

EMOR (LEVITICUS 21:1-24:23)

When In Rome...?

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

I normally don't make it a practice to write about other religions. I have no expertise in other religions, and don't see it as my role to comment. (Especially considering the fact that I don't, to my knowledge, have any Catholics on my mailing list. :-)) However, when the major events of the day are affected, I am willing to make an exception.

(I should point out that it is my personal belief that every Jew in America should give thanks to G-d that we live in what is basically a Christian country. Although it has not always been this way -- Spain, for example, is a painful exception -- we currently fare much better in Christian countries than in Muslim ones. Current events seem to indicate that Israel's best friend is the Christian Right.)

"Sanctify him (the Kohain-Priest) ... he will be holy to you because I, the G-d who sanctifies you, am holy." (Leviticus, 21:8)

In Judaism, one does not enter the priesthood by choice. It is a privilege/obligation that comes to the descendants of Aaron. The Kohain is required to live a holy lifestyle. Among other things, he has limitations on whom he may marry and where he may go.

The *Kohain Gadol*, or High Priest, has additional rules that go beyond those of a regular priest. One of the requirements is that he **MUST** marry. (Marriage is actually a requirement for every Jew. The Torah emphasizes this obligation in reference to the High Priest.) It is considered so imperative that he be married that there is even an authority in the Talmud who maintains that he should have **TWO WIVES**, in case wife #1 dies. (This opinion is not accepted.)

Unlike the opinions of others, the Torah does not consider marriage to be a lower level of sanctity, or an indulgence to "pursue sins of the flesh." On the contrary: *"G-d said, 'It is not good that man be alone; I will make for him a helpmate.'"* (Genesis, 2:18) Until a man finds the woman with whom he is destined to share his future, he is considered incomplete.

It would be naïve to assume that marriage prevents all evil. To be sure, the jails and mental hospitals have no shortage of married men who have perpetrated despicable misdeeds. However, a person's decision to embark upon a career that precludes ever fulfilling G-d's natural plan of a marital relationship, should, at the very least, raise concerns as to that person's all-around stability.

Is anybody in Rome listening?

When I was a Yeshiva student in Jerusalem, I took on, as an extracurricular project, the study of "Sofrus," scribal arts. A Sofer is a highly trained rabbi who writes and repairs sacred texts, such as Torah Scrolls, and Mezuzahs. It is considered an act of intense holiness to infuse ink and parchment with the sanctity of a Torah. One is judged, not only by his artistic and legal expertise, but by his piety as well.

After spending two years studying the laws and serving as an apprentice, I appeared before a Rabbinic Tribunal in B'nei Brak to be tested and certified as a "Sofer STA" M," a Scribe for Torahs, Tefillin, and Mezuzahs. The rabbis reviewed a Megillah that I had written -- they found it acceptable. They quizzed me on several of the intricate laws involved in this endeavor -- I responded to every question satisfactorily.

The rabbis huddled together in a whispered conference. Would I receive my certification? Finally, the Chief Rabbi of the court rendered his decision:

"You have passed the test...

...Come back when you're married."

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz