

OVERVIEW

The weekly portion contains the laws regarding the priesthood and its special provisions. No priest who exhibited severe physical blemishes was permitted to offer sacrifices in the temple's interior. This also applies to the actual selection of the animals destined to be sacrificed.

Chapter 23 is devoted to the festivals and their respective offerings. The Sidrah concludes with the incident involving the blasphemer who was sentenced to death and like punishment for any person who commits this grave offense.

COMMENTARY

Death and Immortality.

Among one of the basic laws applying to the priest is the prohibition of contact with the dead. There is a curious contrast between this law and the religious practices of other nations where the priest is the one who is summoned to the bed of the dying. Indeed in Egypt the priestly kingdom was identified as the kingdom of the dead. The underlying thought is that the divine rule takes over when the human rule ends. G-d's omnipotence is being contrasted with the insignificance of man. Human life is but a passing phase that man must put behind him as rapidly as possible and with a minimum of pain and suffering.

The Torah approach is diametrically opposed to this view. The priest does not teach how to die but how to live. From the time the family assembles around the bed of the dying the priest must remain apart. His separation from the realm of death symbolizes the immortality of the spirit, the power of the eternal life that flows forth from G-d. The exception is the case of the ordinary priest who must involve himself if a death occurs in his immediate family. The high priest alone is prohibited from approaching the body even when it invokes a member of his nearest family. He ceases to be an individual Jew but represents the nation that never dies. And yet - the same high priest who must not even approach his dying father must busy himself with the abandoned body of an unknown person

whom he may find on his way and bring him to the nearest cemetery for burial.

To be Holy.

"Be you holy, for I am holy, G-d your G-d". This fundamental precept applies to every Jew without exception. Everyone, young and olds, man and woman, is expected to do his utmost to help transform our people into a true nation of priests. They are guided by a group of men whose strict self-discipline and noble example serve to inspire their brethren to attain spiritual goals. The priests do not perform their tasks at their discretion. Theirs is a mission for life, a calling bestowed by G-d from birth. Yet they are still part of the people and as such they are permitted to marry women from outside their Levite tribe.

We can appreciate the necessity of selecting the actively serving priests according to their physical condition. A permanent defeat or disability is sufficient reason for disqualifying the priest from active duty. Clad in the garments of purity, the serving priests represent a degree of godliness that does not tolerate any trace of imperfection. His personality must exude a spiritual authority. There is a fitting saying in the Talmud: "A Torah scholar who wears torn or soiled clothing bears a severe guilt". The true leader cannot hope to inspire his following with the fervor of his words if, at the same time, he neglects his physical appearance. It should never be said that intensive Torah study and the meticulous observance of the Torah laws are accompanied by slovenliness and personal negligence.

We now turn to another verse in our Sidrah that is of burning actuality. "You shall not profane My Holy Name, but let Me be hallowed in the midst of the children of Israel.... I am He Who has brought you out of Egypt" (22:32) The Jew is constantly in the public eye. We are scrutinized in our every action - and that is as it should be. For true Judaism must assert itself in all phases of daily living. At all times our spiritual leaders took pride in presenting through their way of life the true picture of Torah Judaism in all its ramifications. We are truly

imbued with the supreme importance of conducting our lives as a veritable service of G-d.

No duty is more important than the "sanctification of the Divine Name". This is illustrated by the Talmud through the following parable: A heavily laden ship traveled on the high sea. Suddenly one of the passengers began to bore a hole under his seat. When told of the danger of water surging into the ship, the man calmly replied that the hole would be under the seat that he had reserved and purchased. That is true, was the angry reply, but the water will surely sink the ship and you will drown together with us. Thus it is with Israel: a rash gesture, a thoughtless remark by a Jew, can have the most serious consequences for the entire nation.

Much depends on the atmosphere and discipline provided by the parental home. From early childhood our youth must be imbued with the awe of and reverence for G-d and His Law. If only the Jewish people at large would follow this path. We are convinced that the example of a nation fiercely loyal to its G-d would lead to the world's recognition of the all-embracing rulership of the All-High. But - let us not "put the cart before the horse". A better world? Let Israel become a better people by letting "My Name be hallowed among you".

The festivals (\*\*\*)

Our Jewish festivals have a double character. Historically they are reminders of the great moments in our history. In the cycle of nature they occur at fixed times in the calendar year. Thus Pessach celebrates the liberation from Egypt as well as the first Spring harvest. Shavuot commemorates the revelation at Sinai and is also the time when the fruit ripens. Succos, festival of booths, recalls the march through the desert and also celebrates the harvest on the fields and gathering of the grapes. Consideration of this double character of our festivals results in a certain difficulty inherent in our Jewish calendar that is based on the lunar orbit. The difference of eleven days between the lunar year (approximately 354 days corresponding to twelve yearly orbits of the moon around the earth) and the solar year (approximately 365 days corresponding to the year-long orbit of the earth around the sun) would create a growing gap between the seasonal

cycles and cause a steady passage of the Jewish months and their festivals through all months of the lunar year. To prevent this from happening and to preserve the nature-bound character of the festivals the sages introduced a precise, if complicated, system to correct the imbalance. This system provides for the addition of a 13th month (Adar II) or leap year. The interrelation between our festivals and the stellar constellations – in particular the moon – becomes especially significant as we examine the position and dates of the festivals in the waxing and waning of the lunar phases. For Israel the moon always represented the picture of its constant renewal. Even more significant is the moon's periodic disappearance from view and its subsequent revival and return to brilliant light. In this way, the full moon on the 15th of each month portrays the splendor of divine loving kindness.

The festivals bear testimony to G-d's care for His people and its continued existence. Pessach symbolizes the formation of the nation's physical structure; Succos, the preservation of the national body. Both are entirely independent of human participation. Both begin on the 15th day of the month, symbolizing the zenith of divine benevolence. Shavuot, on the other hand, as the festival of the revelation at Sinai, requires human acquiescence and takes place on the 6th day of Sivan, the early phase of the moon's ascent when the Word of G-d and the human will join together to guide the nation towards its destiny. Shemini Atzeret, the "closing feast", is simultaneously the conclusion and transition leading to a period of labor and toil. It falls on the 22nd of Tishri in the final descending quarter of the moon.

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(\*\*\*) The manuscript has in the margin a hand written note by the author זצ"ל that reads "Must be re-written and expounded on.... the festivals". Since we do not have in our possession the revised text and we do not know whether it was indeed re-written, we have taken the liberty to publish this version.

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