

Tetzaveh – Michael Israel (reprinted)

יג' אדר תשע"ז – 11th March 2017 – שבת פ'תצוה

***"Ve-osisoh Bigdei Kodesh Le-Aharon Ochicho Le-chovod Ule-sifores" (28:2)
Make sacred vestments for Aaron your brother, for majesty and beauty.***

These vestments were both beautiful and majestic. They were as precious as royal robes. When Achashverosh made the great feast for his officials and servants (Esther 1:3), he wanted to show them his greatness and majesty. He therefore wore the vestments of the High Priest, which had come into his hand after the Temple was destroyed. He set aside his own robes and wore the vestments of the High Priest, since these vestments were more precious and beautiful.

Because the Torah explicitly states that these vestments are for "majesty and beauty," it teaches that if the vestments become torn or worn, they may no longer be used for the Divine service. They are no longer considered "majestic and beautiful." The Talmud relates that a gentile was once passing by a school where young children were being taught. He heard them recite these verses, which speak of the vestments of the High Priest.

The gentile asked some of his Jewish friends, "Who wears these beautiful vestments?"
"The High Priest," they replied.

The gentile went to Shammai and declared, "I wish to convert to Judaism, but only on the condition that I be appointed High Priest and be allowed to wear the special vestments."

Upon hearing such an audacious request, Shammai became angry and chased him away with a builder's yardstick. He refused even to listen to what the gentile had to say.

The gentile then went to Hillel, and made the same request. He accepted him and converted him to Judaism.

This is how Hillel did it. He began by telling the gentile, "It is a universal practice that when a nation wishes to appoint a king, the first thing the people do is teach the appointee the ways of government and royalty. Only then do they accept him as king. The same is true of you. If you wish to be High Priest, you must first learn all the laws that pertain to the priesthood. Only then can you be appointed High Priest."

The gentile went and began to study the Torah so as to know the laws of the priesthood. In the course of his studies, he came to the verse "A non-priest who approaches shall die" (Numbers 3:10). This teaches that anyone who is not born a priest is worthy of death if he performs the service in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem.

"Regarding whom is this verse speaking?" asked the gentile of Hillel. "Even regarding someone as great as King David," replied Hillel. "If David had tried to appoint himself as High Priest and perform the Temple service, he would also have been worthy of death." The gentile said, "And this is true of someone who was born a Jew! G-d called the Israelites His children, as it is written, 'My son, my first born, Israel' (Exodus 4:22). Still, even regarding native-born Israelites, it is written, 'A non-priest who approaches shall die!' How much more so is this true of me, a born gentile, who came with my staff and traveling bag! I now know that I can never be a cohen-priest!"

After having become a proselyte, the gentile went to Shammai and said, "How could I ever have become a High Priest? It is clearly written, 'A non-priest who approaches shall die.' Why did you become angry with me? You could simply have answered me that it was utterly impossible for you to make me High Priest."

When the new proselyte came to Hillel, he said, "May you be eternally blessed for not becoming angry with me, and for allowing me to enter under the wings of the divine. I am now a proselyte and I am happy to be a Jew!"

To some degree, this story is puzzling. It would appear that Shammai was correct in not accepting the gentile as a proselyte. The gentile's motive in seeking to become a Jew was to have high status and position. He only wanted to be High Priest and to be able to wear the majestic, beautiful vestments. The law is that when a gentile or slave wishes to convert to Judaism, his motive must be questioned, to see if he is doing it for the sake of heaven, or for money or for worldly advantage. If the latter is true, he would not be accepted. Therefore since this gentile wanted to convert to Judaism so as to derive an obvious benefit, how could Hillel accept him?

Hillel knew about this gentile, and realized that he would ultimately convert to Judaism for the sake of heaven. We can see from the way he blessed Hillel that this convert was happy to be a Jew even though he could not be High Priest. This is why Hillel accepted him in the first place. (Meam Loez)
