

The role of the priest!

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Following on from the national mission to pursue holiness, the Cohanim, those directly descended from Aaron are charged with an additional mission to safeguard their holiness. Parashat Emor describes several ways in which they must safeguard their position – remaining pure, ensuring that their physical relationships are not corrupted, and that their physical presentation is maintained¹.

Some of these are relatively easy to understand, others are much more difficult, especially the commands over who a priest may be allowed to marry. Additional safeguards or prohibitions are given to the High Priest.

The Ibn Ezra explains that this need for additional holiness and protections of that status is because of their role in sacrificing to God. Because they have a specific role to do, that serves as being an intermediary between the Jewish people and the Almighty, the priests need to maintain a level of holiness that can only truly be achieved by safeguarding and protecting it². Look at the Jewish people, even when they elevated themselves to the highest level of holiness they were immediately corrupted. Time and time again, the Jewish people (because of their human condition) reached spiritual heights only to have lapses in judgement that saw them falling straight down. It is therefore not such a stretch to further protect the small collective of priests from that same human condition, and in fact the Seforno explains that even if he wanted to shirk his responsibility, he is unable to do so³.

But why is this?

If the Jewish people are expressly described as a nation of priests, then why do we need to have a subgroup endowed with special spiritual responsibilities. Rabbi Melamed reminds us that the role of the Cohanim was two-fold, they were there to teach Torah and bring peace⁴. In order to adequately do this, the Cohanim had to maintain a level far above that of the Jewish people, so that they could lead and teach not only by example, but also by respect. When the Jewish people could look up to them, then they would truly be able to follow.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks notes that beauty of this leadership is found in the sociological changes that occurred following the destruction of the Second Temple. In the absence of the Temple, active priests, and the sacrificial rites, the Jewish people had to radically change⁵. Torah learning would begin to be democratized, with learning becoming the responsibility of all. Tefillah was created to fill the void of the absent sacrifice, allowing each Jew to follow the lead of these incredible teachers and create their own expression of avodah. Finally, each of us has directed our hearts to Jerusalem and maintained an incredible beacon of hope through the generations, all inspired by the pursuit of love and peace of the Cohanim.

The Cohanim had very little real-world authority, according to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, none at all. As he notes, they had a symbolic role in the unification of Beit Din and Community, of governance and applied law. This symbolic role enhances the true holiness and leadership that the Cohanim were commanded to protect, because in that protection and maintenance, the Jewish people have been afforded the skills of agility and the manifestation of true emunah, faith, allowing for our long term survival.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**

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