#### Parashat Emor

# Why Can't I Marry a Kohen?

### Dear Rebbetzin,

I've been divorced for more than ten years and am really exasperated by being set up with one weirdo after the other without being suggested even one decent man to date. I'm sick and tired of being alone and look forward to sharing my life with a quality man that shares my values and interests. Last month, at a social event, I met the nicest man. He was polite, intelligent, had a sense of humor and very attractive. Even more so, he showed a great interest in me and seemed to really understand me. You can only imagine my disappointment when I found out that he is a Kohen and prohibited from marrying a divorced woman. I'm so frustrated about this and have a very hard time understanding this law. Why does the Torah have to be so restrictive preventing two single people from sharing their love and life?

Marian Willner (name changed)

## Dear Marian,

How I feel for you in your loneliness and frustration. After all these years, you finally found a man of your heart and then it turns out that the Torah prohibits a marriage between you. The man with whom you fell in love seems to be like any other Jewish man, and the fact that he happens to be a Kohen doesn't seem to make much of a difference in our current reality. So, in your case, it is indeed hard to understand why the Torah seems so cruel.

# The Spiritual Leadership of the Kohen

The Torah laws preserve the eternal reality even if at a given time they may seem irrelevant. Today, a Kohen may appear no different than any other Jew, however, we need to understand his being selected for special holiness. The Kohen was given the role of the foremost religious leader of the Jewish people. He served in the Temple and was exclusively involved in the study and practice of the Torah and the spiritual development of Israel. His ancestry is from the most distinguished family – a direct descendant of Aharon the High Priest. Throughout Jewish History, the Kohen was granted the highest status of communal leadership, together with the king, the prophet, the judge and the scholar. Whereas, the king provided national stability, the judge social stability, the Kohen provided religious stability and continuity. He connected people with Hashem through offering the sacrifices; he was a spiritual healer, a judge and a teacher. Thus, it was vital to preserve the purity of the Kohen's heredity. Therefore, due to the special holiness of the Kohen, the Torah places certain restrictions on him: He is forbidden any contact with the dead, except for his own immediate family and the abandoned dead; and there are restrictions regarding whom he is permitted to marry.

#### The Role of the Kohen in Our Time

Unlike the determination of Jew or non-Jew, which follows the mother, the tribe is passed down from the father. The Kohen inherits his status from his father and bequeaths it in turn to his son. While the primary functions of the Kohen have been suspended since the destruction of the Temple, certain functions remain. He delivers the Kohanim blessing in the synagogue on holidays in the Diaspora and daily in Israel; and he officiates as the representative of the Temple in *Pidyion HaBen* (Redemption of the First-Born) thirty days after the birth of a first-born male. He is called first to the Torah, and he has the privilege of leading the grace after meals. Just as the Kohen has certain honors, he also has certain

restrictions. To maintain the purity of the Kohen's lineage he was kept to stricter marriage standards than his Jewish brothers.

# The Marriage Restrictions of the Kohen

Parashat Emor opens with restrictions for the Kohanim (Vayikra 21:1-8), in order to preserve their special holiness. Since they are designated by G-d to serve Him in a more intimate capacity that other Jews, they are required to maintain a higher spiritual level. Their marriage restrictions are sandwiched between two Torah verses emphasizing the additional holiness of the Kohanim. "They shall be holy unto their G-d, and not profane the name of their G-d, for the offerings of the Lord made by fire, the bread of their G-d, they do offer; therefore shall they be holy" (Vayikra 21:6). The following verse emphasizes the strict requirements for their family purity. This includes the prohibitive commandment that forbids a Kohen from marrying a divorced woman as it states:

ַספר ויקרא פרק כא פּסוּק ז אָשָּׁה זֹנָה וַחֲלָלָה לֹא יִקְּחוּ וְאִשָּׁה גְּרוּשָׁה מֵאִישָׁהּ לֹא יִקְחוּ כִּי קָדשׁ הוּא לֵאלֹהִיו: "They shall not take as wife a *zonah* (woman who has violated sexual prohibitions), or *chalalah* (woman of defective Kohen status); neither shall they marry a *gerushah* (divorced woman); for he is holy unto his G-d" (*Vayikra* 21:7).

The following Torah verse instructs the Israelites to honor the Kohen: "You shall sanctify him because he offers the bread of your G-d; he shall be holy to you; for I Hashem, Who sanctify you, am holy" (Vayikra 21:8). The word שוֹדְּלָ /kadosh – 'holy' means separate. This is learned from the fact that the first time the word appears in the Torah is in connection with the Shabbat which is separate from the six days of creation (Bereishit 2:3). Likewise, the additional holiness of the Kohen is distinguished by certain separations. Although a regular Kohen is not restricted to marry only a virgin, he is prohibited from marrying certain women who have had an intimate relationship with another man. He is prohibited from marrying a divorcee (even his own divorced wife); a chalalah (woman of defective Kohen status), zonah (a woman who previously violated certain sexual prohibitions, including having relations with a non-Jew), or a giyoret (convert). If he marries any of them, their children likewise become chalalim (defective Kohanim). Sons do not have priestly status, and daughters may not marry kohanim. Thus a woman who is Jewish from birth, not a challalah and never married, may marry a Kohen even though she has had premarital relations, provided none of her partners were prohibited to her.

The Kohen's Prohibition from Marrying a Divorcee does not Reflect any Blemish in Her

The prohibition of a Kohen to marry certain women seems somewhat condescending to these women, especially in light of the Torah's reasoning that a Kohen is required to be ViTp/kadosh – 'holy,' implying that a divorcee is an inappropriate wife for one who is holy! Why does the Torah penalize a woman who had a bad marriage, through no fault of her own, and has now met a Kohen who wants to give her a new life? Did not Amram, father of Miriam and Aharon, remarry Yocheved after divorcing her, who then gave birth to the holy Moshe Rabbeinu? I was mulling over this question for quite a while, unsatisfied with the answers I found on the net, until my husband came up with an answer that truly made sense. Since the Kohen is a direct descendant from Aharon, who is known to be the peacemaker in Israel, who "loves shalom and pursues shalom" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:12), the role of the Kohanim, as well, is to restore peace between family members, neighbors, friends and most importantly between husband and wife. Therefore, the lineage of the Kohen precludes the divorcee, whose marriage did not succeed. In order to preserve the ability of the Kohen to fulfill his elevated role properly, the seed of the Kohen must spring only from Jewish offspring of stable lasting marriages.