

Preserving an Old Idea

The very idea of a hereditary priesthood strikes us nowadays as belonging to a previous era, not unlike the hereditary monarchy. Nowadays we believe in meritocracy. And indeed Judaism itself has moved way from being a priest based religion to one that elevates scholarship and is open to those who choose to study. It is the rabbinate that now replaces the priesthood in practical terms.

So why do we still have priests with their own rules and restrictions? Is it just nostalgia? A relic of the past? Or does it symbolize something more significant?

We notice the priest whenever we read from the Torah because he and the Levite get preferential treatment. We also notice the priest at services when they bless the community. In Israel and Sefardi communities it is daily. In some Western communities it is occasional. The blessing comes from God. The priest is merely the vehicle. As with life in general, we often misunderstand the real source of our good fortune.

It is a feature of Jewish life that even when a part of our ancient religion falls out of use, like sacrifices, or the Levirate marriage, we like to keep the idea alive in some way to retain the link with the past. We do not like to scrap old ideas. Instead we find ways to adapt or to get around them. This way we preserve the original idea even if in practice it becomes unworkable.

We revere the past even as we adapt to modernity. We recognize the importance of tradition as well as progress. Sometimes the law may lag in attuning the two, but the process continues within Jewish Law, Halacha, through the very method, the dialectic, the constant debate that the rabbis introduced to supplement the Original text. The ideal of dedication, of communal service remains as relevant today as it was then.