



THE NEW OLD PATH

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Righteousness vs. Self-Righteousness

In its description of the priests, the Torah discusses their unique status, one that differentiates them from ordinary people. In order to sanctify their particular role, limitations are placed on their appearance and on their participation in certain aspects of the Jewish life cycle such as marriage and burial. Only two chapters before this, the entire Jewish nation is also ennobled with the task of being holy, in this case without any limitations: 'Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy' (Lev. 19:2). Here, the Jewish people are clearly instructed to be holy, and to emulate the holiness of God, which is by definition limitless. It is therefore strange that just two chapters later the Torah presents the priests with a subtly different message: 'They shall be holy to their God and they shall not desecrate the name of their God; for the fire offerings of God, the food of their God they offer, so they must remain holy' (Lev. 21:6). This unique command to the priests alone contains the additional requirement of directing their holiness

'to God' and predicates the command on their Temple service. What is different about this command and the one that the entire nation received?

Every individual deserves to be treated with dignity. As it says in Tractate Avot, 'Who is considered to be respectful? He who respects all the creations' (Mishna, Tractate Avot 4:1). Beyond this elementary level of respect, however, individuals in certain roles are treated with additional levels of deference. One can be worthy of respect, for example, if born into a position of nobility or royalty, or one can earn esteem through noteworthy achievements.

While the Jewish people are inherently holy and are commanded to behave in a manner that reflects being created in the image of God, the priests hold an elevated status, which is suggested by the restrictions placed upon their behaviour. They play the unique role of the ambassadors of God to the Jewish people, and the ambassadors of the Jewish people to God. Therefore, they are not only afforded a higher level of respect and commanded to behave

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accordingly, but the manner in which they receive this command is distinct from the previous generic command of holiness communicated to the nation as a whole.

However, since this command and its details are designed to make the Jewish people view the priests as distinct and special, the Torah is wary that the priests will begin to think too highly of themselves. According to the Netziv, the stipulation 'to God' is added to remind the priests that their greatness derives from God and exists in a specific context, and therefore they should not let it make them arrogant (*Ha'Emek Davar* and *Harchev Davar* on *Leviticus* 21:6). Their greatness is a responsibility, not a privilege. It is a duty that comes with their position and should not cause them to think of themselves as better than the rest of the people, but rather should simply be expressed through their different role.

Many of us, at some point in our lives, find ourselves in some type of position of authority that legitimately commands extra respect, whether it is as a youth counsellor, a manager in the professional context, a parent or a communal leader. The manner in which the obligation

of holiness is communicated to the priests is a constant reminder to us that when placed in a position of authority, one should utilise this role to better the situations of those around us, to support them and promote them, rather than to feed one's own ego. We should constantly endeavour to balance the source and purpose of the respect that we receive, and to carry authority with humility.

As the 'chosen people' (*Deut.* 14:2), Jews are sometimes accused of thinking that they are superior to others. Like the priests, who need to be aware that their holiness is specifically directed towards God and the Temple service, we too must realise that we are a 'nation of priest-teachers – a holy nation' (*Ibid.*; *Ex.* 19:6). Charged by the source of holiness, God Himself, our task is to redeem the fractured world that we live in by being a 'light unto the nations' (*Isaiah* 49:6) through living and breathing moral righteousness without ever letting ourselves fall into the trap of self-righteousness. ■

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