

Parashah Ninety-One

Leviticus 21:1–24; Ezekiel 44:25–31; Luke 11:30–44

notes by Tim Hegg

The Sanctity of the Priests

Our *parashah* deals entirely with the manner in which the priests of Aaron’s family were to be particularly set apart for their duties. Since the previous *parashah* listed many of the sanctifying *mitzvot* incumbent upon the nation as a whole, Moses goes on to detail those measures by which the Aaronic priesthood is particularly set apart unto a higher degree of sanctity. The reason for such increased regulations is given several times: “. . .for they present the offerings by fire to Adonai, the food of their God; so they shall be holy” (v. 6). Since the Aaronic priesthood attends to the altar, presenting the sacrifices, they are held to a higher level of sanctity.

It is from the phrase “the food of their God” that the altar could be envisioned as a “table,” as we see in Ezekiel and Malachi:

The altar was of wood, three cubits high and its length two cubits; its corners, its base and its sides were of wood. And he said to me, “This is the table that is before the LORD.” (Ezek. 41:22)

“They shall enter My sanctuary; they shall come near to My table to minister to Me and keep My charge. (Ezek. 44:16)

“You are presenting defiled food upon My altar. But you say, ‘How have we defiled You?’ In that you say, ‘The table of the LORD is to be despised.’ (Mal 1:7)

“But you are profaning it, in that you say, ‘The table of the Lord is defiled, and as for its fruit, its food is to be despised.’ (Mal 1:12)

Thus, the “table of the Lord” as found in the Apostolic Scriptures, has as its antecedent the altar in the Tabernacle and Temple. This informs the teaching of Paul in 1Cor 10:18ff–

18 Look at the nation Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar? 19 What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? 20 No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.

All too often, when this passage is read, modern Christians read the phrase “table of the Lord” to refer to the traditional communion table at the front of the auditorium in most Christian Churches. However, we know historically that no such tables existed until well into the 2nd or even the 3rd Centuries. In the synagogues of The Way, there is no evidence that a special table had become common place for the service of the “Eucharist.” This was a later addition after the division of the Synagogue and the emerging Christian Church took place. For Paul, the “table of the Lord” meant the altar in the Temple upon which the sacrifices were offered, sacrifices which were noted as “God’s food” in the Torah. Likewise, the “Lord’s Supper” (κυριακὸν δεῖπνον) of 1Cor 11:20, in the context, may refer to the eating of the Pesach lamb at the Pesach seder, the blood of which had been offered upon the Temple altar. Even if this passage does detail instructions for an “Agape meal” (cf. Jude 12), it still has its reference in the final Pesach seder of Yeshua and His disciples.

Our Torah portion details specific prohibitions for the Aaronic priests. First (vv. 1–4) are the prohibitions regarding corpse defilement. For the common Aaronic priest, he was allowed to be defiled in regard to his immediate family, but not for relatives outside of this circle. The immediate family members listed are: father, mother, his own children, his brother, and his sister if she had never been married. Once a woman is married, she under the headship of her husband and, in legal and *halachic* matters, enters the circle of her husband’s family.

Obviously missing from the list is the man's own wife, a matter that was debated among the Sages. Akiva rules that he must attend to the burial of his wife, thus attracting corpse defilement. R. Ishmael took the opposite view and prohibited the Aaronic priest from such defilement. This controversy is noted in *Siphra* (Emor, §1:12): "The wife of Joseph the priest died on Passover eve and when he refused to defile himself for her the sages dragged him (to her) and defiled him against his will." We might also note that the prohibition given to Ezekiel regarding mourning for his wife (Ezek 24:15–18) would indicate that such mourning was normally allowed for a priest. It would seem that a *qal v'chomer* argument also functions here: if the priest were allowed to be defiled for his children, how much more would this be the case for his wife.

The obvious question that comes to us from these first verses is why God would prohibit the priests who attend His altar from corpse defilement for a more distant relative. Such defilement would have rendered him unable to perform his duties for a period of time, but surely he could have found another priest to substitute for him. The issue, however, is not that corpse defilement would render him unable to perform his duties, but that the Aaronic priesthood was to function as a clear foreshadow of the ultimate Priest. His coming was for the purpose of overcoming death, and as such, those priests who, each generation, lived and worked as a portend of the coming Messiah, were to be known as separated (as much as possible) from death. Their work, so marked by the sacrifice of animals, was to stand in stark contrast to their own lives which were to be symbols of life. This emphasis is noted in the words of Yeshua, the very One to whom the priestly service pointed: "I am come that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

The second category of prohibitions for the Aaronic Priests relates to their utter distinction from the priests of the pagan religions (vv. 5–9). It was common among the pagan priesthoods for them to shave their heads, to scar their skin, and to engage in fertility rites as part of their sacral duties. It was not uncommon that daughters of priests would be dedicated to the pagan fertility rituals. The Israelite priesthood was therefore to be entirely distinguished from such pagan practices. Thus, the Aaronic priests were prohibited from shaving their heads bald, scaring the corners of their beard, or making any cuts in their flesh. In their general appearance, they looked like other Israelite men. Their distinction was specifically in their duties "before Adonai" and their unique appointment to fulfill them. So too, Yeshua appeared as a common man. His uniqueness was realized only in the duties He performed, and still performs as our great High Priest.

Verses 10–15 pertain specifically to the High Priest, the one chosen from among his brethren to be anointed and to wear the special garments of the High Priest. Unlike the other Aaronic priests, the Cohen Gadol is prohibited from participation in the normal mourning rituals, nor is he allowed to undergo any defilement by a corpse, even for his own parents. At first reading, it appears that our text prohibits the Cohen Gadol from ever leaving the sanctuary (a point over which the Sages debated), but it should probably be understood to mean that while the Cohen Gadol was performing his duties, dressed in his sacred vestments, he was not allowed to leave the sanctuary, and particularly (in this context) was not allowed to participate in a funeral or procession to a burial place. While it appears that Eli and Samuel resided within the confines of the sanctuary, one is at a loss to understand how they did, seeing that no living quarters were described to Moses when instructions were given for the construction of the Mishkan. The Sages note that the Cohen Gadol would regularly leave the sanctuary when his daily duties had been performed, and when he did, he would put on ordinary clothes (m.*Hor.* 3:5; b.*Hor.* 12b). Thus, for instance, when the high priest tears his clothes in Mark 14:63, it is most likely his ordinary clothes that he tears (since it happened in his home) rather than the sacred vestments.

The tearing of clothing and disheveling the hair (and leaving it uncovered) were ancient signs of mourning (cf. Lev 10:6). Thus, the prohibition of v. 10, that the High Priest not to "uncover his head nor tear his clothes" relates specifically to rituals of mourning the dead. While it appears that common priests might be relieved of their duties in order to mourn the death of a close relative, the High Priest was given no such allowance. While wearing the garments of his office, he was restrained from any mourning ritual for one who had died. Some have suggested that the High Priest, once he had taken off the holy vestments and left the sanctuary precinct, could mourn the death of a

relative, but he could not enter the room where the corpse lay, nor could he participate in the actual burial, for such would defile him for seven days, days in which his service was essential. Once again, the foreshadowing of Yeshua is at the heart of these priestly regulations: the impeccability of His life was necessary for the sacrifice He would make on behalf of His people.

Vv. 12–15 relate to the laws of marriage for the Cohen Gadol. Interestingly, there are no similar laws given to the common priest. Yet since anyone of the common priests might eventually become High Priest, it was determined by the Sages that these laws applied to all Aaronic priests. The priest was allowed to marry only an Israelite woman who had never had relations with a man. Thus a widow, divorcee, or a woman who had engaged in illicit sexual relations was prohibited to the priest. The reason given is clear: the priest was to be careful to maintain the Aaronic lineage to which his office was attached. Children born by women who had relations with another man could always be suspect in terms of their lineage. The Sages added an additional fence: a priest should marry within the Aaronic clan (b.*Pesach* 49a), though it is clear that this *halachah* was not always followed.

Vv. 16–23 list the prohibitions relating to bodily defects which disqualify a man of Aaronic descent from functioning in the office of a priest. These include: 1) blindness, 2) being lame, 3) having a disfigured face, 4) having other bodily disfigurements, 5) having broken foot, 6) or a broken hand, 7) being hunchback 8) being a dwarf, 9) having a defect in the eye, 10) suffering from eczema, 11) or scabs, 12) or having crushed or swollen testicles. These twelve were considered categories by the Sages, and expanded to 142 (see Milgrom, *Leviticus* in *The Anchor Bible*, 1.1825). A major criteria for the Sages was appearance, but of course the final defect (#12) was never seen. It is interesting to note the parallel between defects that rendered sacrificial animals unfit (22:22–24) and the list of defects that disqualified a potential priest.

Even though a male descendent of Aaron might be disqualified from service in the Tabernacle/ Temple, he still was allowed to eat of the priest's due, and thus his livelihood was the same as those active priests. It is possible that his duties involved things other than the actual service at the altar and within the Mishkan.

What is the significance of these priestly commandments? What do they teach us about God and His Messiah, our Great High Priest? Surely the requirement that the priest have no bodily defect speaks to the high qualifications required for priestly service. Like the sacrificial animal that had to be without blemish or spot, so the High Priest could not conduct His duties before the Holy One unless His life was (metaphorically speaking) spotless. The sinlessness of Yeshua (His impeccability) is an essential requirement for His qualifications as our acting High Priest.

The fact that a priest could only marry a virgin of Israel is also illustrative of the fact that Yeshua came to us entirely untouched by the sin of mankind. In His miraculous birth, He came untainted by the sin of Adam, and as such, He came as the spotless Lamb of God by Whom our sins are atoned.

In each case, the requirements of the Aaronic priests emphasizes the utter holiness of God Himself, and the holy status which the priest must therefore have in order to approach His presence on behalf of sinners.

Haftarah: Ezekiel 44:25–31

The connection of the *haftarah* to the Torah portion is obvious: it deals with the same subject of the manner in which the Zadokite priests were to keep themselves from corpse contamination with the exception of near relatives. V. 25 essentially reiterates Lev 21:1–3. Moreover, Ezekiel adds the notice that a priest who is defiled by a corpse of his close relatives must follow the prescribed ritual of a seven days cleansing period, and the bringing of the appropriate sacrifice on the eighth day. Only following the period of cleansing (cf. Num 19:11f) and the required guilt offering (cf. Lev 5) is the priest able to return to his duties within the sanctuary courts.

Lacking in the Ezekiel text are regulations specific to the Cohen Gadol (High Priest). Indeed, the Cohen Gadol is not mentioned at all in Ezekiel's prophetic vision of the Temple. It appears,

however, that in Ezekiel's vision, the Prince (נָשִׂיא, *nasi'*) takes on duties previously performed by the Cohen Gadol. For instance, he offers the sacrifices of the Sabbath and the new moon, and is alone allowed to enter the inner porch (which parallels the inner *sanctum* of the Tabernacle) by way of the gate to the porch (cf. Ezek. 44:3; 46:2, 8). For Ezekiel, the Prince takes up the duties of the Cohen Gadol. But who is this Prince? Once again, it appears that the Prince of Ezekiel's temple vision is the Messiah: "And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David will be prince among them; I the LORD have spoken" (Ezek. 34:24). Here, in the millennial Temple, the priest who functions as the Cohen Gadol also has a royal position. He is the priest of Zechariah's vision Who is both King and Priest:

Thus says the LORD of hosts, "Behold, a man whose name is Branch, for He will branch out from where He is; and He will build the temple of the LORD. Yes, it is He who will build the temple of the LORD, and He who will bear the honor and sit and rule on His throne. Thus, He will be a priest on His throne, and the counsel of peace will be between the two offices." (Zech 6:12–13)

It is often a difficulty for some to understand why sacrifices would be offered in the millennial Temple. If Yeshua's sacrifice was the fulfillment of the sacrifices offered in the Tabernacle and Temples, what need would there be for sacrifices in the millennial Temple? Would not such a practice diminish the value of Yeshua's death, teaching that His death was not entirely sufficient? The answer, of course, is "no." From the first giving of the sacrifices to Israel, they never brought about the means for a final and complete atonement for sin. They functioned to render Israelites ceremonially clean within the ritual of the Temple, and particularly as a foreshadow of the true and eternal sacrifice of the Messiah. But as "pictures" or divine revelations of the sacrificial work of Messiah, they enabled the people of Israel to understand the need for Messiah's death: the innocent victim takes the sin of the guilty and pays for it through the shedding of blood (death). Thus, the millennial sacrifices will function in precisely the same manner. While the sacrifices of the Tabernacle and Temple pointed forward to the death of Messiah, the sacrifices in the millennial Temple will point backward to His death as the divine sacrifice of His people. In order for the millennial sacrifices to diminish the sacrifice of Messiah, they would have to have saving value in and of themselves: but they will not, for never did the sacrifices of animals secure forgiveness of sins (cf. Heb 10:4). Thus, the millennial sacrifices will function in precisely the same manner in which the sacrifices functioned throughout the history of Israel—as divine revelation and demonstration of Yeshua's death, the divinely appointed sacrifice for sinners.

Apostolic Portion: Luke 11:30–44

This portion was chosen to parallel the Torah *parashah* because it contains our Master's teaching about the application of clean and unclean. The laws of purity given to us in the Torah functioned to teach Israel of God's holiness, the means by which a sinner could be reconciled to God, and the requirement for God's people to be holy even as He is holy. The rituals of purities were to teach that in order to fellowship with God, one's whole life (one's soul) must be holy, both spirit and body.

Like many of the Israelites in our Master's day, so it is true in every generation: it is easy to engage in the prescribed rituals and miss the eternal lessons they teach. This does not mean that the rituals are wrong, or that they are not needed. Quite the opposite: the rituals were commanded by God because in the proper execution of these rituals—when done with a heart to know and please God—they teach the eternal truths He desires for us to know.

In our Apostolic portion, Yeshua speaks as one of the prophets of old, coming to Israel and warning her that she has disregarded the word of God, and in so doing, was in danger of His judgment. Jonah's message was heeded by the Ninevites, yet one greater than Jonah was in their midst, and they had rejected His teaching. The light of the truth had dawned upon them, yet they remained in the darkness.

It is His voice of warning and judgment that sets up the discussion regarding hand washing.

After having delivered His prophet-like message, a Pharisee invites Him to lunch. In the Pharisee's eyes, this Teacher of judgment had called the people to a renewed emphasis upon holiness—that fit the Pharisee's agenda. Yet it had to have been irksome to be on the receiving end of Yeshua's words, especially since many of the Pharisees of the day considered themselves to be the high watermark for piety.

Again, like the prophets of old, Yeshua often “pushes the envelope” in order to evoke response and to set the platform for His teaching. Nothing in the written Torah commands that one wash his or her hands before eating. This was an additional point of *halachah* added by the Pharisaic Sages, since they had taken the priestly requirements of purities and applied them to the common people as a fence: if one remains as ritually pure as a priest, one is less likely to violate even the common laws of purities. Thus, they instituted the requirement to wash one's hands before eating, hoping that such washing would mimic the state of purity required of priests who were required to eat their priestly due in a state of ritual purity.

It appears that Yeshua wants to engage His host in a discussion of such purity and the eternal lessons one is to learn from it. He therefore starts in eating without washing His hands. He hasn't transgressed God's commandments—He has rather called into question the purpose of the rabbinic *halachah*. The Pharisee immediately notes the incongruity: Yeshua has called the people to holiness, yet He has neglected to rise to the high level of purity as the Pharisee defined it—He had eaten without ceremonially washing His hands. His teaching here may be summed in v. 41: “But give that which is within as charity, and then all things are clean for you.” We might better paraphrase: “But be just as concerned that you offer your inner self as a gift to God, then everything else will have its proper sense of purity for you.” In other words, if your soul is laden with hidden sin, selfishness, hypocrisy, and disobedience, washing your hands has no value at all. As always, Yeshua teaches us that the outward rituals have been given to teach us about one's eternal relationship with God. If we only concentrate upon the ritual and miss the lesson it teaches, the ritual itself has no value. Yeshua does not negate even the man-made ritual of hand washing: He simply wants us to remember that washing our hands before eating has a lesson for our souls. Our souls also need to be cleansed.