

LEADERS WITH PERSONAL LIVES

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah spends a great deal of space in this week's parsha in detailing for us the service of the High Priest in the Temple on Yom Kippur. But it also teaches us the special laws and obligations that the Torah places upon the High Priest. He is limited in his marriage choices, his bereavement behavior and in other matters of seemingly personal life. What is the lesson involved in these restrictions and guidance of the High Priest?

Is it not sufficient that he perform his duties - especially his detailed Yom Kippur duties - in a competent and efficient manner? After all, is not one entitled to a private and personal life, even if one holds high public office? Apparently the Torah does not feel so. Being the High Priest is not a job. It is not even what our non-Jewish friends refer to as "a calling." It is rather a position of moral leadership and a role model stature in Jewish life.

As such, one's private life has a great deal to do with how people perceive the position itself. One's personal behavior, no matter how private and guarded it may seem to be, affects deeply the role and position of the High Priest in the eyes of the masses of Israel. The laws and restrictions of the Torah on his private life are meant to impress this view of his position upon the High Priest. He is not to judge himself and his actions by the ordinary standards of correctness of the average person. He is special and must therefore behave in a special and holy manner.

One of the signs of corruption that doomed the Second Temple Commonwealth of Judea was the unethical behavior of many of the High Priests who served in the Temple during that period of Jewish history. The Talmud teaches us that many of them died when entering the Holy of Holiness because of their unworthy private behavior.

Appointed through bribery and machinations, corrupted by personal scandal and callousness, the Lord refused to allow them to occupy this exalted holy office for any considerable length of time. Apparently God decreed, so to speak, better no Temple than a Temple cheapened and degraded by immoral priests and selfish office seekers. And so the Second Temple was destroyed, not because the ritual of the Temple was not followed but rather because the morality of those who represented the priesthood and Judaism was found sadly wanting. The Talmud in commenting upon the verse in Malachi "That the lips of the priest guard and teach Torah knowledge for he is an angel of God" states: "If the priest resembles an angel of God, than study Torah from his lips. If not, then do not become his student."

This lesson has lost none of its effectiveness in our time. Leadership, whether it is concerning purely spiritual matters or political decisions, requires probity and adherence to Torah values on the part of the leader in order to be effective. Holy and honest people inspire holiness and honesty in others. The Torah's standards have never been relaxed in this matter. We would do well to remember this in our judgment of Jewish leadership today as well.

Shabat shalom.

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