

ACHAREI MOS

Our Man in the Holy-of-Holies

2009 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

The High Priest had a daunting task.

Once a year, on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, the High Priest was required to enter the Holy-of-Holies. That section of the Temple was off-limits to everyone all year. Only he, on the Day of Atonement, was allowed to enter. Even then, his thoughts had to be holy and pristine. According to Tradition, if his thoughts were not totally pure during his visit to the Holy of Holies, he would be struck down on the spot, and would have to be removed via a rope that was attached to his leg.

“... Let him not come at all times into the Sanctuary, within the Curtain... so that he should not die...”
(Leviticus, 16:2)

It must have been a very lonely time for the High Priest. The entire nation turned their eyes and hearts to him, hoping that he would represent them properly, and achieve atonement for them from G-d. They were relying upon him to garner blessings from G-d for a good year. In fact, if the year didn't turn out so well, it was considered, in part, due to the fact that the High Priest didn't pray well enough. (See “Say a Little Prayer for Me.”)

The High Priest's uniform was different on this special day. Rather than the beautiful golden vestments that were unique to the High Priest the rest of the year, he wore, for certain parts of the Yom Kippur Service, the clothes of a regular Priest:

“...This is how Aaron should come into the Sanctuary... he should put on a sacred linen tunic; he should have linen pants... a linen belt... and cover his head with a linen turban... these are sacred garments. He shall immerse himself in water and then put them on. (Ibid, verses 3-5)

When the High Priest goes before G-d to atone for his nation, it is not appropriate to go dressed in gold. He goes humbly, in simple white clothes. The white is symbolic of purity from sin.

Not surprisingly, the above verses from this week's Torah Portion are read on Yom Kippur. There is also another time when these verses are recited. They are read by the members of the Chevra Kaddisha.

Every person is buried the same way. Rich or poor, king or commoner, we are all equal before G-d. Jewish Custom requires that every Jew be buried in the same simple white shroud.

The Chevra Kadisha, (“Sacred Society”) respectfully washes the body of the deceased. Then as he/she is dressed, the corresponding verses are recited. The tunic is placed upon the body: “... *he should put on a sacred linen tunic...*” They dress him in the pants: “*he should have linen pants...*” They put on the belt: “... *a linen belt...*” They cover his head: “...*and cover his head with a linen turban...*”

Isn't it a bit disrespectful to compare a dead person to the High Priest? The High Priest was a holy man, designated by his nation to stand before G-d and plead for the nation's welfare. The Kohain was the antithesis of death. He stood for life; he prayed for life. He wasn't even allowed to enter a cemetery or have contact with the dead. And especially the High Priest; other priests were allowed to defile themselves for the funerals of close relatives. The High Priest couldn't even do that. (When Aaron's two sons were killed, relatives handled the funeral arrangements. Aaron and his two remaining sons did not attend.)

I believe that the answer is that every person is, in a sense, a Kohain in his own right. “*You will be to Me a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation...*” (Exodus, 19:6)

The High Priest represents his nation when he goes before G-d on Yom Kippur. He brings offerings that atone for the misdeeds of the masses. He is “Our Man in the Holy of Holies.”

That system worked in the Temple on the Day of Atonement. He was there to pray for us. His actions were there to bring about Divine compassion and forgiveness.

One problem. It doesn't work for the long term.

One day, each one of us will have to take our leave from this world. To be sure, there will, hopefully be family and friends to pray for our souls.

We will be ushered into the Holy-of-Holies. We will, after a lifetime of hopefully doing the right thing, be called upon to meet our Maker. On that final Day of Judgment, we will enter G-d's Presence, and we will be very much alone. We will be accompanied by the good deeds we have done, and the Torah we have studied. (We will also be accompanied by whatever bad deeds we have done!) The only money we will take with us to the next world will be the money that we spent on charity and worthwhile Torah-related pursuits.

There will be no Kohain to bring incense and sin offerings on our behalf. It will just be us, G-d, and our deeds.

It's good to know this in advance. It gives us the opportunity to prepare. If every time we opened our mouths to speak, we stopped to reflect on the fact that it will all be played back some day, we'd be a lot more careful about what we say.

The High Priest in the Temple was successful in his efforts when he entered the Holy-of-Holies with complete purity of thought and deed. Otherwise, he was pulled out with a rope.

The Chevra Kadisha dresses the deceased like a High Priest, because on that Day of Judgment, he goes to represent HIMSELF. When we go before G-d to stand in judgment, each one of goes, all alone, as his own High Priest. AND THERE IS NO ROPE!

We must live our lives in preparation for that final Yom Kippur. It has been said that every person spends his life writing his own eulogy for others to read.

Before the Chevra Kadisha dresses the deceased in his Priestly garments, they wash him. At the conclusion of the washing they recite, "*Tahor hu, tahor hu, tahor hu.—He is pure, he is pure, he is pure.*"

It's our job during these 120 years of life to make sure that they will be telling the truth.

Have a great Shabbos.

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