



Atonement by the Priestly Garments

Mois A. Navon

The cardinal function of the Beit Hamikdash - the Holy Temple - is to provide a dwelling place, as it were, for God on earth. It is to serve as a place where man can achieve spiritual closeness with his Creator. To this end, the primary role of the priests officiating in the Temple is to effect atonement for both the individual as well as the society as a whole. The Temple services revolve around the bringing of sacrifices to realize this atonement. However, no less important toward this objective, though far less conspicuous, are the eight special garments of the High Priest.¹

¹ So important are these specific garments, that the officiating priest who is not clothed in them incurs the penalty of death.

The Talmud (*Zevachim* 88b)² begins its discussion of the priestly garments' quality of atonement by analyzing the text in Leviticus (ch. 8), which mentions the priestly garments immediately following a discussion of the sacrifices.

R. Inyani Ben Sasson [asked rhetorically]: Why are the sections on sacrifices and the priestly vestments juxtaposed? To teach you that, just as sacrifices make atonement, so do the priestly vestments make atonement.

R. Inyani Ben Sasson interprets the noted juxtaposition to imply a congruity of purpose. Just as the sacrifices are to provide atonement for sin, so too are the priestly garments. The Talmud continues its discussion wherein it associates each garment to a particular iniquity.

The coat (*k'tonet*) atones for bloodshed (*shfichut damim*); for it is said, *And they killed a he-goat, and dipped the coat in blood* (Gen. 37:31). The breeches (*michnasaim*) atoned for lewdness (*giluy ariot*); as it is said, *And thou shalt make them linen breeches to cover the flesh of their nakedness* (Ex. 28:42). The mitre (*mitznefet*) made atonement for arrogance (*gasai haruach, ga'avah*)³. How is this understood? Said R. Hanina: Let an article placed high up come and atone for an offense of haughtiness. The girdle (*avnait*) atoned for [impure] meditations of the heart, [which was placed at the level of the heart]. The breastplate (*hoshen*) atoned for false judgments; as it is said, *And thou shalt make a breastplate of judgments* (Ex. 28:15). The ephod atoned for idolatry (*avodah zarah*); as it is said, *Without ephod [there are] teraphim* (Hoshea 3:4). The robe (*meil*) atoned for slander (*lashon hara*). How is this known? Said R. Hanina: Let an article of sound [bells] come and atone for an offense of sound. The headplate (*tzitz*) atoned for obstinacy (*azut panim*): of the headplate it is written *And it shall be upon Aaron's forehead* (Ex. 28:38) Whilst of obstinacy it is written, *Yet thou hadst a harlot's forehead* (Jer. 3:3).⁴

For the sake of clarity, the following table delineates each garment and the particular sin it is to atone for:

coat (<i>k'tonet</i>)	bloodshed (<i>shfichut damim</i>)
robe (<i>meil</i>)	slander (<i>lashon hara</i>)
breeches (<i>michnasaim</i>)	lewdness (<i>giluy ariot</i>)
girdle (<i>avnait</i>)	[impure] meditations of the heart (<i>hirhurei ha'lev</i>)
ephod	idolatry (<i>avodah zarah</i>)
breastplate (<i>hoshen</i>)	false judgments (<i>din me'uvat</i>)
headplate (<i>tzitz</i>)	obstinacy, brazenness (<i>aizut panim</i>)
mitre (<i>mitznefet</i>)	arrogance, pride (<i>gasai haruach=ga'avah</i>)

2 See also Lev. R. 10:6; Arachin 16a.

3 Gaasei HaRuah = Ga'avah, see Eitz Yosef on Lev. R. 10:6.

4 See also Lev. R. 10:6; Arachin 16a.

From a cursory review of the sins, the criteria for being on this rather short yet important list are not self-evident. A closer analysis of the garments themselves intimates the answer to this question.

Each individual piece of clothing has an associated counterpart. The *ketonet*, which clothed the entire body, can be correlated with the *meil*, which also clothed the entire body. The *michnasaim*, which clothed the lower body, find as their complement the *avnait*, which was used to separate the lower body from the heart. The *ephod* is intrinsically connected to the *hoshen* as it states, "The *hoshen* may never be separated from the *ephod*" (Ex. 39:21). And finally, the *tzitz* can be paired with the *mitznefet*, as both are worn on the head.

Just as there is a tight pairing between garments, so too do the respective sins that they atone for pair off.

- The *ketonet* and the *meil* atone for murder and slander (*lashon hara*). And indeed the Talmud likens *lashon hara* in a conceptual sense to murder: "'Their tongue is like a sharpened arrow' (Jer. 9:7), this teaches that the tongue kills as an arrow" (*Arachin* 15b).
- The *michnasaim* and the *avnait* atone for illicit relations and improper thoughts. These sins are intimately related since the term for improper thoughts, "*hirschurei halev*", is often used as a euphemism for lustful thoughts.⁵ For example, the Rambam in *Hilchot Ishut* 15:3 teaches, "If one's desire is overcoming him, he must get married, ..., for he should not come to *hirschur*".
- The *ephod* and the *hoshen* are to atone for idol worship and false judgment. These two are conceptually linked in that a false judgement is that which goes against God's law; it is the result of the lack of recognition of who is the true lawgiver. As such both idol worship and false judgment have their roots in the same world view that lacks acceptance of God. The Talmud itself makes this comparison stating that, "One who appoints an unworthy judge is like one who plants an *Asheirah* (tree of idol worship)" (*Sanhedrin* 7b).
- And finally the *mitznefet* and the *tzitz* atone for *ga'avah* (pride) and *aizut* (obstinacy). These two sins are related in that obstinacy is an expression of arrogance.

Given this analysis, the necessity that specifically these sins need be atoned for in a special and constant manner becomes clearer. Murder, lewdness, and idol worship are the three cardinal sins of Judaism, so severe that one is required to be killed and not transgress.⁶ As explained before, the sins of slander, impure thoughts, and false judgment are the conceptual counterparts of these three cardinal sins. Arrogance and obstinacy, however, leave us with somewhat of an enigma. Given that the other sins atoned for are major transgressions, the presence of two character traits on this list is rather perplexing!

The answer to this quandary comes with the recognition that these two traits feature most prominently in the character makeup of the Jewish nation. Both Moshe and God Himself refer

5 Meam Loez on Ex. 28:39 (pp.205-6) explains atonement of "*hirschurei halev*" as referring to sexual thoughts.

6 San. 74a; Rambam, Hil. Yesod 5:2.

to the people of Israel as “stiff necked”⁷ The commentators explain this appellation to connote obstinacy and arrogance:

They turn their stiff necks against those that reprove them and refuse to listen.

(Rashi on Ex. 32:9)

One who will not listen to a command. For example a man who goes as he pleases and does not respond to those who call him.

(Ibn Ezra on Ex. 32:9)

... the stiff neck is one who follows after one’s own heart and mind in spite of instruction ...

(Sforno on Deut. 9:6)

As such, this explains why these traits must be atoned for in a continuous manner, and why they occupy a full twenty-five percent of the power of the priestly garments.

This explanation, however, begs another question: If these character traits are so bad as to need atonement along side the cardinal sins, why then did God choose people so heavily endowed with such traits to be His people? A brief study of these two traits will answer the question.

Obstinacy

On obstinacy (*azut*), Rav Hirsch writes that:

Azut, inflexibility, stubbornness is an essential characteristic for the highest degree of moral perfection, yet it can lead equally easily to moral debasement. We find *azut L’Hashem* and *azut L’Azazel* as is represented by the two goats on Yom Kipur. Armed with the noblest, most resistant of metals, the forehead of the High Priest has to bear the truth “*Kodesh L’Hashem*” as a protest against every misconception or lie that would disturb the purity of the Sanctuary. This gives to stubbornness, obstinacy, inflexibility - the firmness of character which keeps itself in opposition to lies, delusions, and false opinions - the consecration of the noblest purpose.

(R. Hirsch, Exodus, p.542)

The Ramchal in Mesilat Yesharim (p. 73) echoes this idea explaining that *azut* is to be applied in order to do the will of God in the face of ridicule.

Thus *azut*, though very negative when abused, is also very powerful when directed toward the proper goal. The dual nature of this trait is borne out by the well-known dictum in the Mishna:

Yehuda Ben Teima said: Be bold (*az*) like a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and mighty as a lion, to do the will of your Father in heaven. He also used to say: Bold (*az*) faced are destined for Hell (*Geihinom*) and shame faced are destined for Eternal Paradise (*Gan Eden*).

(Pirkei Avot 5:20)

7 Ex. 32:9; 33:3,5; 34:9; Deut. 9:6;9:13.

Pride

Jewish tradition is particularly strong in expressing its revulsion for the trait of pride (*ga'avah*):

The proud of heart are the abomination of God.

(Proverbs 16:5)

And now my son know and see, that the proud of heart over humanity, he rebels against the kingship of God...

(Igeret HaRamban)

In the first chapter of *Hilchot Deot*, the Rambam explains that people possess many characteristics and exhibit a wide range of dispositions to each one. Some become angry easily and some not at all, some are haughty to excess while others are humble to an extreme, etc. He goes on to explain that "to cultivate the extreme in any class of traits is not appropriate" (*Hilchot Deot* 1:3), but rather the proper path to strive toward is the median of any trait. That being said, the Rambam goes on to clarify:

There are some dispositions in regard to which it is forbidden merely to keep the middle path. They must be shunned to the extreme. One such trait is pride.

(*Hilchot Deot* 2:3)

R. Hayim of Volozhin emphasizes the base negativity of this trait, writing that *ga'avah* is "the root of all bad traits" (Nefesh HaHayim p.188).

Clearly *ga'avah* is a trait emphatically disdained. Nevertheless, even this most negative of traits has the capacity to be used for the positive. The Mishna *Brachot* (9:5) explains the words "*B'chol Levav'cha*", with all your hearts, in the Shema to indicate that one must serve God with both the *Yetzer HaTov* and the *Yetzer HaRa*. The Tiferet Yisrael expands on this Mishna stating that one must utilize "the fire of the *yetzer hara* - such as desire and longing and anger and pride (*ga'avah*) and jealousy - to inflame oneself to perform the Mitzvot." Though this is a general teaching to use all negative traits for the positive, it is instructive to note that even something as negative as pride (*ga'avah*) is indeed redeemable.

More specifically, pride is that trait through which one recognizes the value of one's work and achievements. Without this specific trait, one could easily fall prey to depression over not fulfilling purpose and over lacking a sense of self worth. The *Mishna Avot* (2:13) teaches, "Be not wicked in your own estimation," to which the Ba'al HaTanya (Ch. 1) elucidates: "if a man considers himself to be wicked, he will be grieved at heart and depressed, and will not be able to serve God joyfully..."

The Talmud (*Sotah* 4b-5a) itself goes to great lengths expounding the odiousness of having the trait of haughtiness. It compares those who exhibit this trait with worshipping idols and committing adultery and details all the ill things which befall such an individual. Nevertheless, the following is included:

R. Hiya b. Ashi said in the name of Rav: A disciple should possess an eighth of pride [in order that his words be accepted]⁸. R. Huna the son of R. Yehoshua said, [This small amount of pride] crowns him like the awn of the grain. Raba said: [A disciple of the Sages] who possesses pride deserves excommunication, and if he does not possess it he deserves excommunication.

(Sotah 5a)

Thus, even something as negative as pride (*ga'avah*) is to be utilized for the good, and in fact was given for that purpose.⁹

Thus, it is specifically because the Jewish nation is strongly endowed with the traits of obstinacy (*aiut*) and pride (*ga'avah*) that it is the best suited to be God's people and emissaries of His will. Both obstinacy (*azut*) and pride (*ga'avah*) provide the inner-strength to persevere in God's ways in the face of ridicule and persecution. Nevertheless, due to the negative manifestation of these very traits, they must be atoned for above all.

As has been explained, the *ketonet*, the *michnasaim*, and the *ephod* atone for the most heinous crimes of society: murder, lewdness, and idol worship. The *meil*, the *avnait*, and the *hoshen* atone for the ethereal corollaries of those cardinal sins: slander, impure thoughts, and false judgment. And finally the *mitznefet* and the *tzitz* atone for the powerful dual-nature traits of obstinacy (*aiut*) and pride (*ga'avah*). Each sin has a significantly deleterious effect on the harmonious functioning of Jewish society – and a correspondingly distancing effect on man's relationship with his Creator. By providing atonement for these sins, the priestly garments most appropriately fulfill a national necessity of vital importance.

Mois Navon designed and developed various security ASICs for NDS as part of the Logic Design Group between the years 1995-2000, and is currently developing image-processing ASICs for Mobileye Vision Technologies to improve automotive safety. He received rabbinic ordination through the R. Aharon Soloveitchik Semicha Program at Mercaz HaRav. He is a member of the Ptil Tekhelet Association where he lectures extensively on the topic of tekhelet and manages the association's question and answer forum. Mois has published articles on Jewish topics in The Torah u-Madda Journal, Jewish Thought, Jewish Bible Quarterly, Alei Etzion, B'Or Ha'Torah and Chidushei Torah, maintains an outreach class on Jewish Thought, and gives talks in parshanut. His writings can be accessed at www.divreinavon.com.

8 Rashi (ibid.).

9 See R. Tazadok Hakohen quoted in Jewish Thought V2.N1, p.81.