

What Do We Learn From the Priests?

The Priests of old, had to be in a constant state of ritual purity. So that whenever they were called upon to perform in the Tabernacle or Temple they would be ready. Purity had nothing to do with what we call cleanliness. You might be covered in mud from tip to toe and still be "impure" or more accurately, "unprepared." And as clean as a whistle. But if you were, say, in a hall with a dead body, no matter how far away, you would be impure. This was all part of the mystique of separateness that priests of all different religions underwent to maintain a distance and state of constant preparedness for holy service. If one did become "unprepared," the Mikvah, special pool of water, was the symbolic process of returning to a state of "religious normality." Here too, even if you were the cleanest possible, you still had to dip in.

All this ancient ritual, ceremonial, the sort of protocol we see reflected in Church and State ceremonies today, is something that we moderns find very difficult to feel enthusiastic about. So, is there anything we can learn from this?

First of all, the Torah specifically says that a priest who, as normal rule, would have nothing to do with burying or attending to a dead person, could and should get involved with members of his family, even those who are not priests. The obligation to ensure that the dead are buried and that family takes priority over ceremonial ritual is particularly important nowadays. Too many people who become more religious think this requires them to limit contact with their less religious family. This is not what the Torah wants.

The other important lesson is that the Torah juxtaposes the role of the priest with keeping the festivals. There each person in his or her way becomes a priest, a holy person, for the duration of the festival. The home parallels the Temple. We can understand the need for public ceremony and community cohesion. But it is what we do in our homes, our private lives, that is the core of Jewish religious life. But it is what we do in our homes, our private lives, that is the core of Jewish religious life.