

Kohanim

This week's Torah reading is a double portion, *Tazria-Metzora*. In it, we learn about ritual purity and impurity, about leprosy and quarantines, about how the kohen, or priest, can atone by means of a procedure involving two birds, spring water in an earthen vessel, a stick of cedar wood, a strip of scarlet thread, and a bundle of hyssop.

Having to give a d'var Torah on *Tazria-Metzora* is usually understood to be punishment for naughty rabbis. So I started reading the text, and I kept running into verses like the following:

If [a person's] flesh has an inflammation... it shall be shown to the kohen. The kohen shall look [at it], and, if its appearance is lower than the skin, and its hair has turned white, the kohen shall pronounce him unclean. It is *tzara'at* -- leprosy. But if the kohen looks at it, and it does not contain white hair, nor does it appear to be lower than the skin, and it is dim, the kohen shall quarantine him for seven days. If it spreads... the kohen shall pronounce him unclean. It is a lesion. But if [it does not] spread, it is scar tissue... and the kohen shall pronounce him clean. [Leviticus 13:18-23]

The kohen, the kohen, the kohen... The kohanim are left, right, and center in this portion. In fact, the word "kohen" is repeated 102 times (I counted them), more than in any other portion! Then it dawned on me: Dan is a kohen! Dan is always the first one to be called for an aliyah at services. The first reading goes to him. Dan has been getting rich all these years collecting five pieces of silver from every firstborn Jewish baby boy. He has the power to bless us -- or not! He is an important person in our community, the creme de la creme of Jewish society. He is a kohen! So that's it! I'll talk about kohanim!

Who are the kohanim? Well, after the Exodus from Egypt, God appoints Aaron, brother of Moses, as High Priest, and makes him the progenitor of a patrilineal line of priests, all from the tribe of Levi:

-I will sanctify Aaron and his sons, to minister to Me in the priest's office.
And [then] I will dwell among the children of Israel, and I will be their God.
[Ex. 29:44-45]
-By statute, I have given [this task] to Aaron the Priest and to his sons
forever... [Lev. 7:34]

The priests were the only ones empowered to offer sacrifices, first in the portable Tabernacle, then in the Temple in Jerusalem. They were assisted by the Leviim (the Levites), also from the tribe of Levi, who sang psalms, played musical instruments, and handled the logistics. Of all the tribes of Israel, the tribe of Levi was the only one that did not get territory when they reached the Promised Land. Not only that, but they were not compensated for their services. However, they did eat some of the meat of the sacrifices, and were allowed to receive certain gifts, such as grain, oil, bread, fruit, animals, a portion of the harvest, sheep shearings, some unclaimed inheritances, and the five silver shekels in exchange for redeeming the first-born son 30 days after birth, in the ceremony of *pidyon ha-ben*, on which Dan built his fortune.

The kohanim were also responsible for some health matters (as in our portion) and were the final arbiters of all ritual matters. They were also the teachers of Torah to the people and participated in judging them. The Torah says:

-And the Lord spoke to Aaron [the High Priest], saying... You [must] teach the people of Israel all the statutes which the Lord has spoken to them through Moses. [Leviticus 10:8,11]
-[Moses] said [to God]:... [The Levites] shall teach Jacob Your judgments, and Israel Your Torah. [Deut. 33:8-10]

God does not say that ONLY the kohanim could teach Torah or judge people. So, in time, meritocracy replaced aristocracy. Spiritual leadership became something to be acquired with study, and had to be deserved. It was not a birthright.

The kohanim bless the congregation with the priestly blessing, *birkat kohanim*, the only part of the Jewish liturgy that must be said in Hebrew. Everything else can be said in translation. The Torah says:
And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying... You shall bless the people of Israel, saying to them:
May the Lord bless you and keep you!

May the Lord make the light of His face shine upon you and be gracious unto you!

May the Lord lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace!

[Numbers 6:22-26]

That blessing may also be said by others, such as by parents blessing their children on Shabbat Eve, or by rabbis from the pulpit. I remember mentioning at Torah discussion one Shabbat morning that the Torah simply says: "And give you peace", and that I had never heard a rabbi of any stripe say: "And give you peace." It's always: "And give you... that most precious of gifts... that which we all long for... the most wonderful thing in the world... I am referring, of course, to peace". It never fails. Rabbi Aft took that information, and, in the service that followed, he just said "and give you peace", probably for the first time in his life.

This blessing is called *duchaning*. Traditional Ashkenazic Jews do it on the holidays. But Sephardic Jews do it every Shabbat as well, and even daily, as was done in the synagogue of my youth in Cairo, Egypt. The kohanim stood and faced the congregation, arms held outwards, hands and fingers in a specific formation, swaying back and forth, heads covered with their *tallitot*, as they intoned the blessings. I remember we were not supposed to look at them, because the Divine Light they focused through their fingers could blind us. I remember shivers going down my spine as a child. Ritual is powerful. Live long and prosper!

Once I went to a Sephardic service in Maryland with a friend who was a kohen. We entered the sanctuary as the kohanim were blessing the congregation. The gabbai asked if we were kohanim. My friend said he was, and he was promptly ushered out! A kohen cannot bless another kohen!

The first aliyah during the Torah service must go to a kohen. Let's hear the background for that ruling, directly from the Talmud:

Mishna: The following rules were laid down in the interests of peace: A kohen is called up first to read the Torah, and after him a Levite, and then a lay Jew. [Gittin 59a]

Gemara: [Why is a kohen called first?] Rabbi Mattenah said: Because the Torah says:

And Moses wrote this law and gave it to the kohanim, the sons of Levi. [Deut. 31:9.]

Now we know that the kohanim are the sons of Levi, [so why does the Torah tell us that?] What it means therefore is that the kohanim [are first] and then the Levites...

Abaye said to Rav Yosef: Is this rule only [rabbinic, and only] in the interests of peace [so people would not fight about who gets to read first]? Or does it derive from the Torah? He answered: It does derive from the Torah, but its purpose is to maintain peace. But the whole Torah is also for the purpose of promoting peace, as it is written:

Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace.

[Prov. 3:17]

No, said Abaye... A kohen might want to defer [to a teacher who is not a kohen, and this might be misunderstood] and lead to quarreling...

Abaye further said... If there is no Levite present, then a kohen reads in his place. [An objection was raised.] Is that so? Has not Rabbi Yochanan said that one kohen should not read after another kohen, because this might cast suspicion on the [legitimacy of the] first kohen?...

[Abaye said:] What I meant to say was that the SAME kohen [should read in place of the Levite]. [Gittin 59b]

The Talmud actually established a strict hierarchy in Israel, for protocol purposes. At the very top is the scholar. The scholar even comes before the king! Why? The Talmud answers:

A scholar takes precedence over a king of Israel, because if a scholar dies there is no one to replace him, but if a king of Israel dies, anybody in Israel is eligible to replace him. [Horayot 13a]

After the king comes the High Priest (the *kohen gadol*), then prophets, then lower-level priests, then Levites, then ordinary Jews, then bastards. However, the Talmud adds:

But if a bastard is a scholar, he takes precedence over an ignorant High Priest. [Horayot 13a]

The kohanim had, and still have, many restrictions. First, they must not come close to dead bodies. So they cannot visit cemeteries, except for the burial of close relatives. The Torah says:

And the Lord said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: None of you shall defile himself for the dead among his people, except for his kin. [Leviticus 21:1-2]

Also, kohanim may not marry a convert, or a divorced woman, or a widow, and more generally any woman who is not a virgin. So a question popped in my mind: If a kohen divorces his wife, is he allowed to marry her again? Answer: No, he is not!

You cannot become a kohen. You must be born one. You all know the story of the man who went to a rabbi and asked him:

"Rabbi, I want you to make me a kohen."

The rabbi says, "Absolutely impossible".

The man insists, "It's very important to me. I'll give \$100,000 to your shul, and \$50,000 to you personally, if you make me a kohen."

The rabbi asks, "Why is it so important to you to become a kohen?"

The man answers, "Because my grandfather was a kohen, and my father was a kohen, and so I want to be a kohen also."

Then the rabbi says, "It's a deal."

Now, let's bring science in. If all of today's kohanim really descend from a single man (Aaron), this should be reflected in their Y chromosomes. Sure enough, it is! DNA testing revealed that half of today's kohanim have some specific genetic markers in common, but only 5% of Jews who are not kohanim have those same markers. Evidently, we keep our traditions, and kohanim more than others!

Cohen is the most common surname for kohanim. It is also the most common Jewish surname, period. Today's kohanim are also named Cohn, Cahn, Kuhn, Kane, Kahane, Kaplan, Chaplin, Katz [*kohen tzedek (righteous priest)*], Kogan, Kaganovitch, Cunha, Korn, Conway, Azoulai, Rappaport, and many others.

After the destruction of the Second Temple, the main role of the priests -- offering sacrifices -- could no longer be fulfilled. In traditional Judaism, priests still retain *duchaning*, *pidyon haben*, and first aliyah, and all the restrictions on their behavior. They can teach Torah only by virtue of their merits and study, not as a birthright -- same as all other Jews. Reform Judaism does not give them any recognition at all.

Our tradition says that when the Messiah comes and rebuilds the Temple, the monarchy and the priesthood will be reinstituted. You will find prayers to that effect in any Orthodox siddur. Would this be good? Isn't our current meritocratic system better than any aristocracy based on birthright? From our vantage point as Americans, the answer can only be yes. But nevertheless, people feel a certain satisfaction in elevating some individuals above the rest, so they can look up to them, even if their elevation is not earned.

It makes them feel part of something larger than themselves. They love the associated pomp and circumstance. How else can we explain the great fascination found in our country for foreign royal families, especially if they happen to be British?

Well, a person like Dan is in a win-win situation. He wins on the aristocratic count, and he wins on the meritocratic count. It *is* important to feel you are special from birth, because it gives you an additional impetus to make your life worthwhile, and when you do make your life worthwhile, as Dan has, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The psalmist said:

Our lifespan is seventy years, and, with strength, eighty. [Ps. 90:10]
In other words, we're all entitled to seventy years, and once we have reached that milestone, we have reached the limit of our given lifespan, and everything above that is a gift, a second lifespan as it were. So when you turn 83, you are really only 13 in that second lifespan, and it's time for a second bar mitzvah.

Happy birthday, Dan, *'ad me'a ve-esrim*, and *mazal tov* on becoming a man yet again!

Shabbat shalom.