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Prohibited Practices for the Priests
21: 1-15

Prohibited practices for the priests DIG: Who was a priest allowed to mourn for and why? Why wasn't a priest allowed to attend the burial of his wife? In what sense are the Levitical sacrifices "God's bread?" Why did the priests need to have no blemishes to offer sacrifices?

REFLECT: Do you celebrate God's appointed times? Why? Why not? Do you feel that the prohibited practices for the priests were excessive? Why or why not? What standards do you have for your spiritual leaders? What does it mean to sanctify the Name of God?

Parashah 31: Emor (Say) 21:1 to 24:23

(See my commentary on Deuteronomy, to see link click Af – Parashah)

The Key People are **Moshe, the sons of Aaron, and Aaron.**

The Scene is **the Tabernacle** in **the wilderness of Sinai**.

The Main Events include **ADONAI giving Moshe mitzvot for priests to stay holy, with special mitzvot for the high priest; guidelines for treating the sacred offerings with respect, including what may be eaten by whom and which animals were acceptable as sacrifices; descriptions of the appointed feasts to proclaim as sacred assemblies, including Shabbat, Pesach and Hag ha'Matzah, Resheet, Shavu'ot, Rosh ha'Shanah, Yom Kippur, and Shukkot; instructions for the priests to tend the lamps and bake bread to set before the LORD; and the story of a blasphemer stoned as Ha'Shem commanded; guidelines for restitution – life for life.**

We now come to a parashah that is filled to the brim with teachings about **the Person** and ministry of **the Messiah**. The main feature of this parashah is the revelation of **God's** calendar, or **God's appointed times** for **His people**. **ADONAI**

instructed **Isra'el** to set aside certain days and years that would serve as special times of worship, celebration, and rest. In **Leviticus 23:2 God said to Moshe, "Speak to the Israelites** and say to **them, "These are the LORD's sacred assemblies, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies."** The Hebrew word translated **sacred assemblies** is from the word *mo'ed*. This word actually means *appointed times* (**to see link click Dw – God's Appointed Times**)**.** It can be likened to **YHVH** telling **Isra'el** to get out **her** personal and national planning calendars and write in certain appointments for **Ha'Shem**. **He** already has **her** in **His** calendar and **He**, therefore, instructed **Isra'el** to give time to **Him** accordingly. For, on those particular days **ADONAI** desires to meet with **His people** in very special ways.[373]

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Thank **You** so much that **You** desire a relationship of love with me. **You** are **the Almighty King of Kings**, yet **You** also walk in chesed, steadfast love, with me! We so love to walk, talk and to listen to **You**. A smile comes to my face and my heart skips a beat when I think of having an eternal relationship with my loving **Father**. **Your** steadfast love frames all that **You** do and say. When there are rules that I don't understand, I remember that **You**, in **Your** infinite kindness, love me and want the best for me. **Yeshua** says: **I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10c)!***

Trials are often used by you to purify my soul. When I am in the midst of trials that I don't understand, just like David when he was being pursued by Sha'ul, I remember the eternal reality of your steadfast love which satisfies me like a wonderful meal. ***Since Your loving kindness is better than life, my lips will praise You . . . My soul is satisfied as with fat and oil, so my mouth praises You with joyful lips (Psalms 63:3,5).***

*Never have **You** forgotten **Your** child, but with your eye carefully checking the heat of the fire that I feel myself in, **You** are seeking to purify me like gold purified in the fire.* ***These trials are so that the true metal of your faith (far more valuable than gold, which perishes though refined by fire) may come to light in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Messiah Yeshua. (1 Peter 1:7).*** *These trials and rules are momentary, but the joy that comes from trusting and obeying **You** will last forever.* ***For I consider the sufferings of this present time not worthy to be compared with the coming glory to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18). You** are a joy to obey! In **Your** holy name and power of **Your Son's** resurrection. Amen*

The **appointed times** all point to the ministry of **Yeshua Messiah**. **Pesach** points to **His death**, **Hag ha'Matzah** points to the sinlessness of **His** sacrifice**, Resheet** points to **His** resurrection**, Shavu'ot** points to the birth of **His** Church**, Rosh ha'Shanah** points to the rapture**, Yom Kippur** points to the Great Tribulation**, and Shukkot** points to the Messianic Kingdom.

The priests and the dead (21:1-6): More than a double standard for leadership, standards of **holiness** increase as those around **YHVH** move closer to **Him**. Being sanctified (being made **holy** for the purposes of **God**) means becoming kosher, or acceptable, to draw near to **the LORD**. In the case of **the priests**, failure to observe **priestly** commands seen in these verses could **defile the Tabernacle**. **The priests** could only **mourn** the loss of **close family members**. **ADONAI said to Moshe, "Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron; tell them: 'No priest is to make himself ritually unclean for any of his people who dies, dies, except for his close family members –** defined as **his mother, father, son, daughter and brother** or **an unmarried sister' (21:1-3)."** These same six **relatives** are mentioned in **Ezeki'el 44:25**. Anything **dead** is laden with the power of **death**, and for that reason **it** does, in a special way, render that person **ritually unclean**, incapable of dealing with **the holy**, the power of life itself.[374] **The priest, in the role of husband, was not even permitted to attend the burial of his wife, who is related to him through marriage. The six relatives at whose death a priest could mourn (being near the dead body) rendered him impure.** But other than this one exception, **he could not make himself unclean, because he was a leader among his people; doing so would defile him (21:4).** The mitzvot regarding contact with **a corpse** by **the Israelites** is addressed in **Numbers 19:10-22**. Touching **a dead body** rendered one **unclean for seven days (Numbers 19:11)**.

Priests are not to make bald spots on their heads, shave the edges of their beards or cut their flesh (21:5). A similar prohibition is stated in **Ezeki'el 44:20**. **Deuteronomy 14:1** prohibits all **Israelites** from doing this, but it is understandable that this code should emphasize this prohibition with respect to **the priests**. Like **cutting**, shaving **the hair** or pulling **it** out were rites of **mourning** in ancient Canaan that **Israelite** religious leaders sought to prevent.[375] **Holy** behaviors like these may sound discriminatory to western ears. But what is kosher to **God** does not carry good or bad connotations in the Semitic world. As in constructing a puzzle, each piece of the puzzle fits together and helps to complete the whole![376]

There is a fascinating teaching contained in this section which deserves some attention. Four times in **Chapter 21 (verses 6, 8, 17** and **21)** we are informed the reason *why* the **priests** were to remain **ritually clean**, having no **blemish**, **physical handicap**, or any **bodily imperfection**. Since the animal which was offered was required to be free from imperfections, **the priest** who offered it on behalf of the sinner, had, therefore, to be just as free from **imperfections**. **They** were **to be holy for their God and not defile the name of their God. For they are the ones who present ADONAI with offerings made by fire, the bread of their God; therefore, they must be holy (21:6).** Sacrificial **offerings** are often called *lehem*, translated **bread** or **food**, and, at least in a symbolic sense, are considered **bread** for **YHVH**. **The priests** needed to observe strict codes of purity for **they** were the mediators between the worshiper and **ADONAI**.[377] It seems that what gave **God** great joy was the fact that **He** was obeyed by worshipful people who offered **the** prescribed **sacrifices** just as **He** had said (see **Ah – The Offerings from the People's Perspective**). This is what pleased **Ha'Shem** and **the offering** became a sweet aroma to **Him**. In other words, **God's bread** was **mankind's** seeking to draw near to **Him**.[378]

The priests and women (21:7-9): The Torah explains that **the priest** must exercise a higher standard in the choice of **a bride**. **A priest is not to marry a woman who is a prostitute, who has been defiled or who has been divorced; because he is holy for his God (21:7). A woman defiled by prostitution has traditionally been understood as any woman who has lived a promiscuous lifestyle, whether for pay or not.** The same **woman** was permitted to **marry** any other **Israelite** as illustrated in the book of **Hosea**. Conversely, it was clearly implied that **the priest himself** was forbidden to live promiscuously. If the exalted sanctity of **the priesthood** forbade **him to marry a woman** who lived a worldly lifestyle, how much more so was **he himself** forbidden from living such a lifestyle. **Rather, you are to set him apart as holy, because he offers the bread of your God. Consider them holy, because I ADONAI am holy – who made them holy (21:8).** From the command to **sanctify the priesthood** we learn the importance of giving **Messiah**, our spiritual **High Priest**, the sanctity and honor due **Him**. Sanctifying **the Master** requires reverence of **His Name** and **Person**.

The daughter of a priest who defiled herself by a promiscuous lifestyle defiled her father. It became a capital offense and **she** was **to be put to death by fire** (see **21:9** for further details)**. A priest** who would allow **a prostitute** to

reside under **his** roof, even if it was **his** own **daughter**, would not be qualified to render decisions on behalf of the covenant community. **The priest** was not in any way to be associated with evil practices because **he** was the designated vessel in the service of **God**. These mitzvot teach us about the very nature of **YHVH** and **His** relationship to **His people**. Throughout the Scriptures, **God** compares **His people** to **a bride**. What kind of **bride** are we to be? We are to be **a people without a spot, wrinkle or any such thing, but holy and without defect (Ephesians 5:27b).** Whenever **the people of God** slide into idolatry, **He** compares us to **a prostitute** and an unfaithful **bride**. Such **a bride** is unfit for **the holiness** of **God**.[379]



The high priest's family (21:10-15): The high priest was held to an even higher (no pun intended) standard than an ordinary **priest**. This is the first occurrence of the term **high priest** in the Bible and **its** only occurrence in **Leviticus**. **The one who is ranked highest among his brothers, the one on whose head the anointing oil is poured and who is consecrated to put on the garments, is not to shave his head, tear his clothes, go in to where any dead body is or make himself unclean, even when his father or mother dies (21:10-11). The high priest** was not to **shave his head** or **beard** or **cut his body (21:5)**. The practice of **shaving the head**, or making oneself bald, is also prohibited in **Deuteronomy 14:1**, and appears to be associated with pagan mourning rites **(Isaiah 3:24** and **15:2; Jeremiah 47:5** and **48:37; Ezeki'el 7:18 and 27:31; Amos 8:10; Micah 1:16). He** could not go anywhere near **a dead body**, not even when **his father or mother died.**

Aaron and **his sons** could **not leave the Sanctuary (21:12a)** during **their** seven-day ordination ceremony (see **Av – The Ordination Ceremony of the Priesthood**). Obviously, this couldn't mean that **he** could never leave **the Sanctuary** at all, otherwise, it would be impossible for **him** to live with **his family**, or to have physical relations with **his wife**. Note also that **Aaron**, **the high priest**, did not remain in **the Sanctuary** all the time **(Numbers 12:1-4** and **16:47)**. The context therefore suggests that **the high priest** could **not leave the Sanctuary** to **mourn** or become **impure**.[380]

Additionally, **he** could **not defile the Sanctuary of his God because the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is on him; I am ADONAI (21:12b).** Child sacrifice to Molech **defiled the Sanctuary** in **20:3** (also see **21:23**). Along with **verse 12** here, these three verses are the only times that the Torah describes **the Sanctuary** being **defiled**. General concerns for **defilement** occur in **verses 7** and **9**. Between them, **verse 8** declares: **because I ADONAI am holy – who made them holy**, just as **verse 15** does. Thus, the text twice relates the **holiness** of **God** to the avoidance of **defilement**. Just as **verses 7-9** deal with sexual matters, so does **verse 13**. The reaffirmation of **God's holiness** explains why **the Sanctuary** should not be **defiled**. **The holiness** of **ADONAI** demands that those who draw near to **Him**, must worship **Him** in **holiness**.[381] **For God is Spirit, so those who worship Him must worship in spirit and in truth (John 4:24).**

Unlike the other **priests**, **the high priest** could only **marry a virgin** daughter of Isra'el, meaning a native-born **woman**, neither a Gentile or proselyte. **He may not marry a widow, divorcee, or a defiled woman who has lived a promiscuous lifestyle; but he must marry a virgin from among his own people and not disqualify his descendants among his people; because I am ADONAI, who makes him holy (21:13-15).** Abstinence from premarital sex on the part of **the wife** of **the high priest** would certainly say something about **her** character, although the legitimacy of the offspring to inherit **the high priesthood** would certainly have been the greater concern.[382]