

THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING ROLE MODELS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This week's parsha addresses in particular the laws and duties incumbent upon the kohanim, the priests and public servants of Israel. The kohanim were chosen to be the civil servants of Israel. They owned no property in the Land of Israel and were dependent upon the support of the Jewish community through the gifts of terumah (a donation of approximately two percent of the produce of the farmer's field), and other specific gifts that were given to them. The kohanim "worked" in the Temple for two or three weeks a year (two week shifts rotated among twenty-four families of the kohanim) but their major task was to be the educators and teachers of the Jewish people. The prophet Yeshayahu describes the kohein thusly: "For the lips of the kohein shall safeguard the law and the faith, and the teachings of the Torah shall be asked of him." Thus the kohanim represented the two most necessary ingredients for decent society - the devoted public servant and the moral educator and teacher. These two categories of people, usually ill paid and vastly unappreciated, are the bulwark of a decent and efficient society. Without them, there is only boorishness, corruption, ignorance and eventually lawlessness. The kohein is thus not only a holy figure in Jewish life, he is as importantly the basic public figure that represents the Torah, its value system and public stance on issues of the day, to the general Jewish society of Israel.

The question therefore arises, how is one to inspire in the kohein the necessary selflessness, devotion and spirit to be such a combination of public servant and skilled educator? Part of the answer to this question is provided by the opening words of the parsha.- emor el hakohanim bnei Aharon. Speak to the kohanim, the sons of Aharon. Tell the kohanim that they are the sons of Aharon. It is important to have role models, to know one's pedigree and ancestry. Remembering that he is descended from Aharon, the man who loved peace and pursued it, whose love for Israel knew no bounds and whose example brought people closer to Torah, alone can inspire a later descendant to fulfill the taxing role of being a proper kohein. A kohein who realizes that he is a ben Aharon a descendant and replacement if you wish for the great Aharon himself, will undoubtedly be able to fulfill his roles as public servant and inspired educator nobly and successfully. Knowing who you are, where you came from, wonderfully enables one to succeed in the great tasks of life that challenge all of us, especially those of us the kohanim who are meant to serve and teach the Jewish society the ways of Torah and tradition. I hope that this coming generation of Jews will produce true kohanim public servants of integrity and merit and teachers that inspire and educate. Then we will realize that Aharon and his descendants still live in the midst of Israel.

Shabat shalom.

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