

On Yom Kippur morning most communities read Leviticus Chapter 16, the first part of Parashah Acharei Mot. The elaborate atonement rites it details are reenacted near the end of the service in the *Avodah*, bringing a fundamental aspect of ancient Judaism to life much like the Pesach Seder does for the Exodus. While we can readily identify with the Exodus, it is difficult to imagine what our ancient ancestors felt on this 10<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month – i.e., Yom Kippur, which HaShem institutes in the last verses of Chapter 16. Only on this day was the High Priest permitted to enter the innermost chamber of the *mishkan*, and later the Temple, to draw as close to HaShem as is humanly possible, a perilous undertaking as the first verses remind us: “The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron’s two sons, when they drew near before the Lord, and they died. And the Lord said to Moses: Speak to your brother Aaron, that he should not come at all times into the Holy within the dividing curtain, in front of the cover that is upon the Ark, so that he should not die, for I appear over the Ark cover in a cloud.” (16:1-2) Indeed, the establishment of the Yom Kippur service appears to be a reaction to as well as an act of atonement for the rash, unbidden act of Nadav and Avihu that brought the joyful celebrations marking the inauguration of the *mishkan* to a sudden and tragic end. From then on, everything associated with the Sanctuary, even the priests’ clothing, was minutely planned. Another tragic infraction is reflected in the High Priest’s special attire for entering the most sacred space. Talmud Tractate Rosh Hashanah 26a: “For what reason does the High Priest not enter the innermost sanctum, the Holy of Holies with his golden garments to perform the service there on Yom Kippur? It is because a prosecutor (*kateigor*) cannot become an advocate (*sanneigor*). Since the Jewish people committed the sin of worshipping the Golden Calf, the High Priest may not enter the Holy of Holies to atone for the Jewish people wearing golden garments, as they would bring that sin to mind.” As we read in Parashah Tetzaveh, the High Priest ordinarily officiates in his “Golden Garments (*bigdei zahav*),” eight separate pieces fashioned with rich colors and adorned with golden threads and precious stones, an appearance that symbolizes the ethical heights to which we should aspire. The hem of his robe was trimmed with bells to announce his approach. According to Midrash Leviticus Rabbah Acharei Mot 21, the tinkling of the bells is akin to knocking on the door of a home to seek permission to enter. In contrast, the special *bigdei lavan* (White Garments) for Yom Kippur consisted of only four simple, unadorned pieces made of fine white linen. There were no bells, although our sages disagreed on whether the Torah commanded the High Priest to carry something else to signal his approach. When performing the special rites in the innermost sanctum, the High Priest wore his *bigdei lavan*, and for every other part of the service he wore his *bigdei zahav*. Tractate Yoma 32b lists five services with their respective attire: “The daily morning offering, performed in golden garments; the service of the day, the bull and goat, performed in white garments; the sacrifice of his ram guilt-offering and the ram of the people, performed in golden garments. After that, the High Priest places the spoon and the coal pan into the Holy of Holies in white garments. He emerges and sacrifices the daily afternoon offering in golden garments; and then he removes the spoon and the coal pan in white garments.” This means he changed clothes five times and washed his hands and feet ten times, once before and once after each change of clothing. It is noteworthy that the daily rites were performed in the High Priest’s ornate attire, while the special rites for Yom Kippur required that he change to his simple, white clothing. The magnificence of his everyday clothing emphasizes the importance of our daily rituals, whose consistency evokes the high ideals the terms of our eternal covenant call on us to aspire. The simplicity of the garments he wore to approach HaShem on Yom Kippur represents not only the acknowledgement that we all are fallible and in need of atonement for transgressions committed knowingly and unknowingly, but also the humility required of the High Priest. His unique standing and the tremendous responsibility of making atonement for the entire people could tempt him to become haughty. In the words of Rashi, “The higher one’s status, the more important it is to be low and humble.” This is also why he must first make atonement for himself, then for his family, and finally for the people. Tractate Bava Batra 60 offers a lovely illustration: “Rabbi Yannai had a tree that was leaning into the public domain. A certain man also had a tree that was leaning into the public domain, and the general public was ... insisting he cut it down ... He came before Rabbi Yannai, who said to him, ‘Go now, and come tomorrow.’ At night, Rabbi Yannai had someone cut down that tree that belonged to him. The next day, that man came before Rabbi Yannai, who said, ‘Go, cut down your tree.’ The man said, ‘But the Master also has a tree that leans into the public domain.’ Rabbi Yannai said, ‘Go and see: If mine is cut down, then cut yours down. If mine is not cut down, you do not have to cut yours down either.’ ... Act properly before requiring others to do so.” In other words, we are all equal before the law, and before judging others, we must judge ourselves. In the beautiful poem that ends the *Avodah*, the High Priest changes one more time – into his own, private clothing, and goes forth to celebrate with his friends and family. But his responsibilities, and ours, never end; they are simply renewed by the cleansing acts of Yom Kippur, which we continue to perform with offerings of prayer in our places of worship, dressed in our own *bigdei lavan*.

Shabbat shalom!