

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

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