

He shall take a shovelful of fiery coals from atop the Altar that is before Hashem, and his cupped handful of fiery ground incense-spices, and bring it within the Curtain. (16:12)

The Kohen Gadol entered the Kodesh Hakodshim, Holy of Holies, four times on Yom Kippur. The first time was to burn incense. This was followed by sprinkling the blood of the bull between the Badim, Poles, of the Aron Kodesh. The third time, he entered with the blood of the sa'ir, he-goat, that was slaughtered l'Hashem. This blood was also sprinkled. Each time the Kohen Gadol entered the Kodesh Hakodshim, he immersed himself in the mikveh. He also changed the vestments, since the Kohen Gadol was not permitted to enter the Holy of Holies while wearing gold vestments. He performed the external service wearing gold vestments and then changed into white linen vestments when he went into the Holy of Holies. The Kohen Gadol went a fourth time into the Holy of Holies for a purpose which, at first, begs elucidation. He brought out the spoon and the firepan that had served as the medium for originally transporting the Ketores, Incense, into the Kodesh HaKodshim. These were brought in following the Kohen Gadol's second immersion in the mikveh, which was his first trip into the Kodesh HaKodshim.

Let us analyze exactly what the Kohen Gadol did with the kaf, Spoon, and machtah, Firepan. The firepan was used to transport the burning coals that had been on the Altar. The Kohen Gadol carried the machtah in his right hand and the kaf containing the Ketores in his left hand. He then placed the pan with the coals on the floor between the Badim. Finally, he placed a handful of ketores into his two hands, which was in and of itself an anomaly, since it is difficult to pour from one hand into two hands, when one only has two hands! The Talmud discusses how this was performed. According to one explanation, he held the spoon with his teeth. He then placed the ketores on the hot coals and waited there until the entire Kodesh Hakodshim was filled with smoke.

Having given a brief synopsis of the Kohen Gadol's avodah, service, in the Kodesh HaKodshim on Yom Kippur, we come to the question that begs elucidation. It is a well-known premise that one refrains from any contact with water on Yom Kippur. Washing the hands is held to the barest minimum. Yet, the Kohen Gadol immerses himself five times, with each time accompanied by washing his hands and feet. It is understandable that this is necessary for the first four "trips" into the Kodesh HaKodshim, since he is performing a vital service, the fourth trip, however, seems superfluous. After all, what does he do? He removes the spoon and firepan. Could that not have been done earlier? Does such a service require immersion in the mikveh and washing of hands and feet? It appears to the unerudite spectator that this last service is almost not necessary and certainly could have been performed in such a manner that would preclude the Kohen Gadol's additional exposure to water.

This question was posed by Horav Yechezkel Abramsky, zl, when he addressed the assembled

faculty and students of Yeshivas Slabodka on Rosh Hashanah, shortly before Tekias Shofar. To paraphrase Rav Abramsky: "What difference would it make if the spoon and firepan had remained in the Holy of Holies until the following year? When the Kohen Gadol entered next, he would retrieve the spoon and firepan. Why add to his tevillos, immersions, and hands/feet washing?" This teaches us, explained Rav Abramsky, that in the Bais Hamikdash and in the Kodesh HaKodshim there was no such thing as a vessel -- or anything, for that matter-- that did not have a defined purpose. A spoon and a firepan that did not function had no business just lying around until the following year. Therefore, a Biblical commandment requires the Kohen Gadol to make another trip to the Holy of Holies, just to retrieve two utensils.

The Rav continued, "Shlomo HaMelech writes in Sefer Mishlei (3:15): Yekarah hee mi'peninim, 'It is more precious than pearls.' This is a reference to the Torah whose value exceeds the most precious treasures. Chazal (Horiyos 13A) interpret the peninim as referring to lifnai v'lifnim, the Inner Sanctum, Holy of Holies, which is the most holy, hidden area in the Bais Hamikdash. The Torah is more important, more precious, than the Kohen Gadol -- who achieves the apex of spirituality when he enters the Holy of Holies on the holiest day of the year. The Torah has greater significance than the holiest man on the holiest day when he enters the holiest place! If in the lifnai v'lifnim no object can be just "hanging around," this idea should, likewise, apply in a yeshivah. No student should be there if he is not fulfilling a defined purpose, attempting to achieve a goal. One does not hang around a yeshivah. It is a place for achievement. The response cannot be, "I am not bothering anyone." The mere fact that one attends a place in which nonstop learning is a way of life -- and he is not participating -- is in and of itself the greatest intrusion on the overall success of a yeshivah."