

# THE KOHEN'S TALE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*Any man of your offspring throughout their generations in whom there will be a mum shall not come near to offer the food of his G-d...The food of his G-d from the most holy and from the holy may he eat.*<sup>[2]</sup>

The Torah excludes two broad classes of *kohanim* from full participation in the priestly life. Both the *baal mum* and the *tamei* are forced to the periphery. Strangely, however, the two classes are treated quite differently, actually in opposite manners. Each one is authorized in the area disallowed to the other.

Take the *avodah* itself. Neither of the two can perform it under ordinary circumstances. Yet, if enough of the *tzibbur* becomes *tamei*, a *kohen* who is *tamei* may perform the *avodah*. The *baal mum* knows of no equivalent allowance. He can never perform the *avodah*.

On the other hand, the *baal mum* is fully allowed to eat of the *korbanos*, as stated in the second of our *pesukim*. The *kohen tamei* gains no such license under any circumstances.

Were we to compare the *tamei* and the *baal mum*, we would be tempted to argue that the latter is "better" than the former. The *baal mum* did nothing wrong. Anyone with complaints about the way he looks is welcome, in the words of Chazal, to take that complaint to the *baal mum*'s Creator who made him that way. The *tamei*, however, is somewhat blameworthy. On some level he failed to adequately safeguard himself against contact with *tumah*.

Upon reflection, however, we realize that we could look at the two from an entirely different perspective. Whatever deficiency there is in the *baal mum* is open and manifest. Anyone can see it. No one can "see" the *tumah* in the *kohen tamei*. The optics of *mum* are worse than those of *tumah*.

The difference between these two reflects the dual nature of the *kehunah*. *Kohanim* are both symbolic givers and receivers. One of their jobs is to give honor to Hashem and His Presence in the *beis hamikdash*. Here, the public appearance of the *kohen* enhances the honor being paid to Hashem. A visible imperfection in one of the *kohanim* detracts from the picture of eager, exuberant subjects of the King. The more honored and honorable the subject, the greater is the honor he bestows upon his Master. In the public eye, the physically perfect is valued over the imperfect; the service of the unblemished brings more honor to the King.

*Kohanim* also receive. They are invited to partake, as it were, from the Heavenly table. As recipients of Divine beneficence, there is no difference between the *baal mum* and the ordinary person. To the

contrary, when we focus on receiving from G-d, the Torah makes a point of including the *baal mum*, because it brings honor to a loving G-d to show that He reaches out to the downtrodden and those with a simple, humble spirit. The *tamei*, however, represents the idea of inner defilement. The imperfect of body is welcome at the Divine table; the damaged soul does not have a seat there.

All of this is alluded to in the *pesukim* with which we began. "Any man of ...in whom there will be a *mum* shall not ... offer the food of his G-d." (He is banned from the role of giving honor to the King.) "The food of his G-d from the most holy and from the holy may he eat." (He is welcome to partake, to receive Hashem's abundant *berachah*.)

From the exceptions we understand the rule. The *kohen* is meant to be perfect in all ways, external and internal. Because of his elevated station in the community, we are not surprised by the numerous restrictions attached to his position. So much of his life is governed by special laws: his monetary activity (not receiving a portion of the Land), his family (the prohibitions of marrying a divorcee, a *zonah* and a *chalalah*), his appetites (the prohibition against consuming wine while performing the *avodah*), and his vigilance (being required to avoid *tumah*). We would be tempted to mentally group him together with the other great personage of Jewish life – the king. We quickly realize, however, that the two are treated quite differently. The king is subject to fewer special laws – and some of those grant him greater license than ordinary citizens!

The reason may be that the king's intended function is simpler than that of the *kohen*. The primary responsibility of the king involves mundane matters of state. The role of the *kohen*, however, is by nature complex, encompassing matters of both Heaven and earth.

The difference between them is reflected in the way the two are anointed. The king is anointed with oil around his head; the *kohen* adds to that oil placed between his eyelids.<sup>[3]</sup> We signify to the king that he needs to press his head – its power and discernment – into the service of the people. We tell the *kohen* that this does not suffice for him. Because he is charged with more spiritual service as well, he must mold and limit all his personal desires as well. The eyes are what lure a person towards all sorts of desires. We therefore anoint the *kohen* between the eyes as well, telling him that guarding what his eyes see is a necessary step in elevating the inner person.

"The stability of your time and the strength of salvation is wisdom and knowledge."<sup>[4]</sup> The word for "stability" in the *pasuk* is *emunah*, which literally means faithfulness or trust. The gemara<sup>[5]</sup> sees an allusion to the section of Mishnah known as *Zera'im*, or agricultural matters. Rashi explains that halachah allows us to rely on the honesty of the individual farmer. If he informs us that he obeyed these laws properly, and removed the required portions from what he grew before offering the rest for consumption, we take him at his word.<sup>[6]</sup>

This vote of confidence in the average individual is not so uncommon. The same holds for other areas of halachah, including all matters of permissibility and proscription. A single witness is

believed to tell us if something is kosher or non-kosher; whether it is *tamei* or *tahor*. Only in one major area of the law do we find the average citizen unreliable. In monetary law we insist on nothing less than two eyewitnesses. Other people's property is so attractive that the Torah could not trust the honesty of the average person.

With this we arrive at our final observation concerning *kohanim*. "They shall instruct my people concerning the differences between the mundane and the holy. Let them inform them of the difference between *tamei* and *tahor*. Concerning a grievance, let them stand in judgment."<sup>[2]</sup> In matters of the permissible and impermissible, regarding things *tahor* and *tamei*, it suffices for the *kohen* to simply "instruct" and "inform." The *kohanim* make known the details of the law – but they do not enforce the law. They rely on the good behavior of the people to properly implement the law.

Not so in regard to monetary issues. The *kohen*/judge cannot simply issue his ruling and walk away. The temptation for the one who is instructed to pay is too great for the Torah to believe that the litigants will cheerfully follow the dictates of the court. Rather, the Torah calls on the *kohen* to see that justice is done – to take a stand for the truth, and not flinch before his detractors.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaasheh, Emor, by R. Yechezkel Libshitz zt"l.
2. Vayikra 21:17,22.
3. Kereisos 5B.
4. Yeshayahu 33:6.
5. Shabbos 34A.
6. At least according to Torah law. Rabbinically, we sometimes demand greater assurance.
7. Yechezkel 44:23-24; the *Haftorah* of this *parshah*.