

## Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



*The Parasha Post of Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation's Capital*

Parashat Tetzaveh  
February 24, 2018

פרשת תצוה  
ט' באדר תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Shmot* (Exodus) 27:20-30:10

*Maftir for Parashat Zachor: Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 25:17-19

In this *parasha*, God describes to Moshe the clothing and anointing process of the *kohanim* (priests).

An old joke goes as follows: A man comes to the rabbi and says that he wants to be a *kohen* (a member of the priestly order). The rabbi says, "I'm sorry, it doesn't work that way, you cannot just become a *kohen*." The man offers the rabbi a donation of \$5,000 to the synagogue. The rabbi says no. The man ups his offer to \$10,000, and the rabbi asks him, "Why is it so important for you to be a *kohen*?" The man responds, "Well, my father was one, so I want to be one, too."

Clearly, the man did not realize that being a member of the priestly order is transferred from parent to child along the paternal line. That line begins in this *parasha* in the second and third verses:

בְּאֵהָל מוֹעֵד מִחוּץ לַפְּרֻכָּת אֲשֶׁר עַל-הָעֵדוּת, יַעֲרֹךְ אֹתוֹ אֶהְרֹן וּבָנָיו מִעֶרֶב  
עַד-בֹּקֶר--לִפְנֵי ה' חֻקַּת עוֹלָם לְדֹרֹתָם, מֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְאֵתָהּ הִקְרַב  
אֶלֶיךָ אֶת-אֶהְרֹן אָחִיךָ וְאֶת-בָּנָיו אֹתוֹ, מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל--לְכַהֵנוֹ-  
לִי: אֶהְרֹן--נָדָב וָאֶבְיָהוּא אֶלְעָזָר וְאִיתָמָר, בְּנֵי אֶהְרֹן.

In the tent of meeting, outside the veil which is in front of the testimony, Aharon and his sons shall set it in order, to burn from evening to morning before Hashem; it shall be a statute forever throughout their generations on the behalf of the children of Yisrael. And bring near to you Aharon your brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Yisrael, that they may minister to Me

in the *kohen's* office; Aharon, Nadav and Avihu, Elazar and Itamar, Aharon's sons.

Ramban [13<sup>th</sup> Century Spain/Judea] questions why the text contains both the phrase "Aharon and his sons" as well as the actual names of Aharon's sons. (One of the traditional methods of interpreting the Torah is to assume that there are no extraneous words, which means that repetitions and redundancies must indicate some deeper meaning.) Says Ramban:

The reason for mentioning Nadav and Avihu, Elazar and Itamar [when it has already said 'his sons'] is that Moshe should not think that by anointing the father to minister as *kohen*, his sons would automatically become *kohanim*; instead he had to initiate them personally into the *kahuna*. Thus Pinchas [the son of Elazar] and others already born were excluded [from the *kahuna*], for only these four sons who were anointed with Aharon, and their children born to them henceforth, were appointed as *kohanim*.

To add to the context of this interpretation, Pinchas was indeed initiated into the *kahuna* later in the Torah, as a result of his bold act of defending the honor of God in *Bemidbar* (Numbers) chapter 25.

The priestly line has continued unbroken for over 3000 years. As a matter of fact, a genetic study in 1997 determined that large numbers of people who believe they are *kohanim* based on family tradition and history, whether they are Ashkenazi or Sefardi, indeed share a group of markers on the Y chromosome. So what should we make of the hereditary nature of the line of *kohanim*?

The only thing one had to do to be born a *kohen* was to have a father who was a *kohen*. There was no additional moral or spiritual requirement. And we know that throughout Jewish history, a number of *kohanim* not worthy of the name have existed. These might include people from Chophni and Pinchas (a different Pinchas from the one above), *kohanim* who appear at the beginning of *Sefer Shmuel* (The Book of Samuel), through Caiaphas, the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) at the time of Jesus. In addition, there are a number of stories in the Talmud about *kohanim* attacking each other and even killing each other for a variety of cultic reasons.

At least one answer for the hereditary nature of being a *kohen* are the strictures placed upon the families of *kohanim*. A *Kohen* traditionally may not marry a divorced woman nor a convert; he may not be exposed to a dead body and may attend the

funerals of only his closest relatives: mother, father, spouse, son, daughter, brother, and unmarried sister. In addition, the priestly functions required knowledge of some arcane cultic rituals involving sacrifices, the altars, and worship services in the Temple. These limits became easier to maintain in family units, and the knowledge could be learned more easily in familial groups. In addition, according to some commentators, notably the Chatam Sofer [18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Century Europe], the *kohanim* were the primary teachers of Torah, and, as such, started their Torah study at a young age within the family structure.

There still remain vestiges of the priestly service in our times in the United States. Some congregations give the first *Aliyah* of coming up for the Torah reading to a *kohen*, and in egalitarian services, this may be a male or female descendant. Some congregations still practice *Birkat Kohanim*, the priestly blessing, on Jewish holidays, and there are families that still practice *pidyon haben*, the redemption of the first born, in which they “buy” their child back from the *kohen* in an elaborate and joyous ceremony 30 days after birth.

And, of course, everyone knows at least one person whose surname is Cohen, Kahn, Katz, Kohn, Kahan, etc., most of whom are actually *kohanim* or the descendants of *kohanim*.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Why might it have been important to have one specific group of people take care of the Temple and worship needs?
- Do you think that the system of direct lineage of *kohanim* worked? Why or why not? If not, what alternative might you have suggested?