

The Mysterious White Garments of Yom Kippur Rav Yonatan Grossman

With the conclusion of the unit dealing with ritual impurity (chap. 11-15), *Sefer Vayikra* proceeds to discuss the purity of the *mishkan* itself. After having examined the many forms of ritual impurity that endanger the *Shekhina's* residence within the Israelite camp, the Torah now addresses the solution to this problem: the process of the *mishkan's* purification, conducted once annually, on Yom Kippur.

I would like to try to identify the function of the special "*bigdei lavan*," the white linen garments donned by the kohen gadol on this special day, referred to by the verse as "*bigdei ha-bad*" - "linen clothing." Why must the kohen change out of his standard clothing? Does this change mark a heightened spiritual quality or perhaps a lower status?

The Ramban (*Vayikra* 16:4), quoting *Vayikra Rabba*, appears to have paved the way for the many others who followed, by viewing the donning of these garments as indicative of an additional quality assumed by the kohen gadol during the Yom Kippur service:

"Like the service in the upper spheres - so is the service in the lower spheres: just as in the service of the upper spheres, one 'person' in [the angels'] midst wears white (see *Yechezkel* 9:3, *Daniel* 10:5), the same occurs in the service in the lower spheres - 'He shall be dressed in a sacral linen tunic.'"

According to the Ramban, these vestments afford the kohen gadol the appearance of an angel. On this day, when the kohen purifies the *mishkan* and the entirety of Benei Yisrael becomes cleansed from its wrongdoing, the kohen gadol earns this unique quality.

If, however, this is the case, then we would expect to find a similar basis for other instances of the kohen's wearing *bigdei ha-bad*. Yet, a review of the other contexts in which the kohen wears these garments demonstrates just the opposite: a lowering of the kohen's stature.

The Torah makes explicit mention of *bigdei ha-bad* in two other instances.

1) THE *TERUMAT HA-DESHEN*, taking up the ashes from the altar (*Vayikra* 6:3):

"The kohen shall dress in linen apparel, and he shall wear linen trousers on his skin, and he shall take up the ashes to which the fire has reduced the burnt offering on the altar and place them beside the altar."

A clear parallel exists between this verse and that describing the kohen's garb on Yom Kippur: "He shall be dressed in a sacral linen tunic, and linen trousers shall be on his skin." This parallel can only mean that the kohen's changing from his traditional vestments on these two occasions serves the same function in both. Why does the kohen wear special clothing for removing the ashes from the altar? *Chazal* (*Sifra* 82:1; *Yoma* 23b) understood that the verse in fact does not require that the kohen change his clothing, but rather teaches that his garments must fit his size (Rashi and

Ramban follow this approach). However, the clear textual association drawn to the Yom Kippur service indicates that the kohen did, in fact, perform this particular service in special linen garments.

In a shiur on *Parashat Tzav* (<http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.61/24tzav.htm>), I addressed this brief segment and suggested that the verses describe two stages of the removal of the ashes from the altar to outside the camp. In the first stage, the kohen lifts the ashes from altar. As this ritual involves direct contact with the altar, the kohen must wear the *bigdei ha-bad*. After this stage concludes with the kohen's placing the ashes "next to the altar," the verse then proceeds to the second stage: the removal of ashes from the altar's side to an area outside the camp. The kohen no longer works at the altar itself, and may therefore wear other clothing. According to the Ramban, he may even don ordinary, laymen's clothing; he need not wear priestly vestments at all. (By contrast, Rashi, following *Chazal* in *Yoma* 23b, maintains that the kohen wears clothing of lower quality but that are nevertheless special priestly garments.) Once the kohen takes the ashes outside the camp, the second and last stage of the ashes' trip reaches its conclusion. According to the simple reading of the text, this procedure must be performed each morning.

As stated, the ashes' removal consists of two stages, the second of which occurs outside the boundaries of the *mishkan* and hence does not require priestly vestments. It involves neither the *mishkan* nor the altar, but rather the technical necessity of removing the remaining ashes from atop the altar. By contrast, during the first stage of this process the kohen comes in direct contact with the altar, and may therefore not wear ordinary clothing during the execution of this task. However, since this activity is not inherently part of the sacred *avoda* (service), but rather merely the removal of ashes, the kohen does not wear the standard priestly garments. Instead, he dons the *bigdei ha-bad*. It thus emerges from this commandment that these linen garments reflect not the kohen's attainment of an additional level, but on the contrary, the lower status of the activity at hand: preparing the altar for future rituals.

2) THE KOHANIM'S TROUSERS (*Shemot* 28:42): The second context in which we encounter a command concerning *bigdei bad* does not involve a special or specific event; rather, one of the priestly garments was made of linen. The Torah writes:

"You shall make for them linen trousers to cover their nakedness; they shall extend from the hips to the thighs. They shall be worn by Aharon and his sons when they enter the Tent of Meeting or when they approach the altar to officiate in the sanctuary, so that they do not incur punishment and die. It shall be a law for all time for him and for his offspring to come."

How must we understand the significance of the linen in the kohanim's trousers? In order to arrive at a clearer understanding of this issue, we must address a broader topic: the general role of the trousers and their relationship to the other priestly vestments. Chapter 28 in *Sefer Shemot*, which describes the various garments, opens with a general command listing the vestments to be prepared for the kohanim:

"These are the vestments they are to make: a breastpiece, an ephod, a robe, a checkered tunic, a headdress, and a sash. They shall make those sacral vestments for your brother Aharon and his sons, for priestly service to Me." (*Shemot* 28:4)

The Torah then proceeds one-by-one down this list, outlining the details of the fashioning of each garment. Surprisingly, however, this brief introductory survey of the garments omits two of them: the head-plate ("tzitz") and the trousers! The issue of the head-plate does not concern us right now, and we should note that the Torah does devote three verses to describe its fashioning later in this chapter (36-38). The trousers, by contrast, are absent not only from the introductory verse, but even from the detailed list presented thereafter.

This presentation concludes in verse 41: "Put these on your brother Aharon and on his sons, as well; anoint them, ordain them and consecrate them to serve Me as kohanim." This concluding verse strongly resembles the introduction - "They shall make those sacral vestments for your brother Aharon and his sons, for priestly service to Me," thus forming a clear, self-contained, literary framework of the priestly garments. Only after the Torah completes this presentation does it mention the trousers: "You shall make for them linen trousers..."

Why did the Torah delay this commandment until after the conclusion of this section dealing with the kohanim's garments? Why do the trousers appear as a mere afterthought of sorts? The answer lies in the verse's characterization of this garment's particular role. Whereas the other vestments serve to reflect "glory and adornment" (*Shemot* 28:2), as well as to "sanctify [Aharon] to serve Me as kohen" (28:3), the trousers are worn "to cover their nakedness... They shall be worn by Aharon and his sons when they enter the Tent of Meeting or when they approach the altar to officiate in the sanctuary, so that they do not incur punishment and die" (28:43). The trousers clearly do not reflect glory and adornment, nor do they involve the sanctification or consecration of the kohen as an attendant of the Almighty. They merely fill the technical role of "covering their nakedness."

Here, too, it would seem, the verse refers to the trousers as *bigdei bad* specifically on account of their lesser importance compared with the other vestments.

Returning to the Yom Kippur service, I believe that we must view the *bigdei ha-bad* mentioned in this *parasha* in a similar vein. The kohen does not earn an elevated stature by wearing these garments; to the contrary, he detaches himself entirely from his priestly vestments and wears clothing of a stature lower than that of his regular priestly garments. Similarly, at the outset of the *parasha*, the Torah lists four garments worn by the kohen gadol during the Yom Kippur service, whereas a kohen gadol generally wears eight special vestments. The Sages have pointed out that from here we see that the kohen gadol officiates on Yom Kippur as a *kohen hedyot*, a regular kohen, who wears only four priestly garments. (See Rashi, 16:4.)

If at first glance a lowering of the kohen gadol's stature on Yom Kippur seems surprising, at second glance it becomes understandable and even compelling. In an article on the relationship between Yom Kippur and the initial consecration of the *mishkan* (the "*milu'im*"), Rav Yoel Bin-Nun explains that this relationship is manifest in four ways (see <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha/26shemin.htm> or *Megadim* vol. 8, pp. 34-39):

1. The Torah presents the Yom Kippur service after its description of the eighth and final day of the *milu'im* and

emphasizes this association in the opening verse of our *parasha*: "God spoke to Moshe after the death of Aharon's two sons [which occurred on the final day of the *milu'im*]" (16:1).

2. Both Yom Kippur and the eighth day of the *milu'im* feature two distinct systems of *korbanot*: those of the kohanim and those of Am Yisrael. Throughout the seven days of the consecration, too, we find a double system of *korbanot*.
3. A strong textual parallel between the two contexts also underscores this association. On the eighth day of the consecration, Moshe tells Aharon, "Approach the altar and sacrifice your sin offering and your burnt offering, and atone for you and for the nation; and sacrifice the people's offering and atone for them, as God had commanded" (*Vayikra* 9:7). Compare this verse with the following expressions found in the Torah's description of the Yom Kippur service: "Aharon shall sacrifice the bull of his sin offering and atone for himself and for his household... He shall atone for himself and for his household and the entire congregation of Israel" (*Vayikra* 16:6,11,17).
4. On both the eighth day of the *milu'im* and Yom Kippur, the *Shekhina* descends. In the former case, the entire nation earned this revelation, which occurred on the outer altar, whereas on Yom Kippur the *Shekhina* is revealed only to the kohen gadol, in the innermost sanctuary.

In addition to these bases of association, we should mention that many parallels exist in Talmudic literature between the laws of Yom Kippur, including the preparations for the day ("The kohen gadol would be separated from his home for seven days prior to Yom Kippur" - *Mishna Yoma* 1:1), and the eighth day of the *mishkan's* consecration.

It would seem that the basic relationship drawn by the Torah between these two events points to one's functioning as the continuation of the other. On Yom Kippur, the kohen purifies the *mishkan* and altar from the impurities generated throughout the year, effectively restoring the *mishkan* to its earliest beginnings, before the surfacing of any impurity. Meaning, on Yom Kippur the *mishkan* returns to the status it had on the eighth day of its initial consecration, when the *Shekhina* first entered its "home," so to speak. We could perhaps formulate this idea in allegorical terms: Yom Kippur marks the renewed "birthday" of the *mishkan*, the point at which it returns to its original state, thus allowing the *Shekhina* to dwell in a home clean of spiritual impurities. On this day, the *mishkan* is thoroughly cleansed from the "defects" it accumulated over the course of the year as a result of Benei Yisrael's impurity.

This comparison, however, involves more than just the cleansing of the *mishkan*. Just as the *mishkan's* initial consecration involved an additional stage beyond the anointing of the *mishkan's* vessels with oil (preparing them for the *Shekhina*), so must we anticipate a parallel feature on Yom Kippur. We refer to the kohanim's donning of their priestly garments. The Torah emphasizes this component of the original consecration of the *mishkan*:

"Moshe brought Aharon and his sons forward and washed them with water. He put the tunic on him, girded him with the sash, clothed him with the robe, and put the ephod on him, girding him with the decorated band with which he tied it to him. He put the breastpiece on him, and put into the breastpiece the *Urim Ve-tumim*. And he set the headdress on his head; and on the headdress, in front, he put the gold frontlet, the holy diadem - as God had commanded Moshe." (*Vayikra* 8:6-9)

The importance of this ceremony, the dressing of the kohanim, cannot be overlooked. As an integral part of the *mishkan*, they, like the vessels therein, required formal consecration through the sprinkling of blood and oil (as described there in chapter 8) as well as through dressing them in their special vestments. As we have seen, these garments serve, among other purposes, as "glory and adornment;" they prepare the kohanim for their service in the *mishkan*. As such, the donning of the special clothing earns its place as part of the *milu'im*, the general process of preparation for the *Shekhina's* descent onto the *mishkan*.

What about Yom Kippur? Are the kohanim dressed anew in the priestly garments then, too? Do they, too, undergo renewed purification on this "birthday" of the *mishkan*? Undoubtedly, the Torah strongly emphasizes the kohanim's atonement as an individual community on Yom Kippur, not merely as part of Am Yisrael; the special sacrifices of the kohen gadol serve this very purpose. Beyond that, however, even the kohanim's donning of their priestly garments undergoes a renewal on this day, just as during the original consecration.

It seems that the white garments of the kohen gadol, the *bigdei ha-bad*, serve precisely this function. As we have seen, when serving with these garments, the kohen descends from his normal stature, reflected by his usual clothing. The verse must emphasize that "they are sacred garments" (16:4) because this is not at all self-evident. These garments allow the kohen gadol to serve in the *mishkan* despite their falling short of the stature of his usual vestments. However, these garments serve but one purpose: to define the kohen as returning to his "pre-garment" state. He wears these *bigdei ha-bad* only so that he can change into his normal priestly garments later that day, assuming his renewed appointment for service in the *mishkan*.

As we saw earlier regarding the *terumat ha-deshen*, the kohen wears the *bigdei ha-bad* in instances where he must officiate in the *mishkan* without his usual, unique stature as a kohen. Whereas when dusting off the altar this results from a lower-level activity, on Yom Kippur this involves the return of the kohen - together with the *mishkan* - to its prior state, before his original consecration.

If so, then we must identify the precise point during the Yom Kippur service at which the kohen changes back into his year-round garments. It seems to me that the Torah refers to this clothing change immediately following the sending of the scapegoat (*se'ir la-azazel*):

"Aharon shall go into the Tent of Meeting, take off the linen vestments that he put on when he entered the Shrine, and leave them there. He shall bathe his body in water in the holy precinct and put on his vestments." (16:23)

At this point, when the entire service has been completed, the kohen receives permission to once again wear "his vestments," his usual priestly garments. (This follows the majority view held by *Chazal* and most commentators; Ibn Ezra disagrees.) The formulation of this verse seems to stress the contrast between the two changes of clothing: "[He shall] take off the linen vestments that he put on when he entered the Shrine." Why must the Torah reiterate the kohen's having worn these linen clothes when performing the service in the Sanctuary? We would have expected the verse to state more simply that he changes his clothing, and we would have naturally associated this reference with the garments he currently wears, the same clothing worn during the service - the *bigdei ha-bad*. Can one change out of clothing other than those he currently wears?

Apparently, the verse wishes to highlight the contrast between the two types of clothing of which it speaks: "the linen vestments that he put on when he entered the Shrine" on the one hand, and "his vestments" on the other. The first refers to clothing with no inherent connection to the person wearing them; they are worn only for a specific purpose and function. These garments are not those of the kohen gadol, but rather those worn when he enters the Sanctuary for the Yom Kippur service. The second change of clothing, by contrast, are "HIS vestments," the garments of the kohen gadol, his special clothing worn regularly as he attends to his responsibilities in the *mishkan*.

It is worth noting that the term "*begadav*," "his vestments," appears in two additional instances in the Yom Kippur section in our *parasha*, both in reference to one's normal clothing. (See verse 26 regarding the clothing of the one commissioned to send away the goat, and verse 28 in reference to the one who burns the sin-offerings.)

The kohen must immerse himself prior to receiving and wearing his priestly vestments. Together with the *mishkan* that has now been purified and the entire nation whose sins have now been forgiven, the kohen is granted permission to conduct the sacred service of his Creator for an additional year.

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