

"THE SONS OF AARON"
And the Daughters and Family and Friends

There is so much happening this week that invites comment from the pulpit -- Watergate, the travels of Secretary Kissinger in the Middle East, and the conference of Jewish Women's Lib organizations, to name but of few of these urgent events.

But I prefer to take vacation from such burning, relevant issues and, instead, to "talk Torah," untimely though that may be. I refer to the commandment at the beginning of this week's Sidra, which forbids the kohanim (members of the priesthood) to "defile themselves" by contact with the dead. The Torah permits them, however, to attend to the interment of their closest relatives, seven in number.

I have always been bothered by this Biblical prohibition for kohanim to have any contact with a corpse. After all, Judaism regards this as hesed shel emet, and therefore a very noble mitzvah -- why, therefore, should a Kohen whose life should ideally be dedicated to the service of God, be denied such a spiritual opportunity? It has been suggested that the reason the Torah forbids the kohanim to have contact with the dead is specifically to protest against the culture of Egypt, from which our people came, in which the priests were so involved with the dead that they were in effect the professional religious undertaking class. But that answer does not satisfy me. Perhaps the Egyptians overdid it, but that is no reason for us to over-react and go to the opposite extreme. Furthermore, whatever the reason may be that he is forbidden to have contact with the dead, why was an exception made in the case of the kohanim's immediate family? And, if kohanim should indeed be prohibited to touch a corpse, why does not the same prohibition devolve on the female kohanim? One more question: why is the commandment given specifically to hakohanim bnei Aharon "the priests, the sons of Aaron?" Surely we all know that the kohanim are the descendants of Aaron!

I suggest that the last question can be used to answer the others. If we want to understand the Torah's legislation on kohanim in relation to הקדש הקדש, we must look at the progenitor of the priestly class, Aaron, the High Priest. For it is as "the children of Aaron" that the "priests" were commanded these laws.

Aaron, of course, is the great saint of Biblical literature -- the sweet, loving, kindly priest. And yet his role is far more complicated than merely that of a fine old gentleman. His most crucial failure is in the episode of the Golden Calf. In the moment of great crisis - either because of his excessive generosity and softness or more probably because of his fear of their reaction, he accedes to the people's demands and builds them a golden calf when Moses is late in coming down from the mountain. God threatens disaster as a result of this incident -- וְעַתָּה הִנֵּיתִי לִי וְיָמָּה אֲפִי בָהֶם וְאֲנִי -- "And now leave Me, and My anger shall be kindled at them and I will destroy them." Moses excoriates his brother when he returns: -- בִּי הִבֵּאתָ עָלֵינוּ חַטָּאת גְּדוֹלָה "for you have brought upon them a great sin." Moses then tells the Levites to take their swords and kill those who worshipped the calf, and in the description of the catastrophe we learn that the calf is ascribed to Aaron as well as Israel:

וַיִּגַּף ה' אֶת הָעָם עַל אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה אֹהֶלן

"And the Lord smote the people because they made the calf, which Aaron made." Aaron is responsible for the calf -- and therefore for the death of so many Israelites. Whether out of fear or out of love -- he is responsible for the moral disaster that lead to death and destruction.

I suggest that the kohanim many not tend to the dead, they are denied this precious mitzvah, because they are still, as it were, working off the debt incurred by their first ancestor. In the crucial moment, Aaron failed his people and brought death upon them. Therefore the priest, his descendants, -- הַכֹּהֲנִים בְּנֵי אֹהֶלן -- cannot go near the dead of their people to express their love and concern for their fellow humans in the last and ultimate distress.

Why then are the women of the priestly class permitted contact with the dead without fear of "defilement?" Because they were strong and resolute, where Aaron was weak and ineffectual!

Thus, Aaron tells the people to make the golden calf as follows: -- לָקְחוּ נָשִׁי הָזָהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵי נְשֵׁיכֶם "take the golden earrings that are on the ears of your wives." But in practice we read that it was not the wives who gave the gold! וַיִּגְפִּיקוּ כָל הָעָם אֶת נְשֵׁי הָזָהָב אֲשֶׁר בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם

"And the people took off all the golden earrings that were upon their ears." It was their earrings, and not the women's, that

were smolten in order to form the golden calf! The Midrash tells us that when Aaron made this suggestion that the elders approach the women,
הלכו אצל הנשים עמדו עליהן ואמרו חו' שנכפור בהקדש
שעשה לנו את כל הניסים והגבורות האלו ונעשה עבודה זרה.

"When the messengers came to the women, the latter stood up and said: 'Heaven forbid we should rebel against the Holy One who did for us all these miracles and great deeds, and now make an idol!'"

Thus, because they resisted Aaron's orders and showed their restraint, the women were free from the taint of the sin of abandoning their own people, and that is why they were perpetually permitted the great mitzvah of חסד של אמת, an eternal act of kindness the duty of caring for the deceased.

We turn now to the next question: why are men ביהנים permitted to defile themselves to the dead, if the dead are their own relatives? Here too we must go back to Aaron. Despite Aaron's great failure, there appear again and again signs of his luminous greatness. His attitude to his family stands out as something that is truly wonderful.

For instance: here is an older brother whose younger brother leapfrogs over him in fame and greatness. When Moses is chosen as leader of the people, as the king and the prophet at once, we read that God tells Moses that your brother will see you ושמה בלבב, he will be happy for you: no sibling rivalry, no career or professional jealousy, just gladness for a brother who achieves success, even if he himself did not!

Further, and even more significant, when Aaron's two sons die in the service of the Temple, it would have been human and expected and forgivable for Aaron to cry out in rage. He deserves the opportunity to vent his resentment. Every mourner, as part of the grief syndrome, goes through a period where he delivers himself of anger against God and man. Articulation, weeping, sobbing, resentment, rage -- these are all legitimate forms of escape. Yet we read וידום אהרן, Aaron kept silent. Aaron chose to deny himself that escape. He combined his love for his two lost sons with an ultimate reverence and submission to the divine will. He honored his beloved sons' lives by not using their death as an excuse to rail and rant against God!

The honor and love he gave to his own family, in the case

of Moses, and especially in the tragic incident of his two sons, are what made the exception in the laws of all kohanim after him, in which Torah permitted them to pay the last personal respect to the dead of their own family.

So, by means of this explanation, referring the laws of the kohanim to "children of Aaron," we have answered all our questions.

We may not have talked about Watergate revelations, but we did learn from the failure of Aaron that a leader may never -- either out of fear for himself or for others -- abandon his people to the disaster that inevitably follows upon precipitous moral collapse.

We have not touched upon the deep fears of many Jews that Secretary Kissinger may jeopardize the survival of Israel and the future of world Jewry. But our divrei Torah did remind us of the greatness of Aaron in displaying such special love and concern for his own family.

We did not discuss the recent meeting of the Jewish Women's groups and their demands for more equality. But we learned about quality -- the quality of the Jewish woman of the

דור המדבר, the generation of the desert, whose loyalty to God superseded their responsiveness to their own leaders, and who refused to participate in an act of idolatry no matter how compelling it was.

Above all, we discovered that the laws of defilement to the dead do not reflect negatively upon the task of caring for the dead. On the contrary, the prohibition to do so reflects negatively upon the kohanim, who are prevented from practicing this noble mitzvah.

And this point is certainly timely. For this week we honor the Hebra Kadisha of The Jewish Center. It is these people who do their work selflessly, giving of their time and effort, in love and dignity, without reward or expectation of reward.

Recently, we have been fortunate in obtaining new recruits for our men and women's Hebra Kadisha, and especially younger men and women who have accepted this great duty. It is a difficult one -- no mistake about that -- but it is crucial for a true Jewish community.

So, for a thankless job -- we thank them.

For being ready to serve -- we hope they will not have to serve.

For tending to the unfortunate -- we bless them with wishes of good fortune.

For being occupied with hessed shel emet , we pray that God who is called Emet (truth) will show them and their families with unending hessed (kindness).

And, above all else, we wish them and their families long and happy life.