

Supporting the Priests

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

This week's reading from the Torah follows on from last week's description of the Tabernacle. It is concerned with the clothes of the Priests, the Cohanim, whose full-time task it was to run the ceremonials of the Tabernacle on behalf of the community. They were compensated by being given a share in the sacrifices that everyone brought and in exchange they were expected to perform ceremonies on behalf of the community and to be the teachers and the guardians of the tradition.

If the Children of Israel were supposed to set an example to the wider world of how to live an ethical life, the priests were the example to the example. That was why they were given no tribal territory in the Land of Israel and were discouraged from pursuing wealth so that they could concentrate exclusively on their role. Incidentally, the extreme detail the Torah goes into of their dress and the way it was made makes this week's reading very appropriate for the start of Fashion Week and it's a fascinating study of ancient clothing styles and materials.

Sadly as we know from the bible itself, within a short period of arriving in Israel the priesthood became corrupt and turned into a privileged aristocracy that soon forgot its mission. They were supposed to be the guardians of the flame of tradition, the symbols of God's benevolence on earth. But instead they used their position to become money grabbing hypocrites misusing religion for their own benefit.

In a way you could say in some ways rabbis today play most of the leadership and educational role the priests once had, now that we do not have a Tabernacle or a Temple. But sadly we see that rabbis too are just as prone to corruption and misusing their positions as the priesthood was. If the priesthood nowadays is no more than a reminder of the past and how it should and could be, I fear that if rabbinic leadership does not return to its original role of ethical leadership and if it continues to pursue wealth over morality, it too will become a relic.