

A Legacy of Peace

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Why do we still need *kohanim*? What purpose do hereditary priests—the descendants of Aaron—serve in a culture that appoints religious leaders based primarily on education? Whatever authority rabbis have stems mostly from their knowledge and individual personalities, but the *kohanim* inherit theirs. Leviticus 21 describes the *kohanim* as a holy caste who, due to nothing other than heredity, assume the religious leadership of Benei Yisra'el. Their heritage is not land, like the other clans of Israel; rather, their legacy is God, Sanctuary, and sacrifice alone.

Their continued presence is not only strange in light of the merit-based leadership of our sages in later times. The focus on a religious nobility determined by blood flies in the face of the Torah's more democratic vision. From the time of Abraham through the Exodus, it was the heads of families who offered up sacrifices. And Exodus 13:1–8 seems to imply that the first-born of every Jewish family was to be responsible for the slaughter and preparation of the sacrifice.

Prior to the creation of this special holy clan of religious leaders descended from Aaron, the Torah's standard seems to have been that the *bekhor*, the first-born son, was to serve as religious leader of each family. As God says in Numbers 3:13,

For all the first-born are Mine; on the day that I struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel.

So why was the role of religious leadership taken from the first-born of every family and given to the descendants of Aaron?

One possible answer may lie in the trauma of the Golden Calf. As the children of Israel betrayed the divine trust at the foot of Mt. Sinai, the Torah hints that the tribe of Levi refused to participate in the idolatry to which the rest of Israel succumbed. When Moses returns from the Mountain to discover the betrayal, he asks “Who is for the Lord? Join me!” And the Torah tells us, “The whole tribe of Levi joined him” (Ex. 32:26). It may be at this point that the Aaronite families of the tribe of Levi take up their role as the *kohanim*. The change of religious leadership is made explicit in the census of Numbers 3:11–12, where we actually see the first-born Israelites exchanged for the Levites:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: I hereby accept the Levites from among the Israelites as substitutes for all the firstborn that open the womb among the Israelites. The Levites shall be mine.

Thus, the *kohanim* are a special holy caste created after the trauma of the Golden Calf. The first-born of Israel can no longer serve in the role of religious leadership because of their participation in this sin. The *kohanim* are substituted so that the religious life of Israel can survive.

The weakness of this argument is that Aaron the High Priest himself participated in the sin of the Golden Calf! In Parashat Eikev, Moses tells his memory of that day of sin and violence. He recalls:

The Lord was so angry with Aaron that he was ready to destroy him, but I interceded also on behalf of Aaron at the same time. (Deut. 9:20)

In Exodus 32 Aaron himself tells us who cast the gold into the fire, bringing forth the calf:

“So I said to them, ‘Whoever has gold, take it off; so they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!’”

Though several commentators try to exculpate Aaron from this deed, justifying his actions as either a delaying tactic (Rashi), or as an esoteric misunderstanding on his part (Ramban), the basic meaning is clear: Aaron sinned, Moses prayed for him, and he was forgiven. Why should his line become the priests of Israel, while the other Levites—who did not sin with the calf—become secondary to his line!?

The answer may be found in what Moses leaves out of his account of the Golden Calf. In our parashah, Moses fails to mention his cry, “‘Who is for the Lord? Join me!’” In Exodus 32:27–28, after the Levites heed Moses’ call, he instructs them:

He said to them, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Put your sword on your side, each of you! Go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill your brother, your friend, and your neighbor.’”

And we see their faithful response:

The sons of Levi did as Moses commanded, and about three thousand of the people fell on that day.

Ramban argues that this act of vengeance elevates the Levites and makes them worthy to be the holiest tribe of Israel. But I would like to suggest a different interpretation: Moses omits the vengeance of the Levites in his account in Deuteronomy because he is ashamed to have called for it. The Levites’ act of violence *disqualified* them from the priesthood. And Aaron’s peaceful and conciliatory nature thus made him and his line the ideal candidates for the high priesthood.

Responding to Moses’ statement in Ex. 32:26 (“Thus says the Lord . . .”), Rashi asks: “Where did He say it?” Rashi is perplexed, as all sensitive readers would be, by Moses’ claim that God said something we never hear. Quoting the Mechilta (a third century collection of Midrash), Rashi posits that the specific command to kill the worshipers of the calf is Moses’ own decision, based on his interpretation of an earlier verse from Exodus. Perhaps Moses, at the end of his life, came to regret this call to violence and omitted it from his own account in Deuteronomy.

The Talmud says, “Aaron was a lover of peace and a pursuer of peace and would make peace between one person and the other” (BT Sanhedrin 6b). This is the quality that God seems to have wanted from the High Priest of Israel. Indeed, it was Aaron’s desire for peace that may have led him to capitulate to the demands of Benei Yisra’el, avoid conflict and violence, and begin work on the calf. The very quality that led him to sin is the same quality that led him to the high priesthood.

In the post-temple world, our sages regarded the honor given to the *kohanim* as an opportunity to promote peace: “A priest is called up first to read the Torah, and then a Levite, and then an Israelite, because of the ways of peace” (Mishnah Gittin 5:8). The Talmud explains that the *kohen* receives the first honor so that those in the synagogue will not come to quarrel about who is the most deserving among them. In the rabbinic mind, Aaron is still making peace between people, resolving conflicts, and making the world a more blessed place. This is why we continue to need *kohanim*: they are to be a vision of peace among us. They will fail at times, as we all do, but as the Priestly Blessing reminds us, it is their calling to bless us with peace.