

A PURE BLESSING

by Rabbi Berel Wein

In this week's Torah reading we are told of the special instructions given to the kohanim - the priests of Israel, the descendants of Aharon. One of the specific prohibitions unique to kohanim is the commandment that they are not to attend funerals or deal with dead bodies. The dead body, merely by the fact that it no longer has life within it exudes tumah - an uncleanness of spirit that is harmful to the degree of spirituality that a kohein is meant to maintain. Ramban offers us the idea that a kohein, because of his higher nature of spirituality does not require the reminder of mortality that funerals and cemeteries invoke in the rest of us. Since that moral lesson is not necessary in the case of kohanim, their becoming tamei - impure - would be gratuitous and serve no positive purpose.

Even though we are all tamei today in non-Temple times, nevertheless there is an implied message here that no Jew should gratuitously allow one's self to become impure unnecessarily. In kabbalistic thought, especially in the tradition of the Ari, visiting graves and cemeteries was discouraged because of the unholiness of the spirits that reside in the place where the dead are buried. This trend of thought has not gained wide popularity in Jewish life - witness the many thousands who make the pilgrimage to the grave of Rabi Shimon ben Yochai in Meron every Lag B'Omer - and graves of loved ones and of great holy people that play an important role in everyday Jewish life. Yet, this idea of not allowing one's self to become tamei, as exhibited in the special commandment to the kohanim in this week's Torah reading should at least give us pause and room for thought on the matter.

The custom of praying at the graves of the righteous departed ones has been entrenched within Jewish life for many centuries. There, also, the rabbis warned us not to pray to the dead for their help but rather to only use the emotional inspiration of the visit to pray directly to the Lord more fervently. Whether such a fine line and sophisticated concept is actually understood and practiced by the masses of Jews who regularly visit graves is hard to assess. Psychologically speaking, visiting the grave of a beloved one and/or a great and holy person allows one to retain a special connection with the deceased. That is a powerful reason and even justification for the strong custom among Jews to visit the graves of their departed ones. It apparently overcomes any objections as to unnecessary defilement and tumah.

However, even today, the kohanim in the Jewish people refrain from coming close to graves or dead bodies. Their unique and special status in the Jewish world is thus preserved by the observance of this commandment detailed in this week's Torah reading. Since they are bidden to raise their hands

in blessing the people of Israel, unnecessary defilement such as coming in contact with the dead, is to be avoided. Their blessing must emanate from purity and holiness, from life itself and its renewal. This is the special role, challenge and task assigned to the kohanim of Israel.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com

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