

SHOES AND THE SOUL

One of the more important laws of Yom Kippur, unfortunately more observed in the breach than in the practice, is that called Ne'ilat ha-sandal - the prohibition of wearing leather shoes on this holy day. This prohibition is indeed a law, and not, in the superficial language of so many unlearned people, a "mere custom." We in our synagogue insist upon its observance at least to the extent that anyone receiving an honor must not appear in shoes at the Ark. Actually, we ought to observe it fully, all of us, certainly within the confines of the synagogue. I confess to being confused and perplexed by some of my fellow Jews. I do not understand those of them w/ho, when they travel and visit a Mosque or other places such as the Taj Mahal, have no objection to acknowledging personally the mores and customs of others, and reverently remove their footwear when required to do so; and yet who, when apprised of the fact that Judaism forbids the wearing of shoes on Yom Kippur, feel constrained to act either annoyed or shy, and do not comply with the law. Yet, despite its neglect by so many, Ne'ilat ha-sandal, the prohibition of wearing leather shoes, is one of the five innuyim, the special prohibitions of Yom Kippur, and follows, in importance, that of fasting.

I mention this to you not, Heaven forbid, because I wish to castigate and reproach my fellow Jews. I would not want to do that on this day of divine forgiveness. Rather, it is because I want you to share with me some of the pride in our sacred heritage and glorious tradition, a pride which you will appreciate and experience all the more when you learn some of the purposes of this law of Ne'ilat ha-sandal. Allow me to mention to you three of the explanations that have been offered for this law, each of which highlights another insight of our Jewish tradition.

To understand the first reason that has been offered for the prohibition of Ne'ilat ha-sandal, allow me to refer to another aspect of Jewish lore. It ~~was~~ ^{is}

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an old Jewish custom that when a man ~~bought~~ a new garment, his family and friends ~~would~~ wish him well saying tevaleh ve'titchadesh or, as the expression goes in Yiddish, "tzureis gezunterheit" - "tear it well." In other words, just as you are putting on this new garment in good health, so may G-d grant that you remain in good health until you wear it out. The famous commentator on the Shulchan Arukh, Rama, adds that this greeting should not be extended to a man upon wearing, for the first time, a new pair of leather shoes. The reason - because ~~a~~ a life had to be destroyed in order for this man to wear these shoes. And although the life that was taken was that of an animal, a being decidedly lower than man, nevertheless our consideration and reverence for life is such that we refuse to express the hope that more lives will be taken, or pronounce a joyous blessing upon such an occasion, even if there result from this some benefit to mankind. The taking of life, even brute life, may sometimes be a necessity, but it never can be considered a virtue. (Similarly, although Judaism requires of a person who performs a Mitzvah for the first time to recite the joyous blessing of she'hechayanu, nevertheless the first time that a shochet performs the mitzvah of shechitah, he is not permitted to recite the she'hechayanu blessing.)

This is the reason for the law against Ne'ilat ha-sandal on Yom Kippur. This day is the culmination, the climax of that ten day period in which we speak mostly of life. Every day, three times, we prayed: zakhrenu le'chayyim, "remember us unto life." We pleaded with G-d, requesting that He inscribe us in the "book of life." Yom Kippur itself, is, par excellence, the day when we celebrate divine compassion and mercy, a theme which we will learn once again from the Book of Jonah later this afternoon. It is the day when we acknowledge that "His compassion extends over all His creatures." On Yom Kippur, therefore, none may wear leather shoes, an object which, in order to benefit man, necessitated the end of some poor animal's life.

This life-affirming principle effects every area of Jewish teaching. Whether we speak of the ethics of nuclear testing or the morality of ending the life of a

foetus, the Jewish veneration of life as the supremely precious gift of the Creator makes its influence known. I might mention, as well, the recent book Silent Spring, by Rachel Carson, which has recently become the center of controversy. The author maintains that as a result of the indiscriminate and excessive use of pesticides and insecticides, we are endangering wild life on a terrifying scale. The day may yet come, she warns, when spring comes but no birds arrive with it - a frighteningly silent spring. Whether or not Miss Carson exaggerates her case, I am not competent to say. But I believe that her concern is one that could have issued from a thoroughly Jewish soul. A people which, on its holiest day, will refuse to wear shoes made of the skin of an animal, is certainly concerned that G-d's creatures exist without harm.

I might add that this reason for the prohibition of Ne'ilat ha-sandal applies not only to Yom Kippur, but also to occasions of mourning as well, such as Tisha B'av or the observance of shivah. We show our appreciation for the life that was lost, our commiseration and personal participation in the fear and the terror and the pain that preceded it, ^{by} ~~but~~ reverencing even the lowliest forms of life, such as those which gave us leather. Similarly, it is significant that the custom of reciting the Yizkor, which we today practice three times a year, originally was followed only on Yom Kippur. It is appropriate that the reunion of generations, the memory of lives which we loved but which are lost, should take place on the day that we proclaim by our symbolic action our appreciation for all life.

A second reason for the prohibition of wearing leather shoes on Yom Kippur was taught by my late grandfather, of blessed memory. He said that when a man wears shoes he walks straight, erect, and undeterred, unaware of and unconcerned with what he tramples underfoot. His mind does not at all perceive the terrain upon which he treads. When he walks barefoot, however, then suddenly he is aware of ~~what~~ he is stepping upon. Every little pebble, every blade of grass, every crevice in the sidewalk is immediately impressed upon the sole of his foot and thence upon his mind. In other words, by divesting himself

of his shoes, a man opens up wide new areas of sensitivity. So that by removing our shoes on Yom Kippur, we emphasize a great human and humanitarian principle: the concern for the sensitivities, delicacies, and special feelings of other human beings. We learn suddenly that others may have subtle feelings, fears, and inhibitions which we may not appreciate, but that we ought to keep in mind at all times. When we remove our shoes we realize that we must not trample the sensitivitiesⁱ of others underfoot, we must not run rough-shod over whole areas of life that others regard as sacred though we may ignore their importance.

Parents ought to remember that. All too often a father or mother, with all good intentions, can push a child into things for which the child is not prepared, which he secretly abhors^e or fears. Many a child's emotional life was ruined by a well-meaning parent who walked over the terrain of his heart clad in stiff leather shoes - unfeeling, insensitive, indelicate. And the same is true in the reverse: mature children sometimes are utterly unaware of the special new problems faced by aging parents - the blows to their pride, the new hyper-sensitivity, the sudden awareness of people once at the center of life that they are now on the periphery, and therefore the great need for being wanted and feeling important. A people which removes its shoes on Yom Kippur will learn, throughout the year, how to be on guard against trampling other people's feelings underfoot.

Is not this part of our protest and complaint against those who have set as their goal the reforming and mauling of traditional Judaism? They may have had good intentions in their desire to compromise away the heart of our faith. But they failed to realize² that the faith of a people is its most sacred and sensitive treasure. And so the reformers marched over the heart of Israel with their feet clad in boots. They snuffed out the Sabbath, trampled Kashruth, destroyed family purity, and - remained completely oblivious to the damage that they had wrought. When we remove our shoes on this day, therefore, we will remember to respect the tenderest feelings of our fellow men- and our own

special heritage.

The third reason I wish to offer is peculiar and unique to Yom Kippur. And that is, that when Jews do teshuvah, when on Yom Kippur they return to our Father in Heaven, when they manifest a special religious inclination, when they spend the whole day in prayer, then not only do they themselves experience great elevation and sanctification, but they raise the whole world along with them. On Yom Kippur, when all Israel turns to G-d, all the world turns with them, so that even the ground we step on becomes sanctified, the very earth becomes holy. ^(see Menachem Tziyyon) And - on hallowed ground it is forbidden to walk with shoes, even as G-d told Moses out ^{of} the Burning Bush when he first revealed Himself to him: shal ne'alekha me'al raglekha - "remove your shoes from your feet" - ki ha-makom asher ata omed alav admat kodesh hu, "because the place you are standing on ~~is~~ hallowed ground." On Yom Kippur our prayer and our devotions have sanctified the ground we walk on, and therefore we remove our shoes. On this day we must feel that we are not alone in the inner love for G-d, in the passion for holiness, in the desire and yearning for the good and the holy and the pure. We must feel as if the whole world has come along with us, that the very earth itself can become hallowed, if we strive for greatness, for Jewishness, for Torah, with all our strength and heart and soul.

I believe that there is a special message for us moderns in this idea. There once was a time when Jews lived in ghettos. Today we are accustomed to think of ^{of the poverty,} ghettos in a negative manner - only ^{of} the oppression, ~~of the discrimination,~~ and the bigotry wrought against us. Yet only the ignorant would assume that that is the whole story. For life in the ghetto was also immeasurably beautiful. The Jew felt completely at home in the company of his fellow Jews. Society, the community, the very streets were ^{sep} ~~respective~~, friendly, hospitable. No Jew had to hide his Jewishness, no Jew ever had to be ^{bashful} ~~beautiful~~ about his loyalties.

Today the opposite holds true. How many of us would be willing to take ~~over our~~ lulav and etrog from our homes to the synagogues without the feeling of self-

consciousness? How many of us, when in company, do not feel ^{shy} bashful, sometimes to the point of denying our better impulses, and insist upon eating only Kosher? We all of us have convictions and principles, and a goodly number of us even live up to them. But we do so only at the cost of embarrassment and a feeling that we must sacrifice in order to live in accord with our conscience. We have the innate feeling that society is inhospitable to our endeavors, that the very air we breathe is unholy, that our whole milieu is hostile to everything we stand for. We feel that as religious Jews we are intruders, disturbers of the peace, aliens and outsiders who are unwelcome in a profane and vulgar society. We feel that we are in but not of this world.

But on Yom Kippur we are told to feel ⁿ differently. We are bidden to imagine that all the world is a kehillah kedoshah, a holy community, so much so that the very earth is holy and we must therefore remove our shoes. Perhaps it is only an illusion that we create for ourselves - but it ~~is~~ is a beautiful, a holy, a sublime illusion that is so precious that life is impossible without it. For at least twenty-four hours during the year we must imagine that all the world proclaims the glory of G-d; that only those who reach out for Him are entitled to feel at home in this wide world; that the earth and the air, the ocean and the seas, the mountains and the ^{ie} valleys and the homes within them welcome only those souls that are on fire with the love of G-d and prayer and Torah, that they are hospitable and friendly only to those who are G-d-seekers. On this one day, let all those who ignore G-d or deny His Torah or refuse to utter a word of prayer - let them feel that they are the intruders in G-d's world, they are the outsiders and the aliens and the strangers.

No wonder that all year long, after we recite the first verse of the Shema, we recite the next verse, barukh shem kevod malkhuto l'olam va-ed, "blessed be the name of Him the glory of whose Kingdom lasts forever and ever," silently. But on this one day of Yom Kippur we ^{proclaim} ~~exclaim~~ it aloud. Our tradition has given a quaint reason for this, one that may sound primitive to those who are ^{consider themselves} more sophisticated. Yet in its very sweetness and naivete we find a world of wisdom.

Our tradition maintained that all year long we may not ^{read} recite it aloud for it is a verse that is set aside for recitation by the Angels. On Yom Kippur, however, all Jews are supposed to feel that they are Angels, and therefore may recite it aloud.

During the rest of the year,
Is not this just what we have been saying? ~~All year long~~ those who are on the side of the Angels, those who aspire for an angelic, heavenly ~~type~~ of life, must keep their peace and remain silent. On Yom Kippur, however, only those who yearn for Heaven may feel that they are the rightful citizens of this world.

Let the law of Ne'ilat ha-sandal teach us to go through the year unafraid and uninhibited in our love of Torah and Jewishness. Let us learn from Yom Kippur not to feel constrained to apologize for any Jewish practice or institution. Let our pride in our tradition be with us through all the year.

As we go into the New Year, inspired by memories of the past, let us remember these lessons: the reverence for life, the sensitivity to the feelings of others, and the knowledge that this one day only those who love G-d are at home in His world. Let us go into the year with the famous words of our holiest prayer on our lips: yitgadal ve'yitkadash shemeh rabah. We shall magnify and make holy the name of the great G-d, B'alma di-vra khi-re'uteh in the world which he has created according to His will. On Yom Kippur we create the illusion that His world is holy. During the rest of the year may we transform that illusion into a reality.