

October 28, 2018 - Lev. 21:1 – 22:16 - Priestly purity
Torah Reading: Leviticus 21:1 – 22:16 - Priestly purity
Psalm 85
Haftarah: Ezekiel 44:25 – 45:2, 15

Holiness of the Priests - Defilement for the Dead

Leviticus 21:1-6 - "And the LORD said unto Moses, Speak unto the priests the sons of Aaron, and say unto them, There shall none be defiled for the dead among his people: But for his kin, that is near unto him, that is, for his mother, and for his father, and for his son, and for his daughter, and for his brother, And for his sister a virgin, that is nigh unto him, which hath had no husband; for her may he be defiled. But he shall not defile himself, being a chief man among his people, to profane himself. They shall not make baldness upon their head, neither shall they shave off the corner of their beard, nor make any cuttings in their flesh. They shall be holy unto their God, and not profane the name of their God: for the offerings of the LORD made by fire, and the bread of their God, they do offer: therefore they shall be holy."

Rashi - But not the daughters of Aaron, [who may become defiled for the dead]. — [Torath Kohanim 21:1,2]

Rashi - "Let none [of you] defile himself [for a dead person] among his people": While the dead person is among his people [and therefore has people, non- kohanim, to bury him]. This comes to exclude [from the prohibition a kohen who comes across] a מֵת מִצְּוֹה, [a dead person for whom no one is in calling distance to attend to his burial and thus it is incumbent for people to attend to him]. — [Torath Kohanim 21:4]

This is relevant to the situation in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (**Luke 10:25-37**), in which the priest passed by on other side of the road to avoid defilement. According to this ruling, he was allowed to defile himself in order to attend to the body.

Rashi - "except for his relative": [The expression שְׂאֵרוֹ "his relative" refers only [here] to his wife. — [Torath Kohanim 21:5; Yev. 22b]

"near unto him" - the "other part of himself," i.e. his wife, which is his other self, and one flesh with him.

Ezekiel, who was a priest, was forbidden to mourn for his wife (**Ezekiel 24:16**) but it is clear this was an exception.

Verse 4 - "But he shall not defile himself, being a chief man among his people, to profane himself." The Jewish translation has "[But] a husband shall not defile himself for [a wife who causes] his desecration, [while she is] among his people."

Rashi - He may not defile himself for his [deceased] wife who was unfit for him [because she was unfit to marry him] - see below

Touching a Dead Body

Burying the dead was reckoned by the Jews not only an act of kindness and respect to the deceased, but an act of piety. The Talmud notes that God Himself buried the body of Moses (Babylonian Talmud, Bava Metzia, fol. 30. 2. & Sota, fol. 14. 1.).

Those whose dead lay before them, and who were as yet unburied, were excused reading the Shema, they were free from performing the duty of prayer, and were not obliged to wear their phylacteries (Mishna Beracot, c. 3. sect. 1.).

But priests were under a different rule - **Numbers 6:6 19:11,14,16; Deuteronomy 26:14, Hosea 9:4.** [Similar rules existed for Greek and Roman pagan priests]

Recall that after Nadab and Abihu were killed, Aaron was prohibited from mourning:

- **Leviticus 10:6** - "And Moses said unto Aaron, and unto Eleazar and unto Ithamar, his sons, Uncover not your heads, neither rend your clothes; lest ye die, and lest wrath come upon all the people: but let your brethren, the whole house of Israel, bewail the burning which the LORD hath kindled."

This could also relate to Jesus' admonition:

- **Luke 9:59-62** - "And he said unto another, Follow me. But he said, Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God. And another also said, Lord, I will follow thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

(Compare this with the calling of Elisha in **1 Kings 19:20**, where the Prophet Elijah allows him go back and kiss his parents)

In this situation in **Luke 9**, the disciples were like priests attending to the Messiah in their midst, as priests handling the sacrifice, doing holy service.

In fact, believers are called "a kingdom of priests":

- **Exodus 19:6** - "And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation."
 - **1 Peter 2:9** - "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation"
 - **Revelation 5:10** - "And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth."

Fasting appears appears to have been part of the mourning ritual upon the death of Saul and Jonathan (**2 Samuel 1:12, 12:16-23**).

- **Matthew 9:15** - "And Jesus said unto them, Can the children of the bridechamber mourn, as long as the bridegroom is with them? but the days will come, when the

bridegroom shall be taken from them, and then shall they fast."

Graves as Sources of Uncleanness

- **Numbers 19:16** - "And whosoever toucheth one that is slain with a sword in the open fields, or a dead body, or a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days."

Jesus called the Pharisees "whited sepulchres." Graves were freshly marked with whitewash before major feasts to prevent any priests from stepping on ground where a grave or tomb was hidden and thereby be defiled and prevented from ministering. Jesus takes their zeal to prevent defilement and turns it around, making them the defiling graves, full of self-effort and self-righteousness.

According to Jewish tradition, a dead body, however deeply buried, communicated defilement all the way up to the surface, unless indeed it were vaulted in, or vaulted over, to cut off contact with the earth above.

- **Matthew 23:27-28** - "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity."

Thus, as the Talmud says, "A disciple of the wise, who is not the same within that he is without, is not a disciple of the wise." (Bab. Joma, fol. 72.2.)

"Concerning the whiting of sepulchres, there are these traditions: 'In the fifteenth day of the month Adar they mend the ways, and the streets, and the common sewers, and perform those things that concern the public, and they paint (or mark) the sepulchres.' The manner is described in Maasar Sheni; They paint the sepulchres with chalk, tempered and infused in water. The Jerusalem Gemarists give the reason of it in abundance of places: 'Do they not mark the sepulchres (say they) before the month Adar? Yes, but it is supposed that the colors are wiped off. For what cause do they paint them so? That this matter may be like the case of the leper. The leprous man crieth out, 'Unclean, unclean'; and here, in like manner, uncleanness cries out to you and saith, 'Come not near.'" R. Illa, in the name of R. Samuel Bar Nachman, allegeth that of Ezekiel; 'If one passing through the land seeth a man's bone, he shall set up a burial sign by it.'"

They would mark the grave with a white chalk mark in the shape of bones, and then washed the whole tomb around the mark with the chalk mixed with water.

- From John Lightfoot, 'The Whole Works: Horae Hebraicae et Talmudicae, Vol. 11' on Matthew 23:27

Cleansing

Ordinary Israelites who had touched a dead body were unclean for seven days and had to be cleansed by the sprinkling of the waters of separation, made from the ashes of the

Red Heifer (**Numbers 19:1-10**).

Spiritually, "touching a dead body" for us means returning to our own dead selves, which have been buried in baptism. All self-effort or self-regard requires that we repent and be cleansed through the waters and blood that Christ provides.

Leviticus 21:7-8 - "They shall not take a wife that is a whore, or profane; neither shall they take a woman put away from her husband: for he is holy unto his God. Thou shalt sanctify him therefore; for he offereth the bread of thy God: he shall be holy unto thee: for I the LORD, which sanctify you, am holy."

"whore" - the rabbis interpret this to mean a non-Israelite,, since they refused to believe there would be a whore in Israel.

"profane" - defiled of her virginity, even by widowhood, or divorced, or even an innocent victim of rape. Or a "Levirite marriage" of a brother, or an illegitimate child.

Leviticus 21:9 - "And the daughter of any priest, if she profane herself by playing the whore, she profaneth her father: she shall be burnt with fire."

Rashi - applies this only to one who was betrothed or married and commits adultery. "All agree... that Scripture did not speak of a single woman." — [Sanh. 50b-51a]

The already stated punishment for this was death by stoning. But a priest's daughter had the honor of being related to a person of sacred office, and the advantage of a more strictly religious education, and had eaten of the holy things in her father's house; all which were aggravations of her crime, and made it the more scandalous and reproachful to her, that the punishment of burning was added. - *Gill's Exposition*

Again, any violation of these rules was looked on a treasonous subversion and sabotage of the spiritual "engine" of Israel - the Tabernacle. If its holiness was defiled, the whole nation was defiled and it was a covenant betrayal of God. It was more of an attack on the nation rather than a personal ethical failing.

Holiness Prohibitions for the High Priest

Leviticus 21:10-12 - "And he that is the high priest among his brethren, upon whose head the anointing oil was poured, and that is consecrated to put on the garments, shall not uncover his head, nor rend his clothes; Neither shall he go in to any dead body, nor defile himself for his father, or for his mother; Neither shall he go out of the sanctuary, nor profane the sanctuary of his God; for the crown of the anointing oil of his God is upon him: I am the LORD."

"uncover his head" - another custom of mourning, to let the hair become disheveled and grow wild.'

"nor rend his clothes" - Note that at the trial of Jesus, the High Priest broke this law:

- **Mark 14:61-63** - "But he held his peace, and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked him, and said unto him, Art thou the Christ, the Son of the Blessed? And Jesus said, I am: and ye shall see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven. Then the high priest rent his clothes, and saith, What need we any further witnesses?"

"Neither shall he go out of the sanctuary" - i.e. leave the sanctuary while anointed to attend a funeral

Leviticus 21:13-15 - "And he shall take a wife in her virginity. A widow, or a divorced woman, or profane, or an harlot, these shall he not take: but he shall take a virgin of his own people to wife. Neither shall he profane his seed among his people: for I the LORD do sanctify him."

Perhaps the precursor of the New Testament requirement, "the husband of one wife" - **1 Timothy 3:2**

Priests with Defects or Blemishes

Leviticus 21:16-21 - "And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto Aaron, saying, Whosoever he be of thy seed in their generations that hath any blemish, let him not approach to offer the bread of his God. For whatsoever man he be that hath a blemish, he shall not approach: a blind man, or a lame, or he that hath a flat nose, or any thing superfluous, Or a man that is brokenfooted, or brokenhanded, Or crookbackt, or a dwarf, or that hath a blemish in his eye, or be scurvy, or scabbed, or hath his stones broken; No man that hath a blemish of the seed of Aaron the priest shall come nigh to offer the offerings of the LORD made by fire: he hath a blemish; he shall not come nigh to offer the bread of his God."

Rashi - like "[When you offer up a blind [animal]...a lame or a sick one, is there nothing wrong?] Were you to offer it to your governor, [would he accept you or would he favor you? says the Lord of Hosts" (Malachi 1:8). Thus, just as an animal with a defect is not fitting as an offering, neither is a person with a defect fit for presenting it.]

Instead of "crookback or a dwarf," the Jewish translation has "long eyebrows, or a cataract" - unusually long eyebrows could mean a real or possible obscuring of his vision, which would hinder his ministry in things like judging leprosy.

What's with the "flat nose"?

"flat nose" = *charam* - to ban, devote, destroy utterly, completely destroy, dedicate for destruction, exterminate. Usually used to denote a city that had been "devoted" to God, meaning everything in it would be destroyed and could not be taken as plunder.

But in this instance it means "to split, slit, mutilate" a body part, like the nose. Possibly

meaning a nose that has been cut off.

The King James translators might have thought translating it "flat nose" made perfect sense because of their own 17th century prejudices of human beauty or something. But the "blemishes" were all *practical*, related to a real or perceived inability to perform the priestly tasks, not some ideal of beauty.

The phrase "he that hath a flat nose of anything superfluous" takes in two extremes - a body part that has been destroyed or cut off, or one that is too long, or deformed by excess or extension. "Nose" isn't even specifically mentioned.

There are 142 different kinds of disqualifying blemishes in the Mishnah, expanded from these 12 general categories.

Note: Deafness is not mentioned in this list, because it may deal only with visible features.

The priests are a reflection and type of Christ, our great High Priest. Nothing lacking, nothing to excess, nothing that might cause shame, no handicap in sight, smell or in His walk or in dexterity. The scurvy and scabs mean no suspicion of leprosy; crushed testicles relate to the ability to reproduce spiritually. In short, this list of defects clarifies the wholeness and perfection of what Christ accomplished as our High Priest. Tradition said that a rope was tied around the ankle of the High Priest in case he was struck down by God, should he make a mistake in the ritual in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. There could be nothing that might hinder his priestly work.

Rashi - However, if his defect goes away, he is fit [to serve]. — [Torath Kohanim 21:55]

There is no mention here of the common belief that sin caused these disqualifying features:

- **John, 9:1–12** - "And his disciples asked him, saying, 'Master, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.'"

These kind of disqualifications were common in the Ancient Near East. Babylonian texts also require the priest or diviner to be "perfect to his appearance and limbs" and includes the following disqualifying blemishes: squinting or cross-eyed, chipped teeth, bruised or severed finger, disfigured face, mutilated eyes, a ruptured testicle, and irregular features like being branded, and the "leper" who was banned from sacral office. Priests had to be inspected from head to toe.

But the Bible sees all people as created in the image of God. And it looks toward the culmination of God's Kingdom when all disabilities will be no more - foreshadowed by Jesus' healing ministry. "The deaf shall hear the words of the scroll;" and "the eyes of the blind shall see" (**Isaiah 29:18; 35:5**). The "lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy" (**Isaiah 35:6**). The eunuchs and foreigners that

“hold fast to my covenant” (**Isaiah 56:5**) God will give “an everlasting name that shall not be cut off” (**Isaiah 56:5**).

Privileges Retained

Leviticus 21:22-24 - "He shall eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy, and of the holy. Only he shall not go in unto the vail, nor come nigh unto the altar, because he hath a blemish; that he profane not my sanctuaries: for I the LORD do sanctify them. And Moses told it unto Aaron, and to his sons, and unto all the children of Israel."

God did not discard or cast out blemished priests. They are not described as “unclean,” and they remained in the Tabernacle/Temple precincts. They are only excluded from performing the rituals surrounding the offerings. He made provision for those priests with blemishes, defects and disabilities, to support them and to feed them and their families.

Priests with blemishes, though disqualified from ministering in the sacrifices, could, however, participate in service in the Tabernacle and Temple. They wore black garments instead of white, and were employed in "the wood room", or "wood chamber," in the northeast part of the court of the women where wood destined for burning on the altar was stored. There they "wormed" the wood, or searched the wood for worms; whatever wood had a worm found in it was not fit to be laid upon the altar.

Blemishes, Bruised Reeds and Smoking Wicks

This should also influence our view of the weak and disabled, both physically and spiritually.

Consider **Matthew 12:20-21** in which Jesus quotes the passage in **Isaiah 42:3**.

"A bruised reed shall he not break, and smoking flax shall he not quench, till he send forth judgment unto victory."

The bruised or broken reed - used for measuring and other tasks - should have been discarded as no longer useful. Egypt is referred to as a "bruised reed" that would not support Israel when it leans on it. (**2 Kings 18:21**)

The same with a smoking flax wick, which no longer could do its job to provide light.

Targum: "The meek, who are like a bruised reed, shall not be broken; and the poor, who are as obscure as flax (or a lamp ready to go out), shall not be extinct"

The common denominator is mercy - patience and looking toward God's final triumph, when all will be set right.

A Possible Spiritual Meaning

Spiritually, priests with blemishes are able to notice character defects in others and themselves, to point out the reasons why someone may need the sin offering, for instance, but are not able to provide or apply the remedy themselves. They see the possibility and the potentiality, with severely limited apprehension, but they are still used by God.

The wood of the altar represents the cross - like Isaac bound on Mt. Moriah. So in that sense, blemished priests are recognizing what's NOT the cross, what is to be rejected as flawed doctrine or heresy. Perhaps they serve as living examples of how not to find salvation - exposing any religious or spiritual effort, ritual or philosophy that falls short of the perfection of the cross and its complete removal of sin by the blood of Christ. But they still participate in the meaning and work of the cross, because they are able to eat their part of the peace offering and the other offerings within the Temple precincts.

We each can become blemished priests through our failures, momentary rebellion or when we despair or lose faith - but as the rabbis said, "if his defect goes away, he is fit [to serve] ." Repentance brings us back.

Leviticus 22 - More on Priestly Holiness

Leviticus 22:2 - "Speak unto Aaron and to his sons, that they separate themselves from the holy things of the children of Israel, and that they profane not my holy name in those things which they hallow unto me: I am the LORD."

i.e., they must separate themselves when they are defiled

These verses apply the previous commandments - about uncleanness - to the special circumstances of the priests.

Who May Eat the Holy Things? Only the Household of Faith

Leviticus 22:10 - "There shall no stranger eat of the holy thing: a sojourner of the priest, or an hired servant, shall not eat of the holy thing."

A stranger included anyone who was not of the priest's household even though he was a priest or a Levite. Also no one who has contracted uncleanness. Only those born in the household of the priest can eat of it - not a hired servant or a stranger. But a purchased slave can. A priest's daughter can, before she leaves home, and even if she is widowed or divorced and returns to his household. But if she is married, she goes to another household and cannot eat of it.

Like the afikomen of the Lord's Supper, only "them who are of the household of faith" (**Galatians 3:27**) may eat - but this is determined by self-examination, "discerning the Lord's body" and recognizing yourself as a member of that body. (**1 Corinthians 11:28-29**)

I the LORD do Sanctify Them

Leviticus 22:15-16 - "And they shall not profane the holy things of the children of Israel, which they offer unto the LORD; Or suffer them to bear the iniquity of trespass, when they eat their holy things: for I the LORD do sanctify them."

"Or suffer them" - The Septuagint and Rashi translate it "themselves," but more probably it means "the people." That is, not only are the priests themselves prohibited to treat with profanity the sacred gifts, but they are to realize that it is incumbent upon them to guard these sacrifices so carefully as not to cause the Israelites to contract sin by transgressing the laws by eating holy things which are put in their way through culpable negligence. - *Ellicott's Commentary*

Because "I the LORD do sanctify them" - meaning He watches over the sanctity of the holy things, and will punish anyone who transgresses, as He did "by the hand of heaven" with Nadab and Abihu.

This is all to emphasize the purity of Christ's ministry as an obedient High Priest, which was necessary for our atonement to be realized through His sacrifice.