

# THE EXCLUSION OF EXCLUSIVE

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

What makes us special and holy? Jews are special; they are holier than the other nations. Kohanim are special; they are holier than the rest of the Jews. The Kohen Gadol is special; he is holier than the other Kohanim.

Jews have more Mitzvos than the other nations. Kohanim have more Mitzvos than all other Jews. The Kohen Gadol has more Mitzvos than the other Kohanim.

Jews are more restricted than the other nations. Kohanim are more restricted than all other Jews. The Kohen Gadol is more restricted than the other Kohanim.

Therefore, it is either the restrictions or Mitzvos that make us special and holy, or the restrictions and Mitzvos that actualize our inherent differences.

The Parsha begins by listing the unique restrictions - Mitzvos placed upon the Kohanim. In addition to the applicable laws of purity and impurity, a standard Kohen can not involve himself in burying the dead unless it is one of his seven closest relatives (Father, Mother, wife, son, daughter, brother, unmarried sister, or a Mais Mitzvah - unattended corpse). The standard Kohain is not permitted to marry a divorcee, Zonah (a woman who had been intimate with a non-Jewish man), or convert. The Kohen Gadol has all the restrictions of a standard Kohen plus being prohibited from attending the funerals of his relatives and marrying a widow.

Regardless of the reasons why G-d selected the specific restrictions to set the Kohanim apart from the rest of the Jews, the Kohanim must live by G-d's rules. They are not optional. (My Father Shlita relates how a non-Orthodox-rabbi-Kohen acquaintance of his who wanted to officiate at funerals, officially resigned from the priesthood!) However, a deeper analysis will reveal a thematic understanding of these Mitzvos.

The function of the Kohanim is to facilitate Shalom - peace. This is obvious from the final words of the Priestly Blessing, "May G-d lift up His countenance... and establish peace for you." The word "Shalom" encompasses peacefulness, the absence of conflict, contentment, perspective, and hope. The Kohanim are the medium through which the nation can collectively and individually realize their potential for Shalom. They do not only "bless the people," they help facilitate the integration of Shalom into the lives of the nation.

In Pirkei Avos (1:12) the Mishnah exhorts us to be "from the students of Aharon who loved Shalom

and pursued Shalom." Avos of R' Nassan illustrated Aharon's "pursuit of Shalom."

"If Aharon knew of two people in conflict he would go to one of them and say, "My son, do you know what your friend is saying? He is beside himself with grief! He proclaims out loud, "Woe onto me! How can I ever look at my friend again? I am so embarrassed by what I did to him!" Aharon would counsel the person until he had removed the hatred from his heart. He would then go to the second friend and tell him the exact same thing! In the end, when the two friends would again meet they would hug and kiss each other forgiving each other for whatever had caused the conflict."

The message of the Mishnah is obvious. Kohanim were stamped with Aharon's character. It was not enough to proclaim Shalom; they had to pursue Shalom. Kohanim were more than mere temple or devotional functionaries. Kohanim were intended to be role models, teachers, and symbols. Their roles were symbolic as well as practical. Therefore, the Kohanim were intended to facilitate peace between G-d and the nation and between individuals and individuals. They symbolized Shalom and the integration of the ideal of Shalom.

In analyzing the specific Mitzvos and restrictions placed upon the standard Kohen, we can apply the understanding of their symbolic function. The Kohen must be true to his calling and his symbol. As a temple functionary, the Kohen represented his constituency on the Mizbeach - altar. On behalf of the "Yisroel" the Kohen ascended the altar to facilitate thanksgiving, spiritual growth, or atonement. He needed to be in tune with the owner of the Korban. He needed to focus his mind and heart on representing the owner's interests, concerns, and hopes. In turn, the owner of the Korban had to be comfortable with the Kohen and what he represented. The Kohen had to represent peace, tranquility, spiritual integration, contentment and unity. The Kohen had to represent the ideals of Aharon Hakohen. The Kohen had to represent the very best in Judaism. He symbolized purity and purpose. He represented the uniqueness of being chosen and exclusive among the nations. Therefore, he was prohibited from marrying a convert, Zonah, or divorcee.

Before explaining why Kohanim are forbidden to marry the convert or Zonah I want to revisit the fundamental concept of separation. In general we are both accepting and uncomfortable with separation. We relish exclusivity when it is convenient or safe. We love being different and apart when we feel good about ourselves. We revel in being chosen when we are proud of being chosen. However, we are uncomfortable when closeness and exclusivity become exclusionary. Privilege is wonderful when it does not restrict or exclude. However, that is not the true meaning of privilege. Privilege is synonymous with responsibility, and responsibility is restrictive.

The Jew is privileged and therefore more restricted and responsible. The Kohen is privileged and therefore more restricted and responsible. The Jew cannot marry the non-Jew and the Kohen cannot marry the Zonah or convert. That does not mean that either the Zonah or the convert is bad. That depends on their personal character and relationship with G-d, which for the most part is none of our business. Our concern is the status of closeness and holiness. Therefore, just as the Jew can

not marry the non-Jew because of the status of being chosen and therefore exclusive; so too the Kohen can not marry the Zonah or convert because of his status of being chosen and therefore exclusive.

The Kohen symbolizes the best we can be. Note that I said symbolizes. It does not guarantee or suggest that the Kohen is the best we can be. Nevertheless, he is the symbol of the best we can be. Therefore, the Torah designated symbolic areas of uniqueness and separation. The Kohen represents purity in being apart from the other nations. Therefore, a Zonah, a woman who was intimate with a non-Jew, is rendered unfit for a Kohen.

Likewise, the Talmud associates the convert with the same concern. As a moral society we can only trust a culture founded upon belief in G--d and His divinely given commandments. It is not the product of our emotions or rational. Therefore, we cannot trust the morality of any other nation. That does not say that they are immoral. It says that their values and ideals are subject to human whim and desire. A non-Jew who converts is held in the highest esteem as the Torah reiterates over and over again. However, the price of becoming chosen and exclusive is realizing the nature of the change and accepting the price of that change. What I was I no longer am, but what I was I cannot simply ignore. Therefore, the first generation convert cannot join with the Kohen - the symbol of spiritual and moral perfection.

The Kohen is forbidden to marry the divorcee because he must be the symbol of Shalom. Therefore, even though the Torah provides for divorce and divorce can be good, nevertheless, it symbolizes the breaking of a unit, the failure of Shalom. As the symbol of peace, tranquility, and the mandate of Aharon Hakohen, he cannot marry a divorcee.

The Kohen Gadol is an even more chosen, exclusive, and therefore restricted symbol. The Kohen Gadol symbolizes the most chosen and holy. The Kohen Gadol is also the quintessential Kohen and must represent the essence of their closeness. All Kohanim are restricted from associating with death. All Kohanim are forbidden to enter a cemetery or attend to the dead. The Kohanim represent life with all its opportunities for willfully serving G-d.

Rav Hirsch on this week's Parsha said it best.

Pagans, both ancient and modern, have a predilection for associating religion and religious matters with death and thoughts of death. For them, the kingdom of G-d begins only where man ends. They view death and dying as the true manifestation of their deity, whom they see as god of death, not of life. Not so the priests of Judaism, because the Jewish concept of G-d and the Jewish religion are not so. The G-d whose Name assigns the priest his place among the Jewish people is a G-d of life. His most exalted manifestation is not the power of death that crushes strength and vitality but the power of life that enables man to exercise free will and be immortal. Judaism teaches us not how to die but how to live

Regarding the harshness of the prohibition that a Kohen Gadol cannot attend the funeral of his

closest relatives, Rav Hirsch explains.

Such a man (the Kohen Gadol) ceased to be an ordinary individual; he must now perceive and value also his personal relationships primarily from the standpoint of the ideals of the nation, ideals which should be in his mind so vividly that, if he must give personal expression to them, they will override any personal mood or emotion that could interfere with them. But while he feels in his heart the pain that death has brought him, in the midst of these thoughts of death, he must demonstrate all the more eloquently the power and joy of life that emanate from G-d even amidst life's bitterness "a concept taught by that sanctuary whose first servant he is."

The Kohen Gadol is forbidden to marry the widow because of her tragic association with death. The widow is not bad! The widow is not impure! We pray for her happiness and protect her rights. The Torah mandates greater sensitivity and concern for the widow and the orphan than for anyone else. However, the Kohen Gadol is the ultimate symbol of life and as such must be removed from death's shadowed mystery.

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