

SEPARATION AND PREPARATION

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Moshe installs his brother, Aharon, and his nephews, the sons of Aharon as the priests - the kohanim - of Israel. Though there is no truly elaborate installation ceremony for the kohanim, there is a week-long period of preparation and purification that precedes their actual entry into their holy service. Why the delay? What does the week-long period of preparation accomplish? And, we see that this period of preparation is a matter of pattern and not simply a one-time event. For the Talmud in Yoma teaches us that the High Priest - the Kohen Gadol - was "separated" for the week before Yom Kippur in order to prepare himself for the service in the Temple that he would perform on Yom Kippur. So separation and preparation are apparently hallmarks for entry into Godly service.

The service of the Lord is not something that one can enter haphazardly. It requires thought, dedication, knowledge and deep commitment. It is not an easy task. Just as one cannot wake up one morning and suddenly say "today I am going to be a brain surgeon," so too one cannot automatically walk in to the synagogue or the study hall and enter positions of leadership overnight. Only by preparation - which invariably means years of intensive Torah study, self-recognition and improvement of personal behavior and attitudes, and a true willingness to serve God and Israel - is one allowed the exalted privilege of being a kohain, metaphorically speaking. The Jewish world suffers today from too many self-appointed, ill-prepared, self-righteous and pompous pseudo-kohanim.

Aside from preparation to serve as a kohain, there is also present the aspect of separation. Even though we all live in the general society and social environment that surrounds us, to be a steadfast Jew requires the ability to separate one's self from society, albeit, even slightly. It means not following every fad of correctness of thought and sociability of behavior, of distancing one's self from the corrosive elements of impurity that abound in every human society and generation, of being able to stand even alone for what is right and moral and proven over the generations. The Jew may be in society but he or she must also be separate from society. The Haskala formulated that one should be Jew at home but just like everyone else in the street of general society. That false notion led to the disappearance of countless "home" Jews who were unable to make that separation once they had compromised their identity in the public arena of life. Without separation there can be no kohain.

The task of a kohain is not to be only a mere functionary in the Temple service. It is rather a challenge to be the guardian of wisdom and holiness, the one who maintains standards and

counsels others in the way of the Torah and Jewish tradition. The kohain is held to a high standard. He may not defile himself or come in contact with what is impure. He must prepare himself constantly for his role in Jewish life and for the task assigned to him. Therefore, his preparation and separation are the first steps that he takes in embarking on the road to his ultimate task of daily service to God and man.

Shabat Shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

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