

Elez Bell's Yom Kippur D'var Torah

“Humility, I Think”

The Torah reading on Yom Kippur morning is the beginning of Parshat Acharei Mot (in the middle of the book of Vayikra (Leviticus) because it talks about what the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) does on Yom Kippur in the Beit HaMikdash (Holy Temple)). The Kohen Gadol goes into the Kodesh Kodashim (the Holy of Holies) where he brings a special incense and does part of the Yom Kippur sacrificial service. While performing service in the Holy of Holies, he wears the white linen clothes of the Kohen Hedyot (the standard Kohen). For the rest of the service, he wears his normal elaborate Kohen Gadol clothes. These include the Efod (apron), the Tzitz (golden headband), the Me'il (blue shirt), and the Choshen (breastplate) containing twelve stones on which were written the names of the twelve tribes. This is the last verse of the first chapter:

וְהָיְתָה-זֹאת לְכֶם לְחֻקַּת עוֹלָם לְכַפֵּר עַל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִכָּל-חַטָּאתָם אֶחָת בַּשָּׁנָה וַיַּעַשׂ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת-מֹשֶׁה:

“[All] this shall be as an eternal statute for you, to effect atonement upon the children of Israel, for all their sins, once each year. And he [Aharon] did as the Lord had commanded Moshe.”

Rashi has a problem with this verse. At the end, it says that Aharon, who was the Kohen Gadol at the time, did what G-d commanded. Rashi wonders why it has to say this because Aharon would certainly do what G-d had told him to do. It would only need to say if Aharon did the unexpected and didn't do what G-d instructed. Here is Rashi's answer:

... "להגיד שבחו של אהרן שלא היה לובשן לגדולתו, אלא כמקיים גזירת המלך:"

“[this verse is written] to tell Aharon's praise, namely, that he did not don those garments for his self-aggrandizement, but rather, as one who is fulfilling the King's decree.”

Rashi answers that the Torah is complementing Aharon for not being haughty. The pasuk says that Aharon did like G-d commanded. Aharon did it not because he wanted the glory, but because he wanted to listen to G-d. This is an important lesson before Yom Kippur. A person can do so many mitzvot, but if it gets to his head, what is it really worth? Moshe, the greatest person to have ever lived, was also the humblest. Every time we do a mitzvah, we need to make sure that we don't become haughty because of it, and that we're doing it for the right reason.

There is a part of the Rashi that I don't understand. Rashi says that Aharon might get haughty because of the clothes that he wears on Yom Kippur (“he did not don those garments for his self-aggrandizement”). This puzzles me. Wouldn't the challenge to Aharon's humility more likely arise from his being allowed to enter the Kodesh Kodashim (Holy of Holies)? The clothes the Kohen Gadol wears on Yom Kippur is actually a downgrade from the clothes he normally wears. On Yom Kippur, rather than wearing his glorious golden clothes for the entire service, he wears the simple white clothes of a regular Kohen for all the parts of the service that take place in the Holy of Holies!

This Devar Torah leaves me with a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of humility. I am exhilarated because I'm pretty sure I understand Rashi's main point. On the other hand I am reminded that there are so many things that I don't yet know and understand. That's a good balance, and very fitting for a Devar Torah about “humility”!