

“Significance of Shoes”

In our parasha [3:5], we read that upon seeing the burning bush, HaShem tells Moshe to remove his shoes. The rationale presented for this is, “for the place upon which you stand is holy ground”. The need to take of one’s shoes in a sacred place is also mentioned in Sefer Yehoshua [5:15], and is established as normative halacha in the last Mishnah in Berachot [9:5], which prohibits entry to Har HaBayit while wearing shoes.

The significance of removing one’s shoes when entering a sacred place is not explicit in Torah, Nevi'im Ketuvim, in Mishnah or Gemara. Different explanations are suggested. Chizkuni comments [in our parasha] that since one’s shoes may be soiled, it’s inappropriate to enter a holy place with shoes.

Rav Shamshon Refael Hirsch, claims that this act symbolizes the need for direct contact between the person and the Kedusha [sanctity] inherent in the ground. Shoes are essentially a Chatzitza, a barrier, and when one comes in contact with Kedushah, one needs to remove the barriers to ultimately be affected and influenced by it. Rav Dovid ben Amram HaAderet, suggests that removing one’s shoes symbolizes the need to free oneself of mundane thoughts and fully concentrate on developing a relationship with Gd.

Thus far we have discussed the prohibition of shoes in “*Makom Kodesh*”, a holy place. Taking this discussion to a higher level we find a similar Halacha when discussing shoes regarding a “*Zeman Kodesh*”, a holy day, namely Yom Kippur. The Rambam, [Hilchot Shevitat Asor 3:7] states that to fulfill the Mitzvah of *Innu'i*, on Yom Kippur, as stated “*Ve'initem Et Naf'sho'teichem*” You shall afflict yourselves” [VaYikra 23:27], implies that one must feel the ground and sense that he is barefoot.” The Bach [O'Ch 614] testifies that several of his teachers would walk completely barefoot on Yom Kippur. But the generally accepted custom is to permit non-leather shoes. However, these non-leather shoes should be thin shoes so as “to feel the ground”.

The common denominator between KEDUSHAT MAKOM, a holy place, and KEDUSHAT ZEMAN, holy day, is that both require a sense of connecting to the ground. The ground that faces the heaven in perpetuity is the same ground that Yaakov Avinu dreamt about concerning a ladder standing on the ground while its top soared up to the heaven. When a Jew stands all year in the Har HaBayit area, or he stands in his local synagogue on Yom Kippur, his feet touching the ground, he senses the Kedusha all around him, while his spirit soars high to the Glory of Gd and he connects with Him, his Creator. That is the ultimate goal we strive to achieve on Yom Kippur.

Another aspect of our feet touching the ground is found by Aveilut, mourning and sitting Shiva. Here too the mourner wears no shoes and is humbled by the fact that “A man’s origin is from dust and his destiny is back to dust”- for man is finite and mortal. But even in our time of sorrow we remove our shoes and feel the presence of Gd is with us.

We strive to connect to HaShem every day, three times a day as we stand Shemoneh Esrei and communicate with Gd. That’s what davening should be all about. But there are occasions when we remove our leather shoes and make that connection feel more intimate as if HaShem is whispering to us from that small burning bush. If you can get that feeling every time you converse with Gd in Tefillah then your face will shine with radiance and happiness thereafter.

Shabbat Shalom, from Deerfield Beach, Fla

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