

THE ROLE OF A KOHAIN

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The third book of the Chumash, Vayikra, is called "Torat Kohanim" - the law of the priests - in rabbinic literature. This is undoubtedly because most of the book is occupied with the laws of the specific sacrifices and the duties of the kohanim in the Temple. However, there is another, broader and more universal aspect to the name of the book of Vayikra/Torat Kohanim. For implicit in the title is the realization that Kohanim are to behave and live up to a certain standard set for them by the Torah. It is not only the offering that is brought to the Temple that is important and vital. It is also the Kohain who is charged with treating that offering properly and respectfully that is important and vital for successful Temple worship. It is therefore no coincidence that this book of Vayikra/Torat Kohanim contains within its entire sections that deal with moral laws and disciplined human behavior. A dishonest Kohain is not allowed to be a representative of God's Temple, just as a physically deformed Kohain was also excluded from performing Temple service.

The Talmud explicitly teaches us that only if a Kohain somehow resembles an angel of God in his behavior and deportment, would people come to study Torah from his mouth and sense the true holiness of the Temple. The task that was placed on the Kohanim was not one of mere rote service in the Temple. It was rather the challenge to be exemplary in behavior, a role model for others, and a teacher of Torah to Israel by deed as well as by word, which would define the true Kohain. The Rabbis in Pirkei Avot described the father of all Kohanim, the great Aharon, as a lover of peace, a pursuer of peace, a lover of his fellow human beings and someone who was able to bring people closer to Torah values, study and observance.

I feel that this description was not merely meant to be an obituary of Aharon. Rather, it is meant as a blueprint as to what a true Kohain should be - what he should represent and what image he should reflect to those who come to him for counsel, aid, instruction and Temple service. We may not have a Temple in our midst as of yet today, but we are sorely in need of Kohanim - religious leaders cut from the cloth of Aharon and his value system and life style. The book of Vayikra is the guide for all those who aspire to religious leadership and influence in the Jewish world. It is truly the book of Torat Kohanim.

Shabat Shalom.
Rabbi Berel Wein

Text Copyright © 2004 [Rabbi Berel Wein](#) and **Torah.org**.