

# HOLY PRIESTS

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

Part of the problem of leadership is that one who achieves position and prominence is always held to a higher standard of behavior and accomplishment than we ordinary humans. In this week's parsha the Torah sets out special and stringent rules for the descendants of Aharon, the kohanim/priests of Israel.

Apparently with public privilege there are added responsibilities. Because of this, the Torah describes and demands specific personal and public behavior, actions and attitudes from kohanim. The prophet will later record for us that "the lips of the kohein will guard knowledge and the people will ask for Torah lessons from him for he is likened unto an angel of the Lord of hosts."

To this verse the Talmud comments that "if he resembles an angel of the Lord of hosts then the people should ask of him to teach them Torah. However, if in his personal and public deportment he bears no resemblance whatsoever to an angel of the Lord of hosts then the people should abstain from asking him to teach them Torah."

In the long history of the Jewish people, both in First and Second Temple times there were righteous High Priests who resembled angels and there were those who disgraced their exalted position by immoral and sinful behavior. There were Saducean High Priests who denied the very divinity of the office that they occupied. And there were righteous High Priests, such as Shimon HaTzadik, who proved to be the saviors of Israel in difficult and dangerous times. To a great extent, the entire situation of Israel, favorable or otherwise, depended on the High Priest and his attitudes and comportment.

It is interesting to note that the Torah in this week's parsha lays down many rules about the actions and behavior of the kohanim regarding their own personal lives. Apparently, nowhere does the Torah deal with public policy issues and the national direction in which the kohanim are to lead the people of Israel.

The Torah assumes that people who behave in a holy and correct fashion in their own personal lives will benefit from Divine intuition and aid when it comes to making vital decisions about public policy for the Jewish people. Shimon HaTzadik saved the Jewish commonwealth of his day from destruction by Alexander the Great through successful and clever negotiation. The Tzadik bested

the Great in that encounter.

That is why throughout Tanach we find the leaders of Israel being judged not so much by their public persona, policy decisions or by their wars and victories and reverses, as much as by their private behavior and interpersonal relationships and actions. In the blessings of the Haftorah reading we state that the Lord gave us "good prophets" - people of personal worth and integrity, of honesty and morality and correct Torah behavior.

Bad people are disqualified from being our true prophets. There are no perfect people so there cannot be any perfect leaders either. Yet, the Torah demands that the kohanim constantly strive for holiness and self-improvement. It therefore prescribes a regimen of behavior in personal life that will aid the kohein in that quest for holy self-fulfillment.

Shabat shalom.

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