6. The *ephod* (apron) atones for idol worship.
7. The *meil* (robe) atones for *lashon horah*.

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Exactly how the priestly garments effectuate atonement is left unanswered by the Talmud. While it may be possible to understand that atonement can be achieved through a sacrifice and the attendant rituals, it is less clear how merely donning a garment achieves a similar result.

Rav Yakov Nagen, a senior educator at the Otniel Yeshiva, addresses this question by focusing on the *meil*, the special turquoise robe adorned with golden bells and cloth pomegranates. The *meil*, as noted above, atones for *lashon horah*. Rav Nagen cites the *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* (10:6) that raises an apparent contradiction. There is no atonement for evil speech, and yet the trimming of the *meil* provides atonement for evil speech.

Rav Nagen explains this apparent contradiction by establishing a relationship between the *meil* and speech. The Torah describes the *meil* as follows (*Shemot* 28:31-35):

You shall make the robe of the ephod of pure blue. The opening (mouth in Hebrew) for the head shall be in the middle of it; the opening shall have a binding of woven work round about (lip of the mouth in Hebrew)—it shall be like the opening of a coat of mail—so that it does not tear. On its hem make pomegranates of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, all around the hem, with bells of gold between them all around: a golden bell and a pomegranate, a golden bell and a pomegranate, all around the hem of the robe. Aaron shall wear it while officiating so that the sound of it is heard when he comes into the sanctuary before the Lord and when he goes out—that he may not die.

The *meil* is described as “speaking,” it has a mouth and lips and makes sounds through its bells. The ability to speak is what distinguishes man from the animals; it is part of our being in the image of Hashem. And, while the power of speech can be dangerous if used carelessly or with malevolent intent, it can also elevate.

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The *midrash* teaches us an important lesson: *lashon horah* can only be overcome with positive speech. According to Rav Nagenis, the point is not that there is no atonement for the harmful, and unerasable effects of *lashon horah*; the point is to use the power of speech to counteract the evil speech and focus on the good and positive.

The *meil* provides that counterbalance manifested in a physical form. The *Kohen Gadol* dons the *meil* in a world full of evil speech, and the sounds made as he goes about his service direct us to focus on using the power of speech — of *lashon tov* — to counteract evil speech. In this way, the *meil* serves as protection for the *Kohen Gadol* so “that he may not die.”

מִי־הָאִישׁ הַחֲפֵץ חַיִּים אֲהָב לְרֵאוֹת טוֹב:

Who is the man who is eager for life, who desires years of good fortune?

נֹצֵר לְשׁוֹנָה מִרַע וְשׂוֹפְתִיה מִדִּבֵּר מִרָמָה:

Guard your tongue from evil, your lips from deceitful speech.

Tommy grew up in the Young Israel of Scarsdale and returned in 1997 with his wife Penina and two daughters, Ariela and Avigail. They were soon joined by their third daughter, Nomi. Tommy is a partner at Schulte Roth & Zabel.

Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?

Please contact Steve Smith at LivingTorahFund@gmail.com

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