

PRIESTLY DUTIES

by Rabbi Berel Wein

We can all agree that the priestly family of Aharon has always had a special rank and position within the Jewish people. Having been chosen to represent God to the Jewish people and the Jewish people to God, so to speak, they had a decisive role of influence within Jewish life. Because of this the Torah held them to a higher standard of pedigree and behavior than the rest of the Jewish people.

The prophet taught us that the priest was to resemble an angel of God in his knowledge and observance of Torah commandments and values. Thus the special laws for the priests regarding marriage, divorce and pedigree that appear in this week's were also intended to influence the rest of the Jewish people even though they, not being from the family of Aharon, were not bound by them.

The values of marriage, probity in personal relationships, pedigree and family were all indirectly strengthened throughout the Jewish nation by the special laws that were given to the priestly family. The priest was always meant to serve as an example, a role model for all of Israel. In essence this was his true spiritual role while his officiating at the Temple services was his day job, so to speak.

We can also understand why the individual priest spent relatively little time at the Temple throughout the year but was rather occupied as the teacher of other Jews, through actual educational methodology and, just as importantly, by personal example.

During both First and Second Temple times the priests were the pivotal force in Jewish life, perhaps even more so than the kings and rulers of the nation. The priestly clan saved the Jewish people from national and moral destruction a number of times. Yet, at other times they were the catalyst for the people's abandonment of Torah and Jewish tradition.

The Talmud lists for us the names of families from Second Temple times who were to be eternally remembered positively because of their Torah true behavior. And the names of those families of priests who were to be remembered negatively, due to their unseemly practices and behavior, were also recorded. Many of the laws and duties regarding the priests remained valid and in force even after the destruction of the Second Temple.

The Talmud ordained that the priests were to continue to receive special honors and recognition from the Jewish people. The priestly blessings became the focal point of the prayer services and the honors due the priest were constantly strengthened in the long night of our exile. The priest was seen as our living personal connection to our past Temple glories and to our future redemption.

In our current world there are a number of study groups throughout the Jewish world, especially here in Israel, which concentrate upon the study of the laws and procedures of the priestly duties vis-a-vis the Temple services. It is no wonder therefore that the priests of Israel are proudly zealous in preserving their lineage and the special place that they occupy in Jewish life.

Shabat shalom,

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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