

D'var Torah for Parshat Tzav  
By Elez Bell

At the beginning of this week's parsha, G-d tells Moshe what clothes the Kohanim (priests) should wear while they're removing the ashes from the altar. Here are the verses:

וְלֹבֶשׁ הַכֹּהֵן מִקְוֹן בֶּד וּמִכְנֶסֶת־בֶּד יְלֹבֶשׁ עַל־בָּשָׂר וּבָרִים אֶת־הַקְרֵבָן אֲשֶׁר תִּאְכַל הַאֲשֶׁר תִּהְעַלְתָּה עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְשֶׁמֶן אֲצֵל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ: וְפָשַׂט אֶת־בְּגָדָיו וְלֹבֶשׁ בְּגָדִים אַחֲרִים וְהוּא יָאַת אֶת־הַקְרֵבָן אֶל־מִזְבֵּחַ לְפָנֶיה אֶל־מִזְבֵּחַ טָהוֹר:

*"And the Kohen shall don his linen tunic, and he shall don his linen trousers on his flesh. And he shall lift out the ashes into which the fire has consumed the burnt offering upon the altar, and put them down next to the altar. He shall then take off his garments and put on other garments, and he shall take out the (remaining) ashes to a clean place outside the camp."*

There are two steps in what the Kohanim are doing: putting some of the ashes next to the altar and taking the rest outside the camp. Rashi has a comment on the change of clothing, in between the two steps, that is very surprising:

אין זו חובה אלא דרך ארץ, שלא ילכלה בהוצאה הדשן בגדים שהוא משמש בהן תמיד. בגדים שבשל בהן קדרה לרבו אל יمزוג בהן כוס לריבו, לכך ולכש בגדים אחרים פחותין מהן

*"This is not an obligation, but proper practice (Derech Eretz), that, by taking out the ashes, he should not soil the garments in which he usually officiates. [By analogy:] The clothes worn [by a servant] while cooking a pot [of food] for his master, he should not wear when he mixes a glass [of wine] for his master. Hence, [the verse continues,] "and put on other garments," inferior to those [garments of the kehunah he had been wearing till now]. — [Talmud Yoma 23b]*

Rashi is saying that the reason for this change of clothes is derech eretz (etiquette), not because it is an obligation. How does Rashi know this? The Siftei Chachamim (a commentary on Rashi) explains that in the above verse, the Torah uses the full expression "אתרים בגדים" (other garments) when the Kohen puts on the other clothes, instead of simply saying "אתרים" (others). Repeating the explicit word "בגדים" (garments) shows that the second set of clothes was the same type of clothing as the first one (the official Kohen uniform). The Torah's emphasis on the validity of the second clothes indicates that the change is not obligatory. The reason for changing, therefore, must be derech eretz (etiquette). The Torah finds Derech Eretz so important that it specifically tells the kohen to have derech eretz even though it's not required.

This doesn't make sense. Isn't derech eretz itself an obligation? There is even a famous saying 'derech eretz kadmah laTorah' (derech eretz comes before Torah). Commentaries explain that derech eretz constructs a foundation that can be compared to how plowing a field makes the ground capable of supporting the growth of seeds. So how can Rashi say that derech eretz is not an obligation?

One possible answer is that there are different levels of derech eretz, and not all of them are obligatory. These Kohanim had ash from an *offering* on their clothes, not dirt from working all day. Changing clothes in this type of case is probably a much more subtle level of derech eretz and is not obligatory.

We can learn from this the importance of all derech eretz. The Torah specifically tells the Kohanim that it is proper to change their clothes even though the ash was "holy ash" from an offering. This teaches us that we should always strive to be more respectful and have derech eretz, no matter how much we already have.