Emor: Ideal and imperfect priests

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The sidrah Emor contains the instruction to Aaron regarding how the priests and High Priests should conduct themselves and their office. They were to attain to the highest state of purity and not defile themselves by contact with the dead (other than when attending to the burial of their closest relatives). They are not to shave their heads or sideburns nor observe certain common demonstrations of mourning such as making gashes in their flesh. Contrary to our contemporary perceptions, any who are possessed of certain physical disabilities or deformities are to be excluded from performing the service. The priests are to seek in marriage only women of impeccable moral standing and avoid those tainted by any immorality. While the High Priest may only marry a virgin, the ordinary priests may marry a widow but not a divorcee. Finally, there is a section dealing with the duties and state of purity that the priests must observe when performing the service at the Sanctuary. Contrary to general assumption, other than in the case of Aaron (and certainly Moses and the elders) – who was regularly bidden to teach aspects of Torah to the nation, there is no reference here to any general role that the priests were to discharge in that regard.

This latter perception owes much to the famous quotation from the prophet Malachi: *Ki siftei kohen yishm'ru da'at vetorah yevakshu mipihu*, 'For the priest's lips shall preserve knowledge, and they shall seek out the law from his mouth' (2:7). We must first remind ourselves, however, that Malachi lived around 500 BCE – hundreds of years after the Pentateuchal period - and that he was addressing the priests of his own day rather than defining any prescribed or hereditary priestly role. Secondly, such an interpretation of the Malachi verse fails to place it in the context of a number of

his other prophecies wherein Malachi remonstrates with the priests of his day and inveighs against them for gross dereliction of their cultic responsibility, for example by bringing on the altar blemished sacrifices that they would not deign to present to their Persian local governors (1:8). Hardly consonantal with teachers of Torah! Malachi was contrasting those of his day with what he perceived as the ideal priest.

With reference to Malachi's period, that of the return from the Babylonian exile, ignorance of the Torah was rife, and hence Malachi's call for the priests to educate themselves and teach the nation. But initially there was no one among the returnees capable of inspiring and teaching the priestly families to effect such a religious renaissance and change of heart among the assimilating masses. This was achieved by some emissaries who came from Babylon to undertake that task, notably Ezra – interestingly identified with Malachi according to one view in the Talmud (Meg. 15a) - and Nehemiah, whose heart prompted them to leave Babylon and undertake that task. He brought with him a Torah scroll and bound the community to enter into a solemn covenant of loyalty to it (See Neh. 8: 1-8, 19; 9:3).

This view, that the priests had not hitherto served as Torah teachers of the Judaean community of returnees from the Babylonian exile, other than (in a limited role) in the Mosaic period, receives support from the reference in the book of Judges to a total spiritual vacuum after the death of Joshua and his contemporaries: 'A new generation arose after them who knew not the Lord or what he [Joshua] had done for Israel' (Ju. 2:10). And the same situation occurred throughout the period of the judges. During the regular invasions of the country the imported idolatry quickly took root, and the return to the ancestral God was brief and intermittent, lasting only for as long as a military leader/judge was able to throw off the yoke of the enemy and restore the fortunes of the nation and its traditional faith (See Ju. 2:11-19). From episodes such as that of the young Levite who acted as a personal priest at the idolatrous shrine at the home of Micah (Ju. 17:7 - 18:31), as well as from the

account of the sons of Eli (See I Sam. 2: 12ff) and the prophecy of doom on his line (I Sam. 2:30-36), we get a glimpse of a priesthood spiritually inactive and at times even totally debased.

But Ezra and Nehemiah's reforms *(circa* 440 BCE) do not seem to have lived up to their initial promise, and the priestly, aristocratic and exclusivist, Sadducean party's seizure of the reins of power – which continued until the Maccabean period *(circa* 165 BCE.) – ensured that whatever Torah education was promoted would have been slanted in the direction of Temple ritualism, rooted in their rejection of any oral tradition, and interpreted from the perspective of a strictly literal interpretation of the Torah text. The Sadducees would also have strongly discouraged universal Torah education for the masses, viewing an educated laity as a threat to their own authority and power.

That the priests had not been involved.in the dissemination of Torah teaching perhaps explains why the Midrash saw fit to spare their blushes, claiming (in accordance with the view we are here expounding) that they never were, in fact, entrusted with such a mission, and, on the other hand, and it rather credited the tribe of Issachar with having being the students and teachers of Torah, supported in that role by the tribe of Zevulun (See *Rashi* on Gen. 49: 13-15).

That the priests were, in fact, wholly unfit to teach Torah and implement its laws is made abundantly clear by the classical prophets. Listen to the charge of degeneracy that Isaiah levelled against that institution:

> The priest and prophet reel with strong drink,
> And are confused with wine. They stagger
> In drunkenness and err in vision,
> Stumbling if giving judgment,

For all their tables are full of vomit,
And no place is without filthiness.
(Isaiah 28:7-7)

Jeremiah adds to that catalogue, outwardly condemning the priestly fraternity's ignorance of Torah and religious indifference:

From prophet to priest everyone deals falsely…

Saying *Peace, Peace,* when there is no peace.

The priests did not say, *Where is the Lord?*

Those that handle the Torah did not know me…

Against this background we may appreciate why every priest, whether observant or not, was, and still is, duty-bound to bless the people. The priests of ancient times were clearly devoid of piety and learning. Such high standards could hardly have been expected, therefore, of those of subsequent generations, including our own! Indeed, compared with the priests of the ancient prophetic age, our priests, of whatever hue, seem almost saintly! We must also remember that, when it comes to blessing the people, the priests are merely formula transmitters, not bestowers; and, in the context of that formula, the Torah makes clear: *va'ani avorchem* – 'It is *I* who shall bless them' (Nu. 6:27).

So, if the priests never became, or were never intended to become, a class of scholars with a pedagogical role, we may wonder what precise function they were, in fact, intended to serve. In our opening remarks we referred to their manifold Temple duties. The challenge of Hillel to become 'as the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing it' (*Avot* 1:12) suggests that the priests' main role was pastoral. They were meant to promote the well-being of the nation in the broadest possible

sense, including attention to the medical and emotional health of the individual member, becoming his or her confidante and mentor, social worker, and counsellor. Rather than merely offering sin-offerings on their behalf, they would have helped with their rehabilitation. Not only would they have offered the Thanksgiving Offerings on behalf of grateful donors but would probably also have helped organise the family celebrations which accompanied it. Their task was to resolve disputes, to bring succour to the suffering and to restore the bereaved to faith and normality. Clearly, many of their functions would have overlapped with those that the prophetic guilds sought to discharge. And that may also have accounted for the tension between those two groups.

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In 1997, the international press carried the report from a learned journal of a unique priestly gene that had been isolated and which had been dated back to the Aaronic period. So, we can take it as read that when we speak of priests we are talking about a homogeneous and genetically identifiable group. We are entitled to enquire, therefore, whether there might be something unique about the nature and disposition of the priesthood, some characteristic traits which the sort of life that the Torah maps out for them presupposes or fosters.

We believe that that was definitely the case. The priests seem to have been singled out to be cocooned and detached from the harsh realities of life. They owned no land, reinforcing the fact that their ties to mother-earth were meant to be comparatively tenuous. They were not burdened with having to earn a livelihood. They received their twenty-four priestly gifts *(Matnot Kehunah*) from the tithes of their brethren's harvested grain and fruits, and from the goodly meat cuts from the various offerings brought to the Sanctuary. They did not have that constant worry, therefore, of how they would feed their families, and were enabled, therefore, to cultivate, exude and

disseminate a sense of contentment and optimism. They could, authentically, therefore, 'serve God with joy' (Psalm 100), and lead the joyful songs of praise to God in the Sanctuary and Temple.

This underlies *Pirkei Avot*'s call for us to emulate the qualities of Aaron, 'loving peace and pursuing it,' as well as the statement in the *Zohar* that 'any priest who is not beloved of the people may not administer the Priestly Blessing (*Zohar,* Parashat Naso, 147b). This latter precondition is reflected in the wording of the blessing recited by the priests: 'Blessed art thou…who has commanded us to bless His people, Israel*, out of love.'* Indeed, the Midrash states that 'All the laws of the priesthood were promulgated by God from Mount Sinai amid great joy' (*Sifrei Korach* on Nu. 18:21).

The cultivation of such a positive, happy and optimistic state of mind might explain why, if the priest was possessed of any physical incapacity, he was disqualified from officiating at the sanctuary. It was not that the Torah was discriminating against the handicapped, but rather that – in antiquity – such a priest could hardly be thought of as possessing a joyful spirit. A similar disqualification faced the priest guilty of manslaughter. Although his act was unpremeditated, it would forever prey on his mind, and deprive him of that happy disposition which was a prerequisite of his calling (See Tal. *Berachot* 32b). It was similarly forbidden for a priest to marry a divorced woman who might well curb his happy disposition by carrying over into her second marriage with him nostalgic recollections of her previous life, discriminating in favour of her own children, or attempting to change the rules of his household.

This might well also have been the rationale of the imposition of an uncharacteristically harsh punishment for the priest's daughter who behaved immorally (See Lev. 21:9). The explanation that 'she profanes her father' does not in fact mean that she disqualifies him thereby from priestly office. Rashi interprets it to mean that her conduct brings public humiliation upon her father, but,

surely, a non-priest's father (and mother) would feel the same degree of humiliation! According to our interpretation, however, her action has discredited her father and destroyed his carefree and happy spirit.

For the same reason, the priest was protected from the upsetting sight of the dead body and did not preside at funerals. His sole involvement in that context was to perform the purification rite of the Red Heifer for those who had been in direct contact with the dead, to enable them to attend at the Sanctuary. The optimistic priest was the facilitator for the bereaved person's return to normality. Undoubtedly, they would have poured out to him all their grief and anger. And it was the priest, with his happy state of mind and optimistic disposition, who was best placed to lift their spirits and restore their faith and hope. Indeed, the only time the priest is allowed to step outside of his cocoon is at the death of his own immediate first-degree relatives. Psychologically, he had to be enabled to confront and lament his own loss if he was to be able to liberate himself from his own grief and be restored to his former cheerful state.

This ability of the priest to exude optimism and to be cushioned from the unpleasant aspects of life was also enhanced by an attempt to surround him exclusively with fine-looking colleagues. And hence no priest might perform the service if possessed of a physical blemish.

It says much for a religion that its sights were set on enhancing the quality of the lives of its adherents and that its spiritual leaders were charged with being the embodiment of such a positive and happy philosophy. It is no coincidence, therefore, that the main biblical source of all the priestly regulations should be followed by the *Parashat ha-Mo'adim*, the list of our festive holy days (Lev. ch. 23) when we celebrate our history and look forward to the future with genuine priestly optimism. The truly spiritual quality of joy was articulated succinctly not only by the

psalmist of old, but also by the illustrious Chasidic Rebbe, Nachman of Breslov (18-19th cent.), when he preached, *Mitzvah g'dolah lih'yot b'simchah tamid,* 'It is a great mitzvah to be ever happy.'

Shabbat shalom – and be happy!

Rabbi Jeffrey

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