

Earning without Merit

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Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

Parshat P'kudei

Anoint them [Aaron's children], as thou didst anoint their father, that they may be My priests, and they [their descendants] shall be anointed to an eternal priesthood in every generation. (Exodus 15:40)

An eternal, everlasting, hereditary priesthood. How strange! Why should the priesthood be hereditary? Our egalitarian sensibilities shout that the priesthood should be based on merit – either the merit of good deeds or the merit of learning or the merit of spiritual attainment or the merit of emotional sensitivity. But hereditary? How elitist! How primitive! And how good we feel to think that we have attained a greater insight than that which our ancestors exhibited.

But there is a significance beyond the mere surface plain-text meaning. And, let us note, we are not the first generation to have raised the issue, for this was one of the factors in the ancient dispute between the Sadducees (the priesthood and their supporters) and the Pharisees (the rabbis, who developed Judaism into the faith tradition which we know today).

The Pharisees, over 2000 years ago, concluded that the priesthood had been corrupted. Not that the individual priests were not rightfully the direct descendants of Aaron through the male line (the idea that women were part of the priesthood seems never to have occurred to them), but that the venality of the priests raised the issue of the validity of their service. The Pharisees concluded that, even though the priesthood had been corrupted, the Temple ritual (the

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administration of which was the priests' primary function) was valid in and of itself, so long as the proper forms were satisfied, and that the unworthiness of the priests administering the ritual did not invalidate it. The Essenes, on the other hand, were more demanding and concluded that a corrupt or unworthy priesthood could not validly administer a ritual to bring the people closer to G*d. (Because kosher slaughter of meat was dependent upon the Temple ritual, the Essenes were therefore compelled to be vegetarians.)

In a discussion of honor and to whom deference should be granted, the (Pharisaic) Talmudic sages concluded that a "learned *mamzer* (bastard) takes precedence over an ignorant High Priest." One cannot help but feel that the Pharisaic sages thought that, with rare exceptions, the expression "ignorant High Priest" was redundant.

But there is a valuable lesson in the priesthood being hereditary rather than merit-based. The priests ministered in the Tabernacle (called, in Hebrew, the *Mishkan ha-Edut*, the Dwelling-Place of the Covenant) and, later, in the Temple, and the Tabernacle and Temple were the places where we availed ourselves of Divine Mercy, not Judgment.

The sacrificial ritual, in Tabernacle and Temple, was a ritual of reconciliation, our reconciliation with G*d, based on Divine Mercy, whatever we may have done. Because that reconciliation is founded not on our merit but on G*d's Compassion, it is most appropriate that its administration should be assigned to individuals chosen without regard to their merit.

Shabbat Shalom.

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