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THOUGHTS ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"L

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לעילוי נשמת

HaRav Ya'akov Zvi ben David ArieH zt"l

לעילוי נשמות

פנחס בן יעקב אשר וגולדה בת ישראל דוד אייזע"ה ועזריאל בן אריה לייב ומעניה בת יצחק שרטור ע"ה

Prophet and Priest

The sedra of Tetzaveh, as commentators have noted, has one unusual feature: it is the only sedra from the beginning of Shemot to the end of Devarim that does not contain the name of Moses. Several interpretations have been offered.

The Vilna Gaon suggests that it is related to the fact that in most years it is read during the week in which the seventh of Adar falls: the day of Moses' death. During this week we sense the loss of the greatest leader in Jewish history – and his absence from Tetzaveh expresses that loss.

The Baal HaTurim relates it to Moses' plea, in next week's sedra, for God to forgive Israel. "If not," says Moses, "blot me out of the book you

have written" (Ex. 32:32). There is a principle that "The curse of a sage comes true, even if it was conditional" (Makkot 11a). Thus, for one week his name was "blotted out" from the Torah.

The Paneach Raza relates it to another principle: "There is no anger that does not leave an impression" When Moses, for the last time, declined God's invitation to lead the Jewish People out of Egypt, saying "Please send someone else", God "became angry with Moses" (Ex. 4:13-14) and told him that his brother Aaron would accompany him. For that reason, Moses forfeited the role he might otherwise have had, of becoming the first of Israel's priests, a role that went instead to Aaron. That is why he is missing from the sedra of Tetzaveh, which is dedicated to the role of the Kohen.

All three explanations focus on an absence. However, perhaps the simplest explanation is that Tetzaveh is dedicated to a presence, one that had a decisive influence on Judaism and Jewish history.

Judaism is unusual in that it recognises not one form of religious leadership but two: the Navi and Kohen, the prophet and the priest. The figure of the prophet has always captured the imagination. He or she is a person of drama, "speaking truth to power", unafraid to challenge kings and courts or society as a whole in the name of high, even utopian

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ideals. No other type of religious personality has had the impact as the prophets of Israel, of whom the greatest was Moses. The priests, by contrast, were for the most part quieter figures, a-political, who served in the Sanctuary rather than in the spotlight of political debate. Yet they, no less than the prophets, sustained Israel as a holy nation. Indeed, though the Children of Israel were summoned to become “a kingdom of priests” they were never called on to be a people of prophets.¹

Let us therefore consider some of the differences between a prophet and a priest:

The role of priest was dynastic. It passed from father to son. The role of prophet was not dynastic. Moses’ own sons did not succeed him; Joshua, his disciple, was chosen instead.

The task of the priest was related to his office. It was not inherently personal or charismatic. The prophets, by contrast, each imparted their own personality. “No two prophets had the same style.”²

The priests wore a special uniform; the prophets did not.

There are rules of *kavod* (honour) due to a Kohen. There are no corresponding rules for the honour due to a prophet. A prophet is honoured by being listened to, not by formal protocols of respect.

The priests were removed from the people. They served in the Temple. They were not allowed to become defiled. There were restrictions on whom they might marry. The prophet, by contrast, was usually part of the people. He might be a shepherd like Moses or Amos, or a farmer like Elisha. Until the word

1. Moses said, “Would that all God’s people were prophets”, but this was a wish, not a reality.

2. This, incidentally, is why there were prophetesses but no priestesses: this corresponds to the difference between formal office and personal authority. See R. Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron, Responsa Binyan Av, I:65.



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or vision came, there was nothing special in his work or social class.

The priest offered up sacrifices in silence. The prophet served God through the word.

They lived in two different modes of time. The priest functioned in cyclical time – the day (or week or month) that is like yesterday or tomorrow. The prophet lived in covenantal (sometimes inaccurately called linear) time – the today that is radically unlike yesterday or tomorrow. The service of the priest never changed; that of the prophet was constantly changing. Another way of putting it is to say that the priest worked to sanctify nature, the prophet to respond to history.

Thus the priest represents the principle of structure in Jewish life, while the prophet represents spontaneity.

The key words in the vocabulary of the Kohen are *kodesh* and *chol*, *tahor* and *tamei*, sacred, secular, pure and impure. The key words in the vocabulary of the prophets are *tzeddek* and *mishpat*, *chesed* and *rachamim*, righteousness and justice, kindness and compassion.

The key verbs of priesthood are *lehorot* and *lehavdil*, to instruct and distinguish. The key activity of the prophet is to proclaim “the word of the Lord” The distinction between priestly and prophetic consciousness (*torat kohanim* and *torat nevi'im*) is fundamental to Judaism,

and is reflected in the differences between law and narrative, *halachah* and *aggadah*, creation and redemption. The priest speaks the Word of God for all time, the prophet, the Word of God for this time. Without the prophet, Judaism would not be a religion of history and destiny. But without the priest, the Children of Israel would not have become the people of eternity. This is beautifully summed up in the opening verses of Tetzaveh:

Command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of pressed olives, to keep the lamp constantly burning in the tent of meeting, outside the curtain that is in front of the Testimony, Aaron and his sons shall keep the lamps burning before the Lord from evening to morning. This is to be a lasting ordinance among the Israelites for the generations to come.

Moses the prophet dominates four of the five books that bear his name. But in Tetzaveh for once it is Aaron, the first of the priests, who holds centre-stage, undiminished by the rival presence of his brother. For whereas Moses lit the fire in the souls of the Jewish people, Aaron tended the flame and turned it into “an eternal light”. ■

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