

Chukkat
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At the wedding of the son of Reb Avraham Yaakov of Sadigora to the daughter of Reb Zvi HaKohen of Rimanov, the groom's grandfather, Reb Yisrael of Ruzhin, stood up and said to the father of the bride: "Let me share with you the *yichus* of our family. My great-grandfather was Reb Dov Ber; my grandfather was his son, Reb Avraham, who was called the Angel; my great-uncle was Reb Nachum of Chernobyl; and my uncle was his son, Reb Mordechai of Chernobyl. So my dear friend, please share with us your lineage." "My parents died when I was ten years of age," Reb Zvi said softly. "I did not know them well enough to tell you anything about them other than that they were righteous and good-hearted people. After their deaths, a relative apprenticed me to a tailor, for whom I worked for five years. It was during that time that I learned two rules by which I have governed my life: Do not spoil anything new, and fix anything old." With that, the groom's grandfather leaped to his feet shouting joyously: "This is a marriage of two great lineages. These children are doubly blessed!"

In this delightful Hasidic tale, we learn about two approaches to righteousness: one that comes from passing down wisdom through the family line and the other that comes from hard-earned life experience. Both have something to offer. Similarly we find two models of living according to God's will in the Bible. One is presented by the priest, for whom lineage is everything and the other by the prophet who observes life and speaks from passion and experience.

In this week's Torah portion, Chukkat, we learn about one of the rituals the Israelite priests are responsible for – the burning of the red heifer and the purification that is made possible by this action. In the course of creating the ashes and water that can convey a renewed state of holiness, we are told about the intricate details of the procedure and all the laws and regulations surrounding it. This ceremony is certainly not the only one in this vein that we learn about in the Torah. Leviticus and Numbers, in particular, are filled with priestly rituals involving the altar, animal sacrifices, and various states of purity and impurity. The text goes into great detail on these matters and often the reader is left with a sense of having received TMI – too much information. These are the parts of the Bible that people generally skip over. They may be an interesting historical snapshot but many feel they are totally irrelevant to our lives today.

So why should we read and study about the priests and their focus on ritual purity? The role of the priest was not to remove demons or perform magical rites but to be a teacher and a guardian of purity. One of the basic messages that informed Israelite life was that the world is set up in a tight, ordered structure reflecting the distinctions between God and humans; Israel and the other people. Human activity was to reflect the inherent orderliness of creation, a kind of imitation of God, namely as God kept things clear at the beginning, you should do the same with food and other contacts. A hierarchy reigned in virtually every aspect of Israelite life as conceived in the Torah: people, land, animals, eligibility for the priesthood, the Tabernacle, and the calendar. The priests were really the caretakers of the people, guarding them from harm, offering them a pathway back to holiness when they sinned. Their concern was for individuals and the community to continue to receive God's blessing by making atonement for misdeeds. They were the

nurturers, the ones that figuratively picked up the people when they fell, dusted them off, gave them a hug and made things better again. Without the separation and order offered by the priests there would be chaos. This is just as true today as it was in biblical times. We may no longer have animal sacrifices, but the purity of our relationship with God is reflected in our ability to honor the physical and moral boundaries we set for ourselves and for our relationships.

The prophets were also the guardians of the people's morality but their approach was entirely different. Having received a vision or calling from God, they preached, often forcefully, about people's shortcomings and extolled them to care for the poor, to stop worshipping idols and to seek justice in their midst. The prophets were on a mission to make the people aware of their sins and to change their behavior so that the nation would be favored by God and the world would be a better place. They provided inspiration and motivation; a vision of a better future.

Prophecy all but died out with the end of kingship after the exile to Babylon, and the priesthood ceased to function when the Second Temple was destroyed in 70 CE. Nevertheless, the archetype of these two powerful figures continues to exist to this day. Ahad HaAm, a cultural Zionist from the early 20th century, wrote an article comparing the priest and the prophet and I wanted to share an excerpt from it. This is translated from pre-modern Hebrew.

The prophet is the master of one side. A known ethical idea fills all the rooms of his heart and swallows him entirely with all of his senses and feelings until it isn't in his ability to ignore his thinking from it even for a moment. He isn't able to see the world except through a reflection of his idea, and all of his desire and toil to accomplish his idea in its completeness in all visions of life. For this ideal the prophet fights for all of his days, he spreads his strength without compassion and without calculating and paying attention to life conditions and demands of general harmony. He scouts always in what is supposed to be according to the private awareness that is in his heart, not in what is possible to be according to the general condition outside of him. Not so is the priest. He goes up on the bimah after the prophecy was already successful to pave the way to its idea, to tip the middle ground in some measure to its side to establish a new general harmony between the powers who are in action. And even though he is serving the idea and desires its existence, there is not in his heart the needed strength for world war against what must be and the reality. He tends more to give in before that which can't be changed and cuts a compromise with reality. Instead of remaining in the narrowness of the prophet and to demand from life what it isn't about to give, he widens his knowledge and his opinion about the relationship between life and his idea and he does not seek "what needs to be" but only "what is possible to be."

The rabbi has taken over the function of both the priest and the prophet, and as you can see from the above description, it can be a challenge to fulfill both roles simultaneously. Nevertheless as your rabbi I am going to attempt it. In my role as priest, I will be here to comfort you in times of sorrow, celebrate with you in times of joy and accompany you through the events that mark the passage of time. We will pray together, sing together and participate in rituals and ceremonies that convey a sense of holiness to the fabric of our lives. As a community we will uphold Jewish tradition, delve into text and search together to find meaning and relevance to our lives today.

As comforting as it is to stay in a familiar niche, Judaism also has a prophetic side. In my role as prophet, I will hold up ideals and challenge you to reach beyond your comfort zone, to look deeply at your beliefs and behaviors, and to reach out to others who are in need of help. Our tradition teaches us to look beyond our own community and help repair the brokenness in our world. To that end, we will engage in social action and join with the larger community to improve the lives of people in need.

Just as Reb Yisrael and Rev Zvi gave us both lineage and good-heartedness to create the perfect match, when we join together the priest and the prophet we come away with a wholeness, a completeness to our lives that isn't there with only one side. We need both the nurturing and compromise of the priest as well as the idealism and drive of the prophet. I am excited to have the opportunity of serving you by both bringing comfort and inspiration; time-honored rituals and ideals to strive for. As your new rabbi I hope to be both priest and prophet to you and thereby to bring blessing to this community.