

The Glorious Process of Teshuvah

Good Afternoon.

Thank you all so much for being here to share this moment with me.

The tune Cantor Sarah Levine just led us in is from a climactic moment of Yom Kippur, when many congregations sing, “*emet mah nehedar*” truly, how glorious it was when the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, departed the Holy of Holies in the ancient Temple, having just secured atonement for the people on Yom Kippur.

The High Priest in this song is **High**- there is no better way to describe it. He is likened to an angel. Marked by dress and ritual as separate and distinct, he is the one person who can enter the holiest space of our people on this holiest day of the year.

In our Torah portion for this week, Tetzaveh, God appoints Aaron as the first High Priest. God commands Moses to bring near Aaron and his sons from among the children of Israel *l'chahano li-* to serve God as *kohanim*, as priests. Twice God commands *bigdei kodesh*, holy garments to be made for Aaron and his sons. They are distinguished in role and dress as *kadosh*, as separate and distinct, as holy among the people.

My question is why. We just read that the entire people of Israel are to be a *mamlechet kohanim v'goy kadosh*- a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. And we will soon read the commandment in Leviticus, "*kedoshim tihyu*" we all are to aspire to be holy, for God *our* God is holy.

Why elevate some people as more holy than others? And what is the role of *bigdei kodesh*, holy garments, in distinguishing the priests from everybody else?

Perhaps the priests are particularly pious individuals who by their merit are chosen to serve in the Temple. They are to be role models for us all, and the *bigdei kodesh* represent their piety. But that doesn't line up with our narrative. Aaron, the first High Priest, helps the people build the Golden Calf, and his sons Nadav and Avihu, perhaps a little tipsy according to the rabbis, offer a strange fire to the LORD and are consequently burned alive. And remember the High Priest from Yom Kippur—the one our song praised- he was assailed by our prophets for corruption in the First Temple, and assailed by the rabbis for holding political power in the Second Temple. At times the office of the High Priest was sold to the highest bidder.

So if the high priest was no moral or spiritual role model, why did our people continue to elevate one religious leader- and one religious class- as closer to God than everybody else?

When we look back at the drama of the Yom Kippur ritual, as described in Masechet Yoma, we can find an answer: the High Priest is “High” not to represent his own piety and merit, but rather to convey the glory of teshuvah, of returning to God to become our best self.

Before securing atonement for the people, the High Priest on Yom Kippur calls out, “ana hashem, please God, aviti, pashati, chatati, I have done wrong, I have transgressed, I have missed the mark before you, I and my household.”

He next calls out, “ana hashem, I have messed up, I and my household *and the children of Aaron Your holy people*, the priesthood.”

Finally, he calls out “ana bashem, av’u, pash’u, chat’u l’phaneicha, am’cha beit yisrael, Your people, the House of Israel, they have done wrong before you, they have transgressed, they have missed the mark.”

The High Priest, like a good teacher, models for the people what it takes to admit your mistake and to try to do better. I can only imagine what it meant to see the holiest person alive, dressed in pure white linen, admit to God

and to everyone around him, “I have done wrong, and so has my family and my holy tribe the priests. We are not who you might think we are. We are just as human as you.”

Aaron, and every High Priest after him, no doubt made mistakes- even quite big ones. It was precisely their ability to admit those mistakes before God and the people that distinguished them as priests. The *bigdei kodesh*, the holy clothes that they wore, represented not that they were holy but that they, and the people, all strove to become more holy. The *bigdei kodesh* also convey that there is something profoundly holy about becoming more holy, about becoming a better version of yourself, about teshuvah. That it is truly glorious to admit your mistakes and to grow as a person.

The rabbis write that one who undertakes teshuvah reaches a place where even the completely righteous cannot stand. Teshuvah transforms sins into merits and brings redemption to the world. It brings out each person’s inner glory and thereby makes the entire world more glorious and closer to God.

Emet mah nehedar- truly, how glorious it was to behold the High Priest who led us all in teshuvah.

But what about today? In a world without priests, without a High Priest, upon whom does it fall to model the glory of teshuvah?

Rabbi Orrin Krublit, in his senior sermon last year, made the impressive point that religious leaders today ought be symbolic exemplars not of perfection but of imperfection. By our position as public leaders we can model for those around us teshuvah by sharing our journeys to become better versions of ourselves.

I would like to go even further. I think it is incumbent upon all of us- clergy and not clergy- to model the process of teshuvah. Some of my greatest role models on what it means to be a good Jew- and a good human being- are not rabbis or cantors or Jewish educators (Two of them are right here). We can learn what it means to be a better human being from all of those around us.

And when we do, we can clothe ourselves in the very same *bigdei kodesh*, the same holy clothes, which the ancient priests wore. And I will conclude with a source that tells us how.

The scholar Malbim writes how God commanded Moses to make the *bigdei kodesh* for his brother Aaron, yet in the very next verse it is the *chachmei lev*, the wise hearted artisans, who are to make Aaron's garments. Malbim

explains that yes, the *chachmei lev* designed the outer garments of the priests, but Moses designed their inner garments, those that clothed their soul.

He writes, as quoted by the scholar Nehama Liebowitz,

“The priests were to invest themselves with noble qualities, which are the vestments of the soul...God commanded Moses to make these holy garments, that is to instruct them in the improvement of their souls and their characters so that their inner selves should be clothed in majesty and splendor- *kavod* and *tifaret*.”

We see here that noble qualities cultivated are like fine garments that clothe the soul and elevate the inner self to majesty and splendor, to *kavod* and *tifaret*, to the same glory that graced the High Priest.

We all have the ability, then, to become High Priests in this regard, to clothe our souls with the same splendor that the High Priest wore by our growing as human beings.

Perhaps it is precisely that growth that the priests wearing *bigdei kodesh* modeled. They modeled on the outside the dignity that graces our inner selves when we grow as human beings. They modeled the glorious and the holy process of teshuvah- of growing into the best versions of ourselves, a

process that is glorious precisely because it reconnects us to God as the Temple once did.

My wish is that we can model for one another the glorious process of teshuvah, so that we all may grow to clothe our souls with *kavod* and *tifaret*, and so that we all may say “*emet mah nehedar*” oh how glorious it is to behold within ourselves a bit of the *kohen gadol* as he departed the Holy of Holies.

Kaddish Derabanan.