

A Meditation on Shoes

By Emanuel Feldman



Where have I seen them before, this array of shoes lying here before me?

The shoes belong to the *Kohanim* who removed them a moment ago when they mounted the *bimah* to pronounce their *berachah*: new shoes and old, with laces and without, brown ones and black ones, dress shoes and casual.

This cluster of shoes lying beneath the *bimah*—why do I keep staring at them? Where have I seen them before?

In the Biblical sense, shoes are more than shoes. They play a weighty symbolic role in Jewish tradition, and they bear within themselves a sub-text that far transcends protective covering for the feet.¹

One element concerning the mystery of shoes is worth examining. The

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shoe of the Torah, of course, is made from the skin of an animal (*Yevamot* 102b, based on Ezekiel 16:10). When man wears the skin of an animal upon his feet, when he treads upon the earth by utilizing animal leather, he demonstrates that he is not just another animal. Instead, he is superior to and has the power to *dominate* the animal. This is in fulfillment of God's will in Genesis 1:26, where man is told that he shall have dominion over the entire animal kingdom, and it is suggested by Psalms 8:7: "Thou makest man to have dominion over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things *under his feet*... *also the beasts of the field*."²

But there is more: Not only is man able to dominate the animal without; he is also endowed with the potential to dominate the animal within himself—his own natural impulses towards the beastly and physical. He need not be merely an upright beast.

He can, in short, become a spiritual, God-like creature. Man has been given the power to own the animal; he is not to be owned by the animal.

In addition to demonstrating man's dominion over the beast, the animal skin on man's feet *separates* him from the earth. Shoes thus represent man's spiritual potential. Man—though he emanates from the earth, walks the earth, and will return to the earth—possesses the ability to separate himself from that which is merely physical, and to reach for greater heights.

An angel, bearer of spirituality, does not wear shoes. Nor does a beast, embodiment of animality. Only man—who can become either an angel or a beast—wears shoes, in the hope that he will choose the former and not the latter. (Note, by the way, the several instances in the Talmud (*Berachot* 60b, *Shabbat* 129a, *Pesachim* 112a and 113b which refer to the importance of wearing shoes.)

Why, then, are the shoes removed when one finds himself on sacred ground, when one stands in the presence of God?

Sacred ground means that the earth, in this particular enclosure, has lost its physicality and has itself become holy. In such a circumstance, there is no need for man to separate himself from the earth, no need to express his dominance over the beastly. On the contrary, when the ground on which he stands becomes sacred and Godly, man is bidden to become as one with this ground and, as it were, to attach himself to the spirituality and the sanctity of this holy place. And so he removes from his feet the symbols of separation and dominance.

Thus it is that when Moshe stands before the Holy One at the burning bush he is told, in Exodus 3:5, "*Shal nealecha meal raglecha*, Remove your shoes from upon your feet, because the place whereon you stand is holy ground." Joshua, when he first enters Canaan, hears the identical command when he is confronted by the angel of God (Joshua 5:15). Remove your shoes, the angel says as if to say that during this one moment of contact with the sacred, while you are being touched by the ultimate sanctity, you require no separators from the earth's physicality, no symbols of your dominance over the beast. For now, the very physicality and animality of the earth has been transmogrified into the spiritual.

Since one goes shoeless on holy ground, the ancient *Kohanim* went barefoot as they performed the sacrificial service in the Holy Temple. Their descendants, today's *Kohanim*, also remove their shoes before mounting the *bimah* to bless Israel. While today's removal of shoes is because of a special enactment by Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai (Talmud, *Rosh Hashanah* 31b; *Sotah* 40a) one can recognize in this gesture a distant echo of what was done in the *Beit Hamikdash*. In fact, Rabbi Yaakov Emden suggests in his *Mor Uketziah* (54b) that today's *Kohanim* mount the *bimah* without their shoes because the place where the *Kohanim*

now stand also represents holy ground.

"*Yevarechecha Hashem veyishmerecha*." Through my reverie I hear the chant of the *Kohanim*. "May the Lord bless thee and keep thee. May He cause His countenance to shine upon thee and be gracious unto thee. May He turn His face unto thee and give thee peace."

The *Kohanim* come down from the *bimah* and don their shoes again.

These shoes, where have I seen them before?

I remember now where I have seen them. It was in that famous (infamous?) black-and-white photograph of the crematoria. Shoes of men and women, shoes of little boys and of little girls piled ever so high, new shoes

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and old, with laces and without, dress shoes and casual, shoes that will never again be worn by their owners—a towering mound of forlorn and bereft and desolate shoes.

This is the place where Jewish boys and girls and their mothers and fathers, because they were all children of the One God, went up in smoke as fire offerings. But the thousands of shoes they left behind, wrenching as they are in their emptiness, can also, on a far different level, offer a small measure of solace and comfort.

Solace and comfort, for in that luminous moment when these Jews stood face to face with the ultimate holiness of *Kiddush Hashem*, they lost all connection to the universe of the earth and the animals. At that moment they transcended the need to

demonstrate their moral and spiritual dominance over the beasts of the field and over the human beasts who murdered them. And as they offered their souls to the Almighty One, and as He reached down and brought them into His loving care for eternity, it was appropriate that their shoes be left behind—an ironic reminder that they now dwell in a more hallowed realm. Angels do not require shoes.

Notes

1. Shoes play a central role in the Biblical *chalitzah* rite (Deut. 25:5-11); in the Book of Ruth, 3:8; in the *halachot* of Yom Kippur, Tishah B'Av, and mourning. See also Gen. 37:28: After Joseph's brothers sold him for 20 pieces of silver, they used the coins—according to various *midrashim*—to buy shoes for themselves—a fact alluded to by Amos 2:6: "*al michram bakesef tzaddik, ve'evyon ba'avur na'alayim*, they sold the righteous for silver, and the poor one for a pair of shoes." The confines of this column do not permit a fuller study of the mysteries underlying these specific shoe-related behaviors.

2. See the *Shelah Siddur* (Rabbi Yeshayah Horowitz, the Shelah HaKadosh, 1560-1630), *Birchot Hashachar*. Shelah cites his teacher, the Maharshal, on the general theme of man dominating the beast. Shelah is cited in Rabbi Shelomo Zalman Auerbach, "Ta'am Lechalitzat Minalayim B'Tishah B'Av UveYom HaKippurim," in *Kovetz Keter Torah*, p. 2, as rendered by Rabbi Avraham Nadav and privately published in Ramat Shelomo, Jerusalem, 5761.) (Inter alia, Rabbi Auerbach explains why only leather shoes are forbidden on Tishah B'Av and Yom Kippur and to mourners, while cloth shoes—which are usually much more comfortable—are permitted; the wearing of leather shoes symbolizes our dominion over the animals, but on such solemn occasions we are to be completely submissive to God, and it is inappropriate to express our dominion over anything.) JA