

DIVINE WORSHIP

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The Torah emphasizes in this week's parsha a basic truism regarding religious leadership. There are no perfect people in the world as all humans commit some wrong at one time or another. Naturally the magnitude of that wrong will vary by its very nature and by the position and public perception of the individual involved. This feature can be very disheartening to the religious purist who seeks only perfection from others.

The Torah comes to teach us special rules regarding the kohanim - the priests of Israel who minister, so to speak, between God and humans. The kohen was not a free agent to improvise the service, to make it more currently popular or meaningful. The service in the Temple was what it was and was not to be tampered with or improved upon. The kohen was held to a standard of behavior and a discipline of participation in the Temple service.

He was meant to be holy but there were provisions made for his own sin offerings as the occasion warranted. Apparently holiness is still not perfection. The kohen could fulfill his duties only by following the instructions exactly as proscribed in the Torah itself. This was not meant to stifle creativity or originality of the individual. It was meant however to standardize the Temple service, to make certain that everyone who participated was treated equally and that the kohanim did not discriminate, play favorites or otherwise indicate behavior not in keeping with their station and service requirements.

The kohanim went through an installation ceremony described in this week's parsha. There were many lessons to be learned before one actually took up the duties of being a kohen. One of the lessons was to discipline one's self in performing the service in the Temple. In next week's parsha we will read of the tragedy that befell the oldest two sons of Aharon when they disregarded this iron rule of Temple service discipline and improvised their own "strange fire" into the service.

Apparently the week's training that preceded the actual opening of the Mishkan for sacrifices and services was insufficient, in their case, to impress upon them the severity of deviating from God's instructions, no matter how noble and innovative they thought this deviation might be.

Over the long history of the Jewish people many have come to improve and be overly innovative, to tamper with God's instructions and "improve" the services of worship. None of these innovations has been able to stand the test of time and vicissitudes. Prayer services, houses of worship and study must conform to a tradition of discipline and continuity. This is the key to Jewish survival and

longevity.

Though neither Mishkan nor Temple is present currently in our world, the synagogue, its rituals, orders and services, have served as the substitute Temple for Jews for almost two millennia. Those who administer and care for the synagogue are today's kohanim, so to speak. All of us would do well to heed the clear messages of this week's parsha.

Shabat shalom and a happy Purim.

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