A Mile in His Shoes

by

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*How beautiful are thy feet in sandals…* (Shir Hashirim 7:2)

Is there anything more symbolic of the humility of man than our feet, carriers of our weight and burden? I do not doubt that it is for that reason that in other traditions, when one seeks to demonstrate true and deep humility, one washes the feet of another.

Our feet are not just symbolic of our humility but also, according to our tradition, of our humanity. Indicative of this is the importance the rabbis afford to shoes. Rabbi Akiva taught his son, R’ Yehoshua, v’al timna minalim m’ragleicha, not ever to go barefoot. The Talmud, in Shabbat [129a], teaches, “A person should sell the roof beams of his house to buy shoes for his feet.”

So important are shoes that the times when we are *not* to wear them are as heavy with meaning as the times when we do. As a sign of mourning, wearing leather shoes on Tisha B’Av is forbidden. On Yom Kippur, the same prohibition is in place to demonstrate how we are to be humbled on that day. Isaiah is told to remove his sandals as a sign of mourning (Isaiah 20:2). During *shiva*, the mourner is not to wear leather shoes and during Talmudic times pall bearers and mourners went barefoot.

Yes, shoes are important. But to deeply grasp how shoes tie together not only our humanity but our highest aspirations requires the insight and knowledge of one like my grandfather.

Recall the powerful Biblical narrative of Yosef and his brothers. It serves as the prelude to our journey to *Mitzrayim*, enslavement and eventual redemption as a people in possession of Torah. Picture the moment in *Parashat Vayeishev* when Yosef approaches his brothers in the fields, innocent and joyful, not yet knowing their jealousy or their “plans” for him.  Rather than receive him with brotherly love, his brothers violently throw him into a pit where he remains until the *Ishmaelim* pass by on their way from Gilead to *Mitzrayim*. It is then that Yehuda suggests, “What profit is it if we slay our brother, and conceal his blood?...let us sell him... and let not our hand be upon him.”

In agreement, they sold Yosef to the *Ishamaelim* for twenty pieces of silver.

A passage in Pirkei D’R Eliezer teaches that the brothers sold Yosef to the *Ishmaelim* for twenty *kesef*, after which each of the brothers bought himself a pair of shoes at two *kesef* each, as it is written in Amos 2:6, Al michram b’kesef tzadik, v’evyon b’avur na’alaim…” (…Because they sold the righteous one for silver, and the poor man for a pair of shoes.)

A closer reading of Amos finds the prophet more emphatic. “Thus says the Almighty; for three transgressions of Israel I will turn away punishment, but for the fourth I will not turn away its punishment; because they sold the righteous one for silver, and the poor man for a pair of shoes.” There can be no doubt that Amos is speaking here about Yosef. It is for that sin, for the selling of Yosef, that *Am Yisrael* continues to “pay” throughout history.

 Into this discussion my grandfather HaGaon Rav Bezalel Ze’ev Shafran ZT’L posits a seemingly straightforward question, “How can it be that up until now the children of Yaakov walked around without shoes?” He reminds us that the Talmud tells us it is considered shameful for a *talmid chochom* to walk without shoes. Indeed, he states that it is the walking in shoes that makes us human (*bar inish*).

For those who love the feel of the grass between their toes, this is an astonishing statement! Of all the things that accrue to our humanity, it is walking with shoes that makes us human? How can this be? My grandfather cites the *Sh’la* in explanation. Dovid Hamelech exclaims, Kol shasas tachas raglav! – You give him dominion over Your handiwork, everything You placed under his feet. (*Tehilim* 8)

We, man, are the pinnacle of creation. It is to us that God has endowed the faculties needed to tame creation for our use and benefit. We dominate all other forms of creation – not, of course, as a cruel dictator might but, by design, as a beneficent one who uses creation even as he protects it. Creation exists for our benefit and to fulfill our needs. We owe creation our consideration and care in return. It is for this reason that the Sh’la concludes that every morning we utter among the other morning blessings, Sh’asa li kol tzarki – Who has provided me my every need.

We recite this blessing when? When we are putting on our shoes!

Shoes affirm our God-given gift to make sure all our needs are met. With shoes on, our feet “…are on the ground…” and we can go about all the tasks – doing, creating, producing – all that is necessary for our well-being.

My grandfather goes on to explain that the same insight teaches us why we are to go without shoes on Tisha B’Av and Yom Kippur. For it is on those days that we lack our dominance over creation. On those days, we are humbled.

When we mourn, when we atone, when we are correctly humbled, we cannot assume our mantle of dominance, we cannot assume our essential humanity. This is the reason, my grandfather reminds us, that Isaiah walked barefoot – he was in a state of mourning.

Our tradition teaches that shoes represent our humanity. Where my grandfather’s insight is so powerfully creative is in addressing the dilemma of *Vayeishev* –that if shoes are so essential how is it that, up to the time of their selling their brother, Yosef, his brothers walked without shoes and only *after* selling him they then purchased shoes *for two kesef*.

On the verse in *Vayeishev*, when the brothers see Yosef coming towards them, they say, “Look! That dreamer is coming!” R’ Levi taught that one day King Yeravam would be a descendant of Yosef; King Yeravam who, among his other sins, would tell the people of Israel rav la’chem me’alot Yerushalaim – “It is too far for you to go up to Jerusalem”. (Melachim I 12:28). That is, his message is that the people of Israel were better off worshipping two golden calves rather than walking all that distance to Jerusalem.

In trying to dissuade them from going on *aliya l’regel*,King Yeravam wanted to end the Torah observance of going up to Yerushalaim for the *shalosh regalim*.

*How beautiful are thy feet in sandals*…

Rava in Talmud Chagiga comments, “How beautiful are the feet of the people Israel when they go up to Jerusalem on the regel. The Maharsha enlarges on this comment, “It is taken for granted that they are trekking to *Yerushalaim* wearing shoes, because one going barefoot is pained, is in agony ... but, those going up to Jerusalem naturally wore shoes giving them both comfort and joy, because after all going to Jerusalem means being filled with joy as they anticipated basking in the glory and presence of God.

This, my grandfather brilliantly teaches, is what forms the context of the brothers’ purchasing shoes with the silver they received from the *Ishamaelim.* Why, they challenged each other, get rid of him? Then Yeravam shall not come from him and he will not have the opportunity to try to dissuade the children of Israel from walking in their shoes to Jerusalem.

Remember, the brothers each took *two kesef* from Yosef’s sale to purchase shoes! Two *kesef*! Why two *kesef*? Because, two *kesef* is the cost of the *chagiga korban* – the cost of the sacrifice to be brought during each of the *Shalosh Regalim*!

Shoes enable us to reach *Yerushalaim* – our “destination”, the place where we can be one with God. In seeking to eliminate *aliya l’regel*, Yeravam was proclaiming the heresy that man is not *moshel*, is not the pinnacle of creation. His message was that it was “good enough” to offer two golden calves. But no! Yosef’s brothers wanted to affirm for all time that man is dominant and that he has an eternal message and mission – to go in search of Hashem.

This then, is the lesson my grandfather teaches from the *parasha* – that it is the task of our lifetimes, but minimally three times a year, to walk upright and sure, to follow our inner guidance and find our way to *Yerushalaim* where we can offer a celebratory *chagiga* unto God - for just two *kesef*!

**Many of Rabbi Safran’s essays on all parshiyot haTorah may be found in his: *Something Old, Something New – Pearls from the Torah* available on Amazon.**