

DARCHAI NOAM**Its ways are ways of pleasantness - דרכיה דרכי נעם -**

(Mishlei 3:17)

Emor, May 2014

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Emor – Everyone deserves to be honoured

In this week's Parsha of Emor, we learn about the special status of the Kohanim and the Kohen Gadol.

All of Bnei Yisrael are holy. Hashem chose us as His holy nation (see Sh'mot 19:6) and in last week's Parsha of Kedoshim we are all instructed to conduct ourselves in a holy manner. However, the Kohanim were granted an even higher level of holiness than the rest of the nation. They were selected to serve Hashem in the Bet Hamikdash. Kohanim are restricted in whom they are allowed to marry. They are also forbidden from coming into contact with a dead body, except for that of a close family member. The Kohanim received 24 gifts from Bnei Yisrael, including the terumah portion from crops, first born animals and various parts of the korbanot that were brought.

The Kohen Gadol was the holiest of the Kohanim. The Kohen Gadol was more restricted than an ordinary Kohen in whom he was allowed to marry. Unlike an ordinary Kohen, the Kohen Gadol was not even allowed to come in contact with the dead body of a close family member.

Though we no longer have the Bet Hamikdash for the Kohanim to serve in today, we still treat Kohanim with an extra measure of respect. In fact, the halacha obligates us to bestow honour on Kohanim and prohibits a non-Kohen from asking a Kohen to perform a service (except in certain circumstances). We always give a Kohen the first Aliya when the Torah is read, and we usually allow a Kohen to lead the Birkat Hamazon. As the Rambam explains (Sefer Hamitzvot 32), the Kohanim have been selected as Hashem's emissaries. Therefore, when we honour Kohanim we are, by extension, honouring Hashem.

Given the special status of Kohanim, it is understandable, and in fact obligatory, to respect and honour them. But what about non-Kohanim? Do they also deserve respect?

There is an interesting Mishnah (Nazir 7:1) that sheds some light on this issue.

The Mishnah discusses the case of a Nazir¹ and a Kohen Gadol who are walking together and see a 'met mitzvah' (an abandoned corpse).

It is a mitzva to bury an abandoned corpse because it is very painful for the neshama of the deceased person for the body to remain unburied. It is a great act of kindness to attend to the burial as quickly as possible. Even the Kohen Gadol himself must become impure in order to perform such an important act if there is no one else available to do so.

Like the Kohen Gadol, the Nazir is forbidden from coming into contact with a dead body. And similarly like the Kohen Gadol, an exception is made in the case of an abandoned corpse when there is no one else available to attend to the burial.

If a Kohen Gadol and a regular Kohen come upon an abandoned corpse the regular Kohen would attend to the burial so that the Kohen Gadol would not become impure. This is because the Kohen Gadol has a higher degree of sanctity than a regular Kohen.

¹ Someone who has accepted upon himself a vow to become a Nazir. The standard vow was for a period of 30 days but it could be longer.

However, if a nazir and the Kohen Gadol were the only two people around and they came across an abandoned corpse, who would take priority?

According to one view presented in the Mishna (Rabbi Eliezer) the Nazir would take priority even over the Kohen Gadol! Rabbi Eliezer's reasoning is that the Nazir would have to bring an extra korban if he becomes unclean while the Kohen Gadol does not. According to this view, the nazir would wait to the side while the holy Kohen Gadol attended to the burial! As it turns out, the final halacha is not like Rabbi Eliezer. In fact, the Nazir would have to attend to the burial while the Kohen Gadol waits to the side. The reason for this view is that a Kohen is sanctified for his whole life while the Nazir is only sanctified during the time of his Nezirut. However, the mere fact that there is a debate as to who takes priority is remarkable. We see that an ordinary person can, in some respects, be equated to the Kohen Gadol.

The comparison goes much further. There are a number of similarities between Nazirim and Kohanim in general and between Nazirim and the Kohen Gadol in particular:²

- Both Nazirim and Kohanim are forbidden from becoming impure from a dead body, as explained above;
- Both Nazirim and Kohanim are forbidden from drinking wine (though for the Kohanim this prohibition is limited to drinking wine while they are serving in the Bet Hamikdash);
- Nazirim and Kohanim are both described as "Holy to Hashem" (Vayikra 21:6 and Bamidbar 6:8);
- The Kohen Gadol is described as follows in the Torah: 'the nezer (crown) of anointing oil of his G-d is upon him' (Vayikra 10:12). The Nazir is described in almost identical terms: 'the nezer (crown) of his G-d is upon his head' (Bamidbar 6:7).

What lesson can we learn from these similarities?

Even though some people are born into the priesthood, it is still possible for any person to reach an elevated level of Kedusha. Any individual can choose to take upon themselves a vow of nezirut and become comparable to the Kohen Gadol himself. Anybody can work hard to achieve a status that commands honour and respect. The Gemara (Horayot 13a) teaches us that "the Mamzer who is a Talmid Chacham takes priority over the Kohen Gadol who is ignorant".

Today we no longer have the practice of becoming a Nazir³. However we can all still achieve an elevated level of Kedusha. The 'accident of our birth' is irrelevant. Regardless of which social, intellectual or religious 'class' we are born into, we can all achieve incredible heights of sanctity through Torah study and the keeping of mitzvot. We just need to grab the opportunity.

Let's try something this week:

1. We deal with many people who do not appear to deserve our honour and respect. They are not lucky enough to be born as Kohanim, or in the 'right' social, intellectual or religious class. When we interact with such people, we should remember that they also have the potential to reach the level of the Kohen Gadol. We should first contemplate this idea and then treat them with the honour and respect that they truly deserve.
2. This also works for ourselves. If we ever feel inferior or if we feel a lack of self-respect, we should think about our own potential to achieve holiness, and that Hashem chose all of us as His special people.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

² Some of the following ideas are based on a shiur by Rav Amnon Bazak from Yeshivat Har Etzion.

³ In truth, one can still take a vow today to be a Nazir. However, in the absence of the Bet Hamikdash there is no procedure to end the vow and one would need to be a Nazir for life. Rabbi David Cohen (the 'Nazirite Rabbi') (1887-1972) is a famous example of a modern day Nazir.

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About Darchai Noam

The passuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: "Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace". The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parsha relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem's help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of 'v'ahavta l'reiacha kamocho' – loving one's fellow as oneself.

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