

Going Barefoot on Yom Kippur

Yom Kippur, 1998

Here's what the Torah says: "On the tenth day of this seventh month, it is a Day of Atonement, a holy gathering for you, and you shall afflict your souls." The Mishnah, the first great code of Jewish law, specifies the ways in which we are to afflict ourselves: "On the Day of Atonement, eating, drinking, washing, anointing, wearing shoes and sexual intercourse are forbidden." These are the two original sources for the aspect of Yom Kippur that everyone knows--that is, the fast from eating and drinking. Many Jews are unaware of the Mishnah's other prohibitions for this day--washing, anointing, wearing shoes and sexual intercourse.

I want to talk tonight about shoes. I know it seems a strange topic for the holiest night of the entire year. But we have been taught that all of the secrets of heaven and earth are contained in every single mitzvah--every commandment. Even a mitzvah concerning something as mundane and as ordinary as a shoe.

The Torah, as we have already seen, make no specific mention of any of the traditional Yom Kippur prohibitions. The Torah says only that we should afflict ourselves. It was the Mishnah, in the 2nd century CE that first specified fasting on Yom Kippur. And the Mishnah prohibits wearing shoes. But the Mishnah gives no explanation of why these particular afflictions; only in the later commentaries do we find discussion of the meaning of the specific prohibitions.

The majority of these commentaries look to the first mention in the Torah of shoes: in the story of Moses and the burning bush. In that crucial event in Moses' life, he has fled from Egypt and is tending the flocks of his father-in-law Jethro. Wandering in the wilderness, he comes upon a bush blazing with fire...but as Moses watched, he realized that the bush burned and was not consumed. He drew closer, in order to understand better what he was seeing, and a voice spoke to him out of the fire, commanding him: "Remove your shoes from your feet, for the ground upon which you are standing is holy." For many commentators, this text provides the key for understanding the Mishnah's requirement that we remove our shoes on Yom Kippur. That is, on this day, the entire world becomes holy ground...and we are all like Moses, standing in the immediate presence of God.

So the story of the burning bush does seem to offer an important clue, but it remains an open question why Moses or any of us would acknowledge the presence of God by removing our **shoes** (Maybe we just want to be different. Other people show respect by taking off their hats. We put our hats and takeoff our shoes.)

The great 19th century rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsh taught that all of the afflictions of Yom Kippur, including the removal of shoes, are to bring us...temporarily...to an experience of poverty. For 24 hours, according to Hirsh, we approach God hungry and thirsty, unwashed, stripped of our grandeur and our finery...really, like beggars. This is a shocking, and powerful, understanding of the afflictions of this day. On this day, we become equal: the rich and the poor, the mighty and the weak, the charming and the graceless...all these distinctions drop away and we come before God as equals: hungry, thirsty, unwashed, shoeless, and alone.

For Jews in this half of the 20th century, removing our shoes is. ..further.. .an act of collective memory, evoking our descent into the hell of Nazi Europe. Because for tens of thousands of our people, in the camps and on death marches, it was **exactly one pair**

of shoes that stood between life and death. In that nightmare world, the golden thread of a human life was stretched tighter and tighter and tighter, until from hour to hour nothing mattered except a crust of bread... and shoes that fit. We cannot imagine that nightmare, but we can honor the memory of those that lived or died in it. We can remove our shoes.

A final understanding of the removal of our shoes; a poetic metaphor. The shoe's essential function is to protect the soft bottom of our foot.. .that tender, sensitive extremity, full of nerve endings. ..from the stones and thorns, the hundreds of dangers posed by the unpredictable physical world. The shoe does keep us safe from harm. It also, however, keeps us **from feeling** Removing the shoe exposes the foot to danger, and also opens us to a vast new world of sensation and experience. We remove our shoes in preparation for intimacy. And this is, of all the days of the Jewish year, the most intimate. On this day we come before God and lay bare our souls... .souls and soles!

Now it is time to discuss the elephant sitting on the table: a question. **If** the Mishna specifically says not to wear shoes on this day.. .and there are all these beautiful and important explanations for this restriction.., then why is everyone wearing shoes Including, by the way, all of our orthodox Jews and rabbis! The answer lies in a tension which runs through all the traditional sources, between the voice of **reasonable** Judaism and the competing voice of a **demanding, passionate** Judaism.

In the Mishna itself, we find a controversy over a possible exception to the rule. Rabbi Eliezer taught that a woman who had just given birth is allowed to put on shoes on Yom Kippur. All the other sages, according to the Mishna, disagreed. Perhaps Rabbi Eliezer was concerned not to physically endanger the woman who was already in a fragile state...by exposing her feet to the elements. Or perhaps he thought that she had just **had** a direct experience of the Divine Presence and that removing her shoes wasn't going to make a particularly huge impression on her. In any case, Rabbi Eliezer is the first to begin backing off...even slightly...from the restriction of shoes on Yom Kippur.

As the tradition unfolded over subsequent generations, this debate broadened; more and more exceptions were proposed. According to some authorities, if it's raining, OK, wear shoes. Others said no. Some rabbis ruled that if the ground is too painful, OK, wear shoes. Other said no. If the shoes were made from wood, or from straw, or from cloth.. .some of the sages permitted them. Maimonides, the towering authority of the Middle Ages, instructs us to wrap our feet in cloth...so that one is protected, but .. .and he stresses this...one can still feel the ground with ones foot.

Ultimately, as we reach modern times, only one restriction was still universally retained: that the shoes should not be made out of leather. The reason, as stated, by one rabbi, is: "How can a Jew put on garment for which it is necessary to kill a living creature. ..on Yom Kippur--which is our day of grace and compassion?" And this is the bottom line, the tradition that many of us have received from parents or teachers--that we do not wear **leather** shoes on Yom Kippur, but shoes of rubber, or cloth or synthetic are considered acceptable. And this is why so many of the Jewish people around the world, on Yom Kippur, come to shul wearing sneakers.

In terms of the tension which I mentioned earlier, between the voice of reasonable Judaism and the voice of demanding, passionate Judaism....in this particular matter of shoes on Yam Kippur....I think we have to acknowledge that reasonable Judaism has won. Hands down.

Speaking for myself, I want a religion that is **both**--reasonable **and** passionate. One of the things I love most about our tradition is that ...in general... we have managed to preserve this balance. Reason and passion. So I am puzzled, and want to know **why** that balance gets lost, and either reason or passion wins hands down....as seems to have happened in the case of not wearing shoes on Yom Kippur.

So let's all lie down on the analyst's couch for a few minutes and ask ourselves what exactly is at stake here. Why have so many ordinarily strict and demanding Jewish authorities backed so far away from bare feet on Yom Kippur? Is it really that we are such a comfort-craving people that we cannot stand to feel the sharpness of the ground on our feet....and so have **twisted** this requirement all the way around into an **excuse** to wear shoes that are actually **more** comfortable than our regular, leather, dress-up shoes?

Perhaps we do enjoy our comforts, and perhaps a few of us do shy away from anything that might involve physical discomfort. But that cannot be the reason that Maimonides and all the great rabbis...who in so many areas accepted the necessity of some discomfort-- were so lenient in this matter.

I would argue that most or all of our rabbis and traditional Jews have put on shoes on Yom Kippur, in direct defiance of the Holy Mishna, because of their immense concern for **dignity**--their own dignity, the dignity of the Jew, and of the human being. Somewhere in the last one thousand years of Jewish history, the shoe has come to symbolize the distinction between human beings and the animal world...and the distinction between a civilized people and barbarians. And while our Jewish forefathers and foremothers were willing on Yom Kippur to endure hunger, thirst, and even the discomfort and smells of going unwashed...they drew the line at taking their shoes off in public. They simply could not imagine that this holiest day of the year required them to let go of this last, most powerful, symbol of human dignity.

Now here comes my sermon: as you can see, tonight I am following the simple instruction of the Mishna. Because I think our generation of Jews needs this requirement of removing our shoes on Yom Kippur. For three reasons.

First of all, we need this corrective to our extremely reasonable, but somewhat pale and watered-down Judaism. The vast majority of us know Judaism primarily as a set of disembodied concepts: the **idea** of Shabbat, the **concept** of justice, the idea of freedom, the concept of God....and we grew up sitting in synagogue reading responsively about these ideas. ..maybe even studying and discussing them... but rarely living them with our bodies. And make no mistake the authentic Judaism that is alive, and which has kept us alive as a people, is a **physical** faith...acted out in the realm of our bodies and the material world. We will only find the fire at the core of Judaism in **mitzvot** physical practices which we enact with our hands, our mouths, our feet, our bodies. This is the first reason to take off our shoes on Yom Kippur.

Secondly, we need to renew our connection to the earth. There is a photograph I love in Michael Ableman's wonderful book, "From the Good Earth," of the feet of a Burundi farmer, caked with the soil of the earth. The caption reads, "Brown skin blends with dark, moist earth. There is little to show where one begins and the other ends. "Even if I had shoes," the man says, "I could not put them on while cultivating. It is culture here. Nobody cultivates while wearing shoes.

We who never go barefoot, except perhaps in our carpeted homes, have grown apart from the living earth in so many ways. We recoil from and quickly wash off the very soil from which we were created, the **adama** for which our first ancestor **Adam** was

named. We kill the earth with chemical pesticides and herbicides, then inject it with new chemicals to force it to produce our food. We desperately need to return in every way possible to a trusting and honest relationship with the earth. We need to learn from the farmer in the photograph. We need to remove our shoes.

Thirdly, and finally, I think we need this old Yom Kippur practice as a corrective to our basic human tendency to leap to judgment based on appearance. With a glance, we size a person up, and decide we know all about them. As a result, we judge others and feel ourselves judged based upon the appearance of our car. The appearance of our clothes. The appearance of our bodies. Naturally, most of us invest huge quantities of time, money and energy **fixing** the **appearance** of our lives.... and we imagine that we are thereby repairing or healing the essential nature of our world.

Of course, Judaism does teach that the way we dress and groom ourselves and our homes is important. Beauty and order are both necessary for a life of human dignity. But fixing the appearance of the world is not the same as fixing the world, and all too often, our preoccupation with appearance blinds us. It leads us to see only a dirty pile of rags where we should see a suffering human being. It leads us to address the problem of homelessness by cleaning people off of the streets and sidewalks of our town. It leads us to solve the problem of death by putting it out of sight, in hospitals. It leads us to judge people by their car, their clothes, their body.. .rather than by the generosity of their heart or the integrity of their life.

Concern for appearance can also make us afraid to live visibly Jewish lives. We choose not to build a sukkah because, what would the neighbors think about a shack going up on the street? Or we choose not to put a mezuzah on the door because it might make people wonder. And we could never go barefoot on Yom Kippur; that would be bizarre!

But what if, for one day out of the year, we were to remove our shoes...and endure the stares of our neighbors, maybe even the catcalls of their children. ...Could that **fail**, arouse our compassion for all those people who endure our stares throughout the year? Might we not learn an awesome lesson in the **unimportance** of appearance? Might we not rediscover something of the secret of how to be simple, and honest, and open with each other?

Tomorrow night, at the conclusion of our Day of Atonement, we will offer up the final service of the day, called Neilah. The word **neilah** is usually translated “the closing”, referring to the closing of the gates of heaven. But **neilah** does have one other meaning...it also means “buckling on a shoe.” This is the very word the Mishna uses in listing the Yom Kippur prohibitions: **neilat sandal** buckling up a shoe. And so that intensely dramatic moment, as the rays of the sun are slanting through the window late tomorrow, can be understood in two ways: first, as the closing of the gates of heaven.. **and** also as the buckling up of our shoe: the return to our safer, ordinary existence... the end of our long day of vulnerability and intimacy. ..of standing barefoot before God.