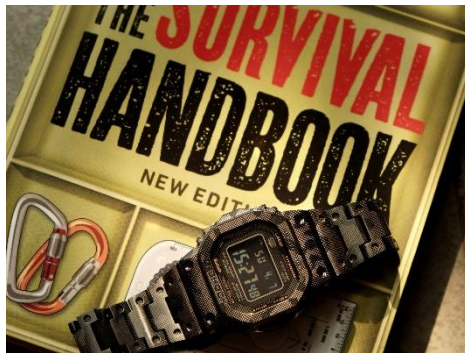

*The role of the
priest*

Rabbi Alon Meltzer

A New Page of Talmud

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Emor 5782



Hashem said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: None shall defile himself for any [dead] person among his kin, except for the relatives that are closest to him: his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, and his brother; also for his unmarried sister, close to him because she has not become someone's [wife], for her he may defile himself.- **Vayikra 21:1-3**¹ They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God; for they offer God's offerings by fire, the food of their God, and so must be holy.-

Vayikra 21:6² After charging the Israelites, and the sons of Aaron who are included among them, to be holy, the Lord told the sons of Aaron that they are commanded to keep themselves from other

things, for they are the ministers of God. It is possible that speak unto the priests refers to the section which is mentioned above, for the Torah is in the hands of the kohanim.— **Ibn Ezra on Vayikra 21:1**³ even though all of the

aforementioned were expressions of grief over the loss of relatives, the priest is not permitted to disregard the dignity which his status as priest imposes upon him. Even though the priests, no doubt, mean to honour God in what they are doing, when they disregard the restrictions their status imposes upon them, they indirectly desecrate the name of the Lord. – **Seforno on Vayikra 21:6**⁴ The Kohanim had two main tasks: the first was to educate and teach halachah in Israel, as it is written (Malachi 2:7), "For the kohen's lips safeguard knowledge, and Torah is sought from his mouth." The second was to be messengers of chesed and peace, like Aharon HaKohen, whose disciples were taught to "love peace and pursue peace, love thy fellow creatures and bring them closer to Torah" (Avot 1:12) – **Rabbi Eliezer Melamed**⁵ What is truly remarkable, however, is what happened after the biblical era and the destruction of the Second Temple. Faced with the loss of the entire

infrastructure of the holy, the Temple, its Priests, and sacrifices, Judaism translated the entire system of avodah, Divine service, into the everyday life of ordinary Jews. In prayer, every Jew became a Priest offering a sacrifice. In repentance, each became a High Priest, atoning for their sins and those of their people. Every synagogue, in Israel or elsewhere, became a fragment of the Temple in Jerusalem. Every table became an altar, every act of charity or hospitality, a kind of sacrifice. Torah study, once the speciality of the priesthood, became the right and obligation of everyone. Not everyone could wear the crown of Priesthood, but everyone could wear the crown of Torah. A

... Speak to the priests,
the sons of Aaron...

אָמַר אֶל־הַכֹּהֲנִים בְּנֵי אַהֲרֹן...
Vayikra 21:1

mamzer talmid chacham, a Torah scholar of illegitimate birth, say the Sages, is greater than an am ha'aretz Kohen Gadol, an ignorant High Priest. Out of the devastating tragedy of the loss of the Temple, the

Sages created a religious and social order that came closer to the ideal of the people as "a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation" than had ever previously been realised. – **Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks** ⁶ Neither the Cohen or the Cohen Gadol is granted any authority by virtue of his office. It is not the task of the Cohen Gadol to interpret Torah. His word as Cohen does not have binding authority on what is permitted or prohibited. Only in the sanctuary does he symbolically represent the unity of Beit Din and the community, the ideal of nation guided by the spirit of the Torah. – **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch**

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