

לע"נ

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Prophet & Kohein

T'TZAVEH

The sedra of T'tzaveh, as commentators have noted, has one unusual feature: it is the only sedra from the beginning of Sh'mot to the end of Bamidbar that does not contain the name of Moshe. Several interpretations have been offered.

The Vilna Gaon suggests that it is related to the fact that in most years it is read during the week which follows the seventh of Adar falls: the day of Moshe's death. During this week we sense the loss of the greatest leader in Jewish history - and his absence from T'tzaveh expresses that loss.

The Baal HaTurim relates it to Moshe's plea, in next week's sedra, for God to forgive Israel. "If not", says Moshe, "blot me out of the book you have written" (Sh'mot 32:32). There is a principle that "The curse of a sage comes true, even if it was conditional" (Makot 11a). Thus, for one week his name was "blotted out" from the Torah.

The Panei'ach Raza relates it to another principle: "There is no anger that does not leave an impression".

When Moshe, for the last time, declined God's invitation to lead the Jewish People out of Egypt, saying "Please send someone else", God "became angry with Moshe" (4:13-14) and told him that his brother Aharon would accompany him. For that reason, Moshe forfeited the role he might otherwise have had, of becoming the first of Israel's kohanim, a role that went instead to Aharon. That is why he is missing from the sedra of T'tzaveh, which is dedicated to the role of the Kohen.

All three explanations focus on an absence. However, perhaps the simplest explanation is that T'tzaveh is dedicated to a presence, one that had a decisive influence on Judaism and Jewish history.

Judaism is unusual in that it recognises not one form of religious leadership but two: the Navi and Kohen. The figure of the prophet has always captured the imagination. He or she is a person of drama, "speaking truth to power", unafraid to challenge kings and courts or society as a whole in the name of high, even utopian ideals. No other type of religious personality has had the impact as the prophets of Israel, of whom the greatest was Moshe. The kohanim, by contrast, were for the most part quieter figures, a-political, who served in the Sanctuary rather than in the spotlight of political debate. Yet they, no less than the prophets,

sustained Israel as a holy nation. Indeed, though the Children of Israel were summoned to become "a kingdom of kohanim" they were never called on to be a people of prophets.

Let us therefore consider some of the differences between a prophet and a kohein:

- The role of kohanim was dynastic. It passed from father to son. The role of prophet was not dynastic. Moshe's own sons did not succeed him; Yehoshua, his disciple, was chosen instead.

- The task of the kohein was related to his office. It was not inherently personal or charismatic. The prophets, by contrast, each imparted their own personality. "No two prophets had the same style."

- The kohanim wore a special uniform; the prophets did not.

- There are rules of kavod (honour) due to a Kohen. There are no corresponding rules for the honour due to a prophet. A prophet is honoured by being listened to, not by formal protocols of respect.

- The kohanim were removed from the people. They served in the Temple. They were not allowed to become defiled. There were restrictions on whom they might marry. The prophet, by contrast, was usually part of the people. He might be a shepherd like Moshe or Amos, or a

farmer like Elisha. Until the word or vision came, there was nothing special in his work or social class.

- The kohen offered up sacrifices in silence. The prophet served God through the word.

- They lived in two different modes of time. The kohein functioned in cyclical time - the day (or week or month) that is like yesterday or tomorrow. The prophet lived in covenantal (sometimes inaccurately called linear) time - the today that is radically unlike yesterday or tomorrow. The service of the kohein never changed; that of the prophet was constantly changing. Another way of putting it is to say that the kohein worked to sanctify nature, the prophet to respond to history.

- Thus the kohein represents the principle of structure in Jewish life, while the prophet represents spontaneity.

The key words in the vocabulary of the Kohen are kodesh and chol, tahor and tamei, sacred, secular, pure and impure. The key words in the vocabulary of the prophets are tzedek and mishpat, chessed and rachamim, righteousness and justice, kindness and compassion.

The key verbs of the kehuna are l'horot and l'havdil, to instruct and distinguish. The key activity of the prophet is to proclaim "the word of

the Lord" The distinction between priestly and prophetic consciousness (torat kohanim and torat nevi'im) is fundamental to Judaism, and is reflected in the differences between law and narrative, halacha and aggada, creation and redemption. The kohein speaks the Word of God for all time, the prophet, the Word of God for this time. Without the prophet, Judaism would not be a religion of history and destiny. But without the kohein, the Children of Israel would not have become the people of eternity. This is beautifully summed up in the opening verses of T'tzaveh:

Command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of pressed olives, to keep the lamp constantly burning in the tent of meeting, outside the curtain that is in front of the Testimony, Aharon and his sons shall keep the lamps burning before the Lord from evening to morning. This is to be a lasting ordinance among the Israelites for the generations to come.

Moshe the prophet dominates four of the five books that bear his name. But in T'tzaveh for once, it is Aharon, the first of the kohanim, who holds centre-stage, undiminished by the rival presence of his brother. For whereas Moshe lit the fire in the souls of the Jewish people, Aharon tended the flame and turned it into "an eternal light".

Around the Shabbat Table:

- (1) How do the roles of Prophet and Kohein complement each other in a community?
- (2) How do you experience keeping to routines alongside moments of significant change in your life?
- (3) Can you think of other pairs in Tanach where different leadership styles are highlighted? What can we learn from their dynamics?

Y'HI ZICHRO BARUCH