

SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

If Rabbis Can Marry Why Can't Priests?

When I was in high school, “Coffee Houses” were popular, but they were not a cafe, and they weren’t even about coffee. They were social gatherings where young people would talk, enjoy music, and stay out of trouble.

The first coffee house I attended met in the basement of a church.

Although these were not religious events, I somehow ended up in a dialogue with a priest. While he talked to me about Jesus, I wanted to know why the church did not allow priests to be married.

Every Rabbi I knew was married. Furthermore, the bible says Jewish priests [kohanim] may marry,¹ which makes sense since the priesthood is a hereditary position and marriage is the only way to ensure future generations of priests.

Even more striking is the requirement that the High Priest [Kohen Gadol] must be married to perform the Yom Kippur service, a day when only he would enter the Temple’s Holy of Holies.

The Torah says concerning the first high priest, “*Aaron shall bring the bull for his sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household*” (Leviticus 16:11). Our sages, in Yoma 13a, point out that the word “household” refers to his wife.

The marriage requirements for kohanim are described in this week’s Torah portion Emor (Leviticus 21:1–24:23). Since kohanim were required to maintain a higher level of holiness, they were commanded to marry women who were not in previous relationships. These restrictions were a far cry from the vow of celibacy found in other religions.

How do these regulations contribute to the kohen’s holiness?

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The Hebrew word for holy, Kodesh [קדש], means separate, as we see in the verse, “*You are to be holy to me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have **SEPARATED** you from the nations to be my own*” (Leviticus 20:26).

Being holy and separate indicates that God wants us to have an intimate relationship with Him alone and not share our allegiance with any other entity.

Therefore, the Torah teaches, “*You shall have no other gods before Me* (Exodus 20:3), and “*I will not **SHARE** My glory to another or My praise to idols*” (Isaiah 42:8).

Kohanim hold an elevated position and their intimate [not shared] relationship with God is alluded to in the act of marriage and the restrictions that require that they avoid marrying a woman who was previously “shared” with someone else.

Marriage is a metaphor for the relationship between God and the Jewish people, as it says, “*I will betroth you to Me forever*” (Hosea 2:19), and “*I was a husband to them*” (Jeremiah 31:32).

The Torah also refers to the entire Jewish people as a “*nation of priests and a holy nation*” (Exodus 19:6) and instructs us to “*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might*” (Deuteronomy 6:5). We are also commanded, “*Do not follow other gods to serve and worship them*” (Deuteronomy 6:14).

Every one of us has the ability to achieve our own personal and intimate relationship with God and not share this relationship by following false gods, as it says, “*it is not too difficult for you, and it is not beyond your reach.*” (Deuteronomy 30:11).

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

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¹ It was the Council of Nicea, convened in 325 CE by the Roman Emperor Constantine, that decreed that priests could not marry. This council also established other non-biblical doctrines such as the Trinity and the abrogation of the commandments. Many scholars attribute the growth of Christianity to Constantine whose edict established Christianity as the official state religion of the Roman empire.