

SIMPLE ACCEPTANCE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Exotic designs, rare gems, the finest materials, and ceremonial appointments, served to set the Kohain Gadol and the regular Kohanim apart from the rest of the nation. The laws of purity, tithes, Terumah, and their attendant restrictions further divided the holy from the mundane and the holier from the less holy.

The newly formed hierarchy within the nation set the tribe of Layvie and the family of Aharon above and beyond the rest of the people. Life was no longer simple or equal. The image of Moshe standing among the masses at the foot of Mt Sinai and hearing the word of G-d at the time of Revelation would be no more. Forever after, the religious expectations for some would be greater than the religious expectation for others.

At first, before the sin of the Golden Calf, the religious expectations for the Bnai Yisroel had been across the board. There would not have been any divisions within the nation except for the position of the firstborn. They were to be the designated "attendants" in the Temple serving the communal and individual devotional needs of the nation. The laws of purity and impurity were to have been practiced by the entire "kingdom of priests." The laws of Tithing and the other priestly gifts would have been unnecessary. The tribe of Layvie would have been given their own designated portion of land in Eretz Yisroel. In essence, the hierarchy of the nation would have been limited to the administrative and organizational demands of the nation and the Temple. Otherwise, everyone would have been equal in his or her religious expectations and observances.

We find religious differences more difficult to accept than other types of differences. Other differences, such as financial or physical, might be resented and might generate jealousy. However, most of us accept that they exist and attempt to adjust our attitudes and feelings accordingly. In fact, most of us will never do anything to change the status quo. The rich get richer and the poor stay poor. Culture and ethnicity will color certain neighborhoods, and they will remain so for many generations. However, religious differences, even among the most accepting and liberal of families and communities, will generate latent animosity, resentment and outright disdain.

A person born missing a limb is different than the majority of his peers. It is difficult, and it is challenging, yet, manageable. The person might be jealous of his friends who are not missing the limb. He might have to suffer the immature taunts and barbs of school-age immaturity. He might be resentful toward G-d for the circumstances of his disability. However, once past those early stages

of bias and fear, the individual can begin to feel equal to everyone else.

In families and classrooms, certain children were not created equal. Some are smarter and more capable than others. This can cause jealousy and resentment, however that is part of the challenge of maturation. We each have to learn to accept those naturally imposed differences.

In the realm of finances it is equally true. Some are born into money and others have to struggle to make ends meet. Jealousy often spurs on ambition and resentments can flare into conflict and crime; however, we know that we must learn to deal with it. We must learn to accept the vagaries of family, time, circumstance, and genetics.

However, when it comes to religious differences the emotional reactions and resentments are far more profound. Because of assumed hurts and insults, families break apart, communities split, and intolerance is not only accepted, it is justified. Why is this so, and how should we deal with the differences?

Religious differences, especially as they relate to levels of observances and intensity of practice, are resented for being personal choices. Physical and financial differences are accepted because they are imposed or natural. It is far easier to justify resenting personal choice than it is to justify resenting personal luck. Imposed differences are beyond our control. Personal choice is within our control. Your physical and financial difference may be a source of jealousy for me but it does not obligate me to be like you. However, your personal choice to be more observant or religious makes me feel less than you because I too could do the same if I wanted.

Obviously, not every expression of religious observance is necessarily better. Religious fervor might be escapism cloaked in self-righteousness. In such instances it behooves us to explore more deeply "his" affections and our reactions. However, in an ever-growing desire to understand the true word of G-d, many are returning to the strict observance of the Halacha. I do not mean the affect of black hat, swinging payos, hanging Tzitzit or ankle length skirts. I refer to the total acceptance of Halacha as the only honest expression of G-d's will.

Much depends on the practitioners of Halacha. Their mannerism must be socially inclusive, emotionally balanced, and consistent in their uncompromised adherence to religious observances and practices. They must be confident without being arrogant. They must be accepting without being condescending. However, even more depends on our granting them permission to be fully committed to the ideals and values of their personal choices. Their strength should not become our weakness.

I believe this to be one of the most important lessons of the Parsha. The Kohain and the Kohain Gadol were obligated to be different. Their personal practices were more intense and disciplined. Their manner of dress and personal behavior reflected the sanctity of being the "Chosen among the Chosen." As such, their personal bearing and our reaction to their choseness is a model for all relationships involving religious forbearance and acceptance.

Was it easy to be a Kohain at the time of the Mishkan and the Bais Hamikdash? Well, is it easy to be a Jew in an era when we do not have a Bais Hamikdash? Both questions deserve the same answer. It depends on our attitude. Being a Kohain and being a Jew demands discipline and sacrifice. Both the Jew and the Kohain are more restricted relative to the general population. However, the gains of being among the chosen are worth the price of being chosen.

The Kohanim are obligated and restricted by the laws of Tumah and Taharah - purity and impurity. In the times of the Bais Hamikdash this could prove to be a real pain. Imagine you are best friends with a Kohain. You invite your friend and his family to join you for a Shabbos meal. Above and beyond the level of your Kashrus would be his concern for whether or not you and your family kept the strict laws of Tumah and Taharah! You buy your meat from the most Mehadrin (highest level of Kashrus) butcher. You are constantly calling your Rabbi for shaylos (questions) and concerns. You were raised in the frumest (most religious) of homes and send your children to the blackest (extreme right) of Yeshivas. Nevertheless, your table would not be good enough for your best friend, the Kohain! How should you react? How should you feel?

We must understand and accept that Halacha for the committed Jew is no different than the priesthood for the Kohain. Both are imposed by G-d, and both must be accepted as inviolable and beyond personal preference and control. Rather than resent the religious commitments and restrictions of the Halachic Jew, we should proudly support their desire to live by the strict dictates of G-d's law.

Many of us would like to invite our friends to our homes for a meal. However, before doing so know whom it is that you are inviting. If you know that they will be comfortable with your level of kashrus and keeping of Mitzvos, proceed with your menu! If however they might be a family that is more stringent in their practices, be prepared to accept and be supportive of their level of devotion. For them their level of Kashrus is not optional. For them it is a non-negotiable value. It may have started as a personal choice but once accepted we must respect their choice as their immutable law.

Above and beyond personal choice and levels of commitment (eg. glatt or non-glatt, - degrees of kashrus in meat, using an Eruv - "rezoning" an area to permit carrying on Shabbos, or not using an Eruv, eating out or not eating out) is the strict Halacha. There are many kosher homes who are unaware, and do not keep some basic laws. Tovelng - immersing in a Mikvah glass and metal utensils, having a non-Jewish cook, and how to warm up foods on Shabbos, are a few such considerations. They are no less important than keeping Shabbos or not buying a cheeseburger. It is incumbent upon all of us to be vigilant in not compromising anyone's personal level of commitment, or being insulted by personal choice, especially when the concerns are basic Halacha.

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