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With Great Joy He Put on His Own Clothes

The Prophet Elijah, Eliyahu HaNavi convened a great theological debate with the idolatrous prophets of Baal. As recounted in I Kings 18, Eliyahu alone was left alive among the true prophets of God and he had assembled four hundred fifty prophets of Baal for a theological debate. This debate was unusual. The entire population of the region around Har Karmel, where Haifa is located today, was invited to watch the debate, and the debate would take the form of a sacrifice contest.

וַיִּגַּשׁ אֵלֵיהֶם אֵל-כָּל-הַעָם וַיֹּאמֶר עַד-מָתַי אַתֶּם פֹּסְחִים עַל-שְׁתֵּי הַסַּעֲפִיִּם אִם-ה' הָאֱ-לֹהִים לְכוּ אֶתְרוּ וְאִם-הַבַּעַל לְכוּ אֶתְרוּ וְלֹא-עָנוּ הָעָם אִתּוֹ דְּבָר:

“Elijah approached all the people and said, “How long will you keep hopping between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; and if Baal, follow him!” But the people answered him not a word.”

Two bulls were slaughtered as sacrifices, one to Ba'al, and one to God. The four hundred fifty prophets of Ba'al then began to cry out to their god, asking him to consume the bull with fire from heaven. It did not work. Eliyahu taunts them, “perhaps Ba'al is sleeping” he says. “Yell louder.” That did not work. Eliyahu then successfully invokes God's intervention and a fire bursts forth from Heaven and consumes the bull.

Thousands of people watching cried out as one:

וַיִּרְא כָּל-הָעָם וַיִּפְּלוּ עַל-פְּנֵיהֶם וַיֹּאמְרוּ ה' הוּא הָאֱ-לֹהִים ה' הוּא הָאֱ-לֹהִים:

“The LORD alone is God, The LORD alone is God!”

And the very next day, Eliyahu had to flee for his life to escape the wrath of Queen Jezebel. The powerful moment, at which thousands of people cried out in unison: ה' הוּא הָאֱ-לֹהִים ה' הוּא הָאֱ-לֹהִים: seems to have not been quite as transformational as it appeared in the moment.

Wednesday night hundreds of us gathered in this room, and downstairs, and outside in the parking lot, and at precisely 7:08 PM, we too cried out ה' הוּא הָאֱ-לֹהִים ה' הוּא הָאֱ-לֹהִים: We didn't just say it twice, we said it seven times. What impact did it have on us?

Nechama Leibowitz shared that “in school they told us we need to be extra careful about our behavior between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. But in our home, my father said that it is even more important to behave in an exemplary way between Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah!”

In fact the test of the effectiveness of the *Asseret Yamei Teshuvah*, the ten days of repentance and introspection, and the month that precedes them, which all culminate on Yom Kippur, cannot be determined until we demonstrate after Yom Kippur the ways that we are different. Do we speak differently? Have we adjusted our priorities to make time for volunteering in the community or visiting sick or isolated people we know? Have we established a pattern of reciting *berachot* before

and after we eat with more care? Are we more patient with our children? Are we more patient with our parents? Are we more eager to help our co-workers?

For myself, I think it is too soon to tell, and I think it is probably too soon for most of us to tell yet whether or not we accomplished something on Yom Kippur that has more than a fleeting impact. But the legacy of dramatic declarations like ה' הוא ה' -ה' לה'ים ה' הוא ה' -ה' לה'ים: is that for all the drama and the power of shouting out one's allegiance to God, we would do well to remember that the original paradigm of a collective religious revival was a failed model.

There is another paradigm that we reenacted over Yom Kippur which I find more hopeful. For the first time this year I noticed a small detail in the account of the Avodah of the Kohen Gadol, the intricate service of the high priest in the Temple on Yom Kippur. The Mishnah in tractate Yoma recounts the steps that he took, one after the other, as he prepared for the Yom Kippur service and as he faithfully carried it out. He immersed in a mikvah, he changed his clothing, he sacrificed the various animals as detailed in the Torah and applied their blood in all the places where it was supposed to be applied.

In the Machzor's poetic retelling we read:

תֵּאָר מְגִמְתּוֹ כְּצֵאת הַשָּׁמֶשׁ בְּבֹרָה, תִּקַּף וְדָץ וְעֵטָה בְּגָדֵי הַזֶּה.

Which means:

The appearance of his face was like the brilliance of a sunrise. With great joy, he put on his own clothes.

In the Mishnah, this is stated a bit more prosaically:

הֵבִיאוּ לוֹ בְּגָדֵי עֲצָמוֹ, וְלָבַשׁ. וּמְלוּיִן אוֹתוֹ עַד בֵּיתוֹ. וַיּוֹם טוֹב הָיָה עוֹשֶׂה לְאוֹהָבָיו בְּשִׁעָה שִׁיֵּצֵא בְּשִׁלּוֹם מִן הַקֹּדֶשׁ:

They then brought him his own clothing and he dressed, since the service was complete and Yom Kippur was over; and the people escorted him to his house. And the Kohen Gadol would make a feast for his loved ones and his friends when he emerged in peace from the Sanctuary.

On Yom Kippur when we retell and reenact this moment we break out into song:

אַמֶּת מֶה נִהְדָּר הָיָה כְּהֵן גָּדוֹל בְּצֵאתוֹ מִבֵּית קֹדֶשׁי הַקְּדוֹשִׁים בְּשִׁלּוֹם בְּלִי כָּנַע:

How truly glorious was the *Kohen Gadol* as he left the Holy of Holies, peacefully, unharmed.

All of the beautiful and inspiring words about the kohen gadol, the high priest, were about the kohen gadol after Yom Kippur was over and he was already dressed in his street clothing.

כְּבָרְקִים הַיּוֹצֵאִים מִזֵּי הַחַיּוֹת

As the glitter of light emanating from the brilliance of the Chayot (angels).

כְּדַמּוֹת הַקִּשּׁוֹת בְּתוֹךְ הָעָנָן.

As the rainbow in the clouds.

This year, I am more inspired by the kohen gadol than I am by Eliyahu HaNavi. We can construct moments of inspiration when we cry out The Lord is God, Hashem Hu Ha'Elokim. But the real

challenge of religious life is for religious experiences to leave an imprint on those who experience them which is visible and demonstrable even after it is over. The kohen gadol can wear his own clothing and everyone knows what he has seen and where he has been. It's visible on his rainbow face.

That more lofty and challenging goal is what we should strive for in the aftermath of Yom Kippur. Can we wear our regular clothing and still shine with the light of Yom Kippur? If we were transformed by the holidays that just passed, or if we hope to be transformed by the holidays that are coming in a few days, how will that transformation be seen by others? Can our very lives serve as testimony to the powerful things we experience together in this room?

The example of the Kohel Gadol teaches us that we live our lives in such a way that all the people we come into contact with, family, colleagues, neighbors, and fellow-citizens, will look at us and respond: אֲמִת מְאֵה נִהְדָּר - Truly, how glorious.