

# THE ROLE OF THE SHOE IN THE BIBLE

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What was normal dress for Jews in ancient days with regard to shoes? If the removal of the shoe denotes a loss of dignity, if the shoe serves as a symbol of transfer of property, if the shoe is not to be worn in certain places – then it seems that the shoe was both a symbol of dignified dress and at the same time was associated with dust and thus unfit for holy places and holy activity.

The dress of biblical man has been described:

We may say that there were two main garments, an outer garment, the mantle, *simlah* in Hebrew, and an inner garment, the tunic, *kut-tonet* . . . . If to these two we add the *ezor*, a broad girdle worn beneath the tunic, and the *hagor*, a belt worn outside of it, and if we picture sandals of wood or leather tied to the feet with thongs, we have the complete ordinary dress of ordinary men.<sup>1</sup>

On shoes in particular:

Sandals apparently were worn in Palestine from the earliest times . . . . though ordinary persons are generally represented as barefoot . . . . Shoes were also of symbolic significance, as may be seen from the legal practice of presenting the shoe to confirm publicly the renunciation of levirate marriage rights or obligations . . . . (Deut. 25:9; Ruth 4:7). To be unsandaled was to be dispossessed . . . .<sup>2</sup>

There is no word in Hebrew that connotes wearing shoes, but there is one for being barefoot. "*Yahef*" is defined in Gesenius' Hebrew Lexicon as follows: "to be without shoes. The ultimate root lies in the syllable *chaf*, *chet*, *peh*, and the primary notion is that of peeling, removing the bark of shell." This implies that being barefoot was being deprived of normal dress.

There are instances in Scripture where "shoe" comes into some prominence. (1) In the customs of levirate marriage (Deut. 25:9, Ruth 4:7); (2) at Moses' theophany at the Burning Bush (Ex. 3:5); (3) in Amos (2:6).

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## LEVIRATE MARRIAGE

*Then shall his brother's wife draw nigh unto him in the presence of the elders, and loose his shoe from off his foot . . . . And his name shall be called in Israel The House of him that had his shoe loosed (Deut. 25:9).*

In the Encyclopedia Talmudit, the article on *halitza* (ceremony performed in lieu of the levirate procedure) is enormous, with 20 subtopics. One of them is *ha'naal*, on the proper shoe for use in this ceremony, and another is *halitzat ha'naal*, the proper removal of the shoe from the foot of the brother-in-law who refuses, or is ineligible, to fulfill the mitzvah of *yibum* – to marry the widow of a brother who died childless. In defining the term and the concept, the text cites the disagreement of opinion between the sages (a) who say that *halitza* is a *kinyan* [transaction], as if the Levir first had possession of the widow and the *halitza* puts her in possession of herself, and (2) who say that it is merely a *ptur* [release]. As for the shoe in *halitza*, the laws about it are so complicated that it was decided that the court should have a special *halitza* shoe for the ceremony, because sometimes the Levir would not be wearing an halakhically suitable shoe.

In the *Guide to the Perplexed*, Chapter 46, on rationales of commandments, Maimonides gives this version of the reason for *halitza*:

. . . because in those days it was considered disgraceful to go through that ceremony, and in order to avoid the disgrace, a person might perhaps be induced to marry his deceased brother's wife. This is evident from the words of the law: *So shall it be done unto the man that will not build up his brother's house. And his name shall be called in Israel, the house of him that has his shoe loosed.*

If indeed the removal of the shoe is a form of disgrace, not a mere transaction as it seems to be in the Book of Ruth, then we have a problem. It time, it was decided in halakha to prohibit levirate marriage because of the danger that it could bring about abuse, to substitute *halitza*. Why should a brother-in-law who is willing to marry the widow but is not permitted to, be subjected to the disgrace of the removal of the shoe and the proclamation that his house is the house of one who has had his shoe removed?

Samson Raphael Hirsch, in his book *Horeb*,<sup>3</sup> tries to rationalize the issue of *yibum* and *halitza*:

The man who is not prepared, where law and circumstances permit, to build up his brother's house must himself, "shoeless," forfeit position and progress on the earth, he is to merit contempt, and his house itself should be called the house of the "shoeless," the house of "him without position and progress" . . . . Since for many ages now it has no longer been possible to take for granted in Israel that pure, lofty and godly outlook on life . . . our Sages, . . . have long since declared *yibum* always to be inadvisable, and have ordained *halitza* in all cases unless the purpose of carrying out the mitzvah pure and simple is obvious beyond all doubt.

I do not think Hirsch removes the difficulty of shaming and making "shoeless" the brother-in-law who is willing to marry the widow but is prohibited by the sages to do so.

Maimonides presents some reservation regarding the theme of "shame" in the ceremony of *halitza*. Hirsch and others attempt to address this problem. However, Louis Ginzburg<sup>4</sup> further elaborates the theme of shame with regard to shoelessness:

The brethren of Joseph bought shoes for the money (from the sale of Joseph), for they said: "We will not eat it, because it is the price for the blood of our brother, but we will tread upon him, for that he spake, he would have dominion over us, and we will see what will become of his dreams." And for this reason the ordinance has been commanded, that he who refuseth to raise up a name in Israel unto his brother that hath died without having a son, shall have his shoe loosed from off his foot, and his face shall be spat upon.

#### RUTH

The Book of Ruth describes a strange "shoe ceremony" involving the *go'el* [redeemer] who rejected his role of redeeming Ruth's dead husband's property: *And this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and concerning exchanging, to confirm all things: a man drew off his shoe and gave it to his neighbor* (Ruth 4:7). Obviously, there are differences in the use of the shoe in Deuteronomy and in Ruth. In the latter, there seems to be a civil matter of redemption or transfer of property, and the removal of the shoe part of a transaction rather than a symbol of shame.

The Soncino Commentary on the Book of Ruth raises the possibility, based on the Targum and Yavetz, that the text refers to a glove instead of a shoe:

This form of acquisition later gave way to others, such as by means of money payments, by deed or by virtue of *hazakah*, possession . . . .  
 . A distinction must be made between drawing off the shoe in this ceremony and in that of *halitza*.<sup>5</sup>

This agrees with our assumption that while *halitza* as a substitute for Levirate marriage is a matter of shame, in the case of Ruth and Boaz and the unnamed kinsman, it was a matter of transfer of property.

#### MOSES AND THE KOHANIM

'Put off your shoes from off your feet, for the place whereon you stand is holy ground' (Ex. 3:5) Here, both shoes are removed, and for an entirely different reason: The ground on which Moses stood was holy! Is the shoe unfit for a holy place? Mishna Berakhot 9:5: "A person should not behave frivolously. . . he should not enter the Temple Mount with his cane or his shoe . . . and the dust upon his feet . . ." Then we have the rule that the kohanim should not wear shoes when they deliver the Priestly Blessing. Is that related to the removal of shoes in a holy place?

What connection is there between holy ground and not wearing shoes? Martin Buber introduces the matter of possession in this case as well. "God . . . orders him . . . to remove the sandals from his feet. The reason may possibly be because being holy ground, it should not be trodden by any occupying and therefore possessing shoe."<sup>6</sup>

The matter of the kohanim not wearing shoes during *Birkat Kohanim*, the Priestly Blessing, has nothing in common with Deuteronomy, Ruth, or Moses at the Burning Bush. It has to do with shoelaces rather than with shoes. Here is the explanation offered by the Arukh Hashulhan, Orach Chayim, Siman 128:

It is a Takanah by R. Yohanan b. Zakai that the Kohanim should not go up in their sandals for the Dukhan, but they remove them, and the reason is that their shoes were tied with straps, and we fear that the strap will snap from off the sandal and he will sit down to tie it up, and he will pause and will not bless together with his brother Kohanim . . . . It is not the purpose that they be barefoot,

which is demeaning, but they should stand with socks. Even though in our shoes there are no straps and there is no fear of this happening . . . It is certain that a sandal or a shoe not made of leather is permitted, for with respect to Tisha B'Av and Yom Kippur they are not considered shoes. However, if there are shoelaces in them, it is still prohibited, for we follow the reason (of the possibility of pausing to fix the laces) . . . .

#### AMOS

The prophet Amos harks back to an ancient sin of Israel, namely, the selling of Joseph by the brothers into slavery: *For they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes* (Amos 2:6). Radak prefers to see in the Hebrew word *naal* [shoe] another allusion more in line with the theme of castigation of the corrupt judges in Israel, who submitted to bribery and injustice in the execution of their roles:

They pervert the judgment of the poor so that he is compelled to sell his field, which was situated among the fields of the judge, who forces upon him a cheap sale in order to seal [*lin'ol*] and to fence in his own fields, and this one should not interfere between them. This is the meaning of *baavur naalayim*, from the meaning of closing.

Another explanation is: they convict the innocent so that the poor one has to sell his field with a full act of transfer, which is with the shoe, as it is said: (Book of Ruth) *A man would remove his shoe*. Which returns us to our original text involving the use of the word *naal*, shoe, not in terms of *halitza*, but in terms of the accustomed act of transfer: the removal of the shoe!

#### CONCLUSION

The same object can have different meanings in different contexts, although there is the temptation to see parallels in the different usages. The shoe has an entirely different symbolism in the *halitza* ceremony and in the transaction in the Book of Ruth. Moses removing his shoes at the Burning Bush and the kohanim removing their shoes for the *Birkat Kohanim* differ despite some element in common. The reference to the shoe in Amos is a social commentary but not a ritual.

## NOTES

1. Max Radin, *The Life of the People in Biblical Times* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1948) p. 129.
2. "Sandals and Shoes", *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia Identifying and Explaining All Proper Names and Significant Terms and Subjects* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1980).
3. Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Horeb: A Philosophy of Jewish Laws and Observances*. Trans. From the German original with annotations by I. Grunfeld, 5th ed., Vol. II (New York: Soncino Press, 1994), p. 405.
4. Louis Ginzburg, *Legends of the Jews*, Volume II (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956) p. 18.
5. *The Five Megilloth: Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther*. Hebrew text and English translation with Introduction. Edited by A. Cohen (London: The Soncino Press, 1974) Ruth, Chapter 4:7.
6. Martin Buber, *Moses* (Amherst NY: Prometheus Books, 1988) p. 42.



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