

FORCED TO BE HOLY

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"They shall be holy before their L-rd, and they shall not desecrate the name of their L-rd, for the sacrifices of G-d, the bread of their L-rd do they bring, and they shall be holy." [21:6]

Given only a shallow understanding of the laws of Kohanim, the priests, we might consider them a higher class, "creatures of privilege." When we had our Land and our Temple, all Jews gave the Kohanim a portion of their crops. Even the children of Levi (the tribe of the Kohanim), who also were given special portions, gave the Kohanim part of what they received. Only Kohanim could enter many parts of the Temple; only they could offer sacrifices; only they could aspire to the position of High Priest, he who performed the special service of Yom Kippur.

A closer examination reveals a far more complex distinction. The Kohanim received their designated presents, but they did not receive a portion of land. Perhaps they were assured they would have a basic income, but the opportunity to amass individual wealth was greatly reduced. [Note, by contrast, that the Catholic church was the largest landholder in Europe in the Middle Ages.] They were prohibited from numerous actions permitted to others. To be a Kohen is not simply to enjoy privileges the rest of us do not.

Indeed, the verse describes the holiness of the Kohanim as not simply a fact, but a command -- "they shall be holy," similar to "you shall be holy," the command to all Jews in last week's reading. Rashi, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, further notes (according to the Sifsei Chachamim) that unlike the command of last week, this statement is said in the third person, as if there were a commandment upon others to make them holy.

His stunning conclusion: there is indeed such a command! "They shall be holy - By force, the Bais Din [Jewish court] shall make them holy."

This statement refers to the Commandments that precede the above verse. In general, a Kohen is not permitted to enter a building with a dead body, much less to touch or carry a body, or even to approach a grave. A Kohen cannot even attend the funeral of his married sister, save from a distance! And if he wants to go, the court pushes him away.

Frequently, we may look at other people, and feel jealousy. We wonder why this person was born wealthy, this one with a brilliant mind, this one with great beauty. Others may also look at the Torah, and wonder why this group is different from that group, or why the Rabbis gave certain responsibilities to one group and not another.

The truth behind the distinctions of the Kohanim should teach us. Jewish thought does not tell us to seek fame and glory. Our lives are not about power and privilege. The Torah tells us that we are here to seek and to serve our G-d, through performance of Mitzvos and good deeds.

G-d gave us the Torah to assist us in our search. We need not wonder why some of us are Kohanim, some Levites, some Israelites, and why our tasks and responsibilities are different - because just as each individual is different, what will help one person to grow could be harmful to another. And when we perform our tasks correctly, and succeed in our mission, then these outside distinctions do not determine who is considered truly worthy: "An ill-begotten scholar is preferable to an ignoramus priest." It is not how we were born that makes us - it is how we die.

Good Shabbos,
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