

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:

וְלִבְשׁ הַכֹּהֵן מְדוּ בָד וּמְכַנְסֵי-בָד יִלְבָּשׁ עַל-בְּשָׂרוֹ וְהָרִים אֶת-הַדָּשָׁן אֲשֶׁר תֹּאכַל הָאֵשׁ אֶת-הָעֵלָה עַל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְשָׂמוּ אֵצֶל
הַמִּזְבֵּחַ: וּפָשַׁט אֶת-בְּגָדָיו וְלָבַשׁ בְּגָדִים אֲחֵרִים וְהוֹצִיא אֶת-הַדָּשָׁן אֶל-מִחוּץ לַמִּחֲנֶה אֶל-מְקוֹם 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 ילכלך בהוצאת הדשן בגדים שהוא משמש בהן תמיד. בגדים שבשל בהן קדרה לרבו
אל ימזוג בהן כוס לרבו, לכך ולבש 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 erez (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 “אֲחֵרִים בְּגָדִים (other garments)” when the Kohen puts on the other clothes, instead of simply saying “אֲחֵרִים (others)”. Repeating the explicit word “בְּגָדִים (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 erez (etiquette). The Torah finds Derech Eretz so important that it specifically tells the kohen to have derech erez even though it’s not required.

This doesn’t make sense. Isn’t derech erez itself an obligation? There is even a famous saying ‘derech erez kadmah laTorah’ (derech erez comes before Torah). Commentaries explain that derech erez 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 erez is not an obligation?

One possible answer is that there are different levels of derech erez, 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 his type of case is probably a much more subtle level of derech erez and is not obligatory.

We can learn from this the importance of all derech erez. 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 erez, no matter how much we already have.