

PARASHAT EMOR 5774 – “THE MODERN ROLE OF THE KOHANIM”

What role should there be, if any, for Kohanim?

Parashat Emor, and much of the rest of Vayikra, tell us about God’s assignment of special duties, restrictions, and privileges to the descendents of Levi and his descendent, Aaron. These descendents were Kohanim, priests, if they descended from Aaron, or Levites if otherwise.

The priesthood was the dominant source of religious authority and influence throughout Jewish history, until the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. By that time a major source of priestly power was their exclusive role in conducting sacrifices as representatives of Israel to God. When the Temple fell so did the cult of sacrifices and the priests’ role and influence. The more liberal (in quotes) Pharisees defeated the more conservative (in quotes) Sadducees in the battle for the soul of the Jewish nation. Rabbis replaced priests as the preeminent leaders of the community. The service of God was decentralized to the study hall, synagogue, and places of chesed.

Commencing with the destruction of the Temple and accelerating with the expulsion of Jews from Jerusalem after the Bar Kochba revolt of 135 CE, the kohanic divisions established villages across the Galilee. The priests retained some practical hope for reclaiming their status until the 4th century, when the Emperor Julian gave the green light to rebuild the Temple. Alas, this effort died when Julian died after only two years as Emperor. The rabbis, understandably, were ambivalent about the effort. They were not eager for the priests to reclaim their active lofty positions in the community – though, at the same time, they copiously studied the laws of the priesthood, as we see in Talmud.

The rabbis boxed the priests into largely ceremonial roles within the synagogue, which substituted for the sacrificial service – offering the priestly blessing, taking the first aliyah to the Torah, and continuing as the redeemer of the first born in the Pidyon Ha-ben service. The priests' extensive prohibitions, which are detailed in Emor, such as not being in the presence of a dead body, were maintained in order in order to maximize the priests' ritual cleanliness.

Almost 20 centuries later, the priesthood remains a ceremonial function within the Jewish communities where the Kohanim are still involved.

Within our Conservative movement today there is chronic ambivalence about the priesthood and the sacrificial cult. During musaf, some choose to pray the traditional liturgy, which points toward the restoration of the sacrificial system and priesthood. Others pray the alternative liturgy, which omits mention of the sacrifices completely. Some synagogues keep the first two aliyot for priests and levites, whereas others do not. Most synagogues have eliminated duchening, the blessing of the community by the priests. A few, such as ours, maintain it for Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot. Pidyon ha-ben is common only amongst the most observant Conservative Jews.

So how should we view the Kohanim, the priests? What should their role be? I would urge us to go beyond surface considerations and think more deeply about their significance to our religious experience even today, in the 21st century.

First, the kehuna rituals remind us how critically important the Kohanim were in the formation of Judaism itself. The ancestors of

today's Kohanim risked their lives against the eleven other tribes by obeying God's call to abandon idolatry. They were placed under considerable limitations in order to perform their sacred duties. They did receive certain rewards for their service, such as the first bushels of a harvest. But that meant relying on the contributions of others for their sustenance. That reminder should keep us attuned to our own non-negotiable responsibilities to others. When we participate in the modern ceremonies of the Kohanim let us take the color and animation of those rituals to awaken our communal memory and our contemporary obligations.

Second, the kehuna rituals demonstrate that, as individuals, we each have different roles to play in Jewish life. Some might argue that the privilege of the first aliyah impinges on the rights of the rest of the community to their fair share of aliyot (particularly on weekdays), that this causes consternation in the community, and should be abolished for the sake of peace in the community – *darchei shalom*. But the privileges of the kehuna do not shut out the rest of us in the Jewish community. We each have different roles to play in Jewish life. To bless and be blessed. To layn, to lead

davening, to pray. To prepare Shabbat and to enjoy Shabbat. To be givers and receivers of chesed.

Finally, the kehuna rituals can inspire us to excellence in service to God. As we participate in these rituals, we accept our humility in the face of God, our appreciation for the blessings we have, and our obligation to serve God and each other. The kehuna remind us of our distinct role amongst the peoples of the world, our charge to be a mamlechet kohanim, a kingdom of priests, and ohr, light, to other nations. And this distinction comes not just through ethical behavior but also through the actualization of our unique ritual life.

So the kehuna rituals are reminders of our heritage, demonstrations of our varying roles, and an inspiration to be the people God has called on us to be.

Of course, I know there are reasons offered, both in Conservative halakhic literature and thought, for eliminating the priests' privileges, beyond darchei shalom (keeping peace in the community). There are those who argue that there is serious doubt

about the continuity of priestly lineage over the generations, that there is a safek, doubt, concerning the priestly status of all kohanim. Others diminish the Kohanic prohibitions, arguing that it impossible today to maintain Kohanim in a state of Tahara, ritual cleanliness. Moreover, the Conservative Movement no longer holds that priests cannot marry divorcees or converts, as the pressing need for inmarriage outweighs the import of that prohibition. Furthermore, most of us don't want a restoration of the sacrificial cult, which is the dangerously active goal of some fundamentalists in our community. And some of us are made uncomfortable by the spectacle of duchening, being blessed by individuals who are certainly good people, but ultimately no different in character or relationship than any one else in the community.

It is duchening, however, whose blessing I'd like to invoke to remind us of why the privileges of the kohanim remain a compelling and necessary part of our synagogue ritual. As the priests bless us, the shaliach tsibbur, prayer leader, takes a back seat in humility, recognizing the power of others to represent us to God. Moreover, in the same moment, others turn their backs toward the priests, so

as to focus themselves on the intensity of God's blessing, not on the visage of the kohanim. They feel the power of the moment, the proximity of God's blessing, and the proximity of the divine Godself. Others shield themselves likewise, as families under a family tallit, brought together in love by the priests' invocation of God's presence. And we all chant a beautiful, mystical hymn that enhances the moment.

The priests, though representatives of a bygone institution, remind us of that communal memory and the way it drew our people closer to God. And they continue the responsibility of bringing us closer to God, to others, to our mission as Jews to serve God, to the excellence with which we should implement that service, and to the future possibilities of Jewish life, without markedly inconveniencing the other members of the community.

I leave you with a story.

When Rabbi Shimon Schwab was young he spent a Shabbat with the Chofetz Chaim, the famed scholar and shaper of Jewish ethics. The Chofetz Chaim asked Shimon if he was of the priestly lineage, either a Kohen or a Levi. The young Shimon responded that

he was neither. The Chofetz Chaim, who was a Kohen, asked Shimon, “Why are you not a Kohen? ”

Shimon gave the obvious answer, that his father wasn't a Kohen.

“Do you know why your father was not a Kohen and my father was?” said the Chofetz Chaim. “Because there was once a time in Jewish history, when Moshe Rabeynu called out, ‘Who is for God? Let them gather to me.’ My great-great grandfather answered the call and your great-great grandfather did not answer the call. That is why my father was a Kohen and your father was not a Kohen.”

The Chofetz Chaim wasn't trying to shame Shimon. The point he was trying to make was that there are times when a call goes out to rally around God's banner. As history bore out, Rabbi Shimon did answer the call by becoming..... If one rises to the occasion, his actions can have ramifications not only at the time, but until the end of time.

I've been honored to see how we at B'nai Israel do respond to this call. We filled the synagogue the morning after the late-night seders. We established new learning opportunities when the need has been recognized. We followed through on commitments to meet

our quorum for minyanim. We joined with Kol Ami to open the synagogue to the homeless.

These are the kinds of responses that the priestly tradition beckons us to achieve. I look forward to our continued efforts to perpetuate this tradition.

We can't all be kohanim, but we can all be ready to model a priests' response to God's call.