“The Kohen shall don his fitted linen tunic…he shall separate the ash…and place it next to the Altar. He shall remove his garments and don other garments, and he shall remove the ash to the outside of the camp.” (6:3-4)

In the Talmud Yoma 23b, Chazal explain that the Kohen’s act of removing his garments was an act of derech eretz, good manners and courtesy. It is not proper for a servant to pour wine for his master while wearing the same garments that he wore when he was cooking the meal.

Horav Mordechai Gifter, z.l., derives a powerful message from Chazal’s words. A human king has many servants, each performing a specific function. The cook prepares the food, restricting his area of expertise to the kitchen. In contrast, the king’s waiter is someone whose training, refinement and breeding benefit him as he “serves” the king. In short, the waiter does not work in the kitchen because it is a task too “menial” for him, while the cook does not perform his role in the public domain.

The opposite is true in regard to serving Hashem. Rather than assign one Kohen to remove the ashes and another to continue with the avodah, service, the Torah instructs the very same Kohen to remove his clothes, don other clothes and continue with the avodah. Every aspect of avodas Hashem, regardless of how it may appear to human eyes, is equally laudable. One who has performed a seemingly menial and common task has fulfilled Hashem’s will and is thus worthy of praise – regardless of the nature of the task. The fulfillment of Hashem’s will is the critical factor. The apparently undistinguished nature of a mitzvah does not lower its status before the Almighty, for we cannot evaluate the value of mitzvos. This is consistent with Chazal’s teaching in Pirkei Avos 2:1, “Rebbe said, ‘Be as scrupulous in performing a minor ritual as in performing a major one, for you do not know the reward for mitzvos.’”

The “reward” of a mitzvah can have an alternate meaning. Performing mitzvos is a privilege – one we should value. We do not really appreciate many of the things that we receive without effort. We may waste the meals that are prepared at home, only to pay three times as much for an inferior meal at a restaurant. Why? At the restaurant, we value the food more.

We are born as Jews. The mitzvos that Hashem commanded us are readily available. We have only to go out and perform them. Do we each consider what other generations before us went through to observe these same mitzvos? Do we think about the “price” these mitzvos have cost in the blood, sweat and tears of history? We do not value mitzvos properly because they come too easily to us. We rarely think about our long martyr-filled history and what our predecessors gave up in order to observe the most simple mitzvos. Blood was spilled, lives were given, just so that the legacy of Sinai not be severed from Klal Yisrael. With this in mind, mitzvos emanate a new significance.