



## Why Can't Women Be Kohanim?

### Korach's Claim Against the Kohanim Keeps Reverberating

*Parashat Vayikra* opens a new book in the Torah – the Book of *Vayikra* also called *Torat Kohanim* (The teachings of the Priests). This week's parasha focuses on the different sacrifices and the kind of sins for which they atone. What is in it for women? I ask myself. In my struggle to find a hint of halacha for women in *Parashat Vayikra*, I thought about the importance of accepting the authority of the Kohanim as the spiritual leaders of Israel. Our current pandemic cries out for true spiritual leaders that can lead us into a paradigm shift of truly healing ourselves and the world. During the Exodus, when the Israelites made the Golden Calf, only the Levites refused to worship it. As a result, they were appointed Hashem's servants. Of the members of the Levite tribe, those who were descended from Moshe's brother, Aharon, became the Kohanim. Aharon was the first kohen, and also the first *Kohen Gadol* (high priest). Since biblical times, the Divine appointment of Aharon as the Kohen Gadol has been disputed. Korach's claim, "You take too much upon yourselves, for the entire congregation are all holy, and Hashem is in their midst. So why do you raise yourselves above Hashem's assembly?" (*Bamidbar* 16:3), is well-known. Unfortunately, this defiance of Jewish leadership reverberates in every generation, especially in our time. An article in Israel's secular paper, *Ha'aretz* (January 27, 2018) titled [The Intrusive Ways Israel Maintains the Purity of the Jewish Priestly Dynasty](#) derides the authority of the Israeli Rabbinate and their rules which are intended to preserve the purity of the line of Kohanim. It complains about the restrictions practiced in Israel on adding the surname Kohen, Cohen or Katz by non-Kohanim. The article quotes a movement called חופש דתי ושוויון – *Chiddush: For Religious Freedom and Equality*, whose aim is to undermine the Rabbinate's power in the government of Israel. This attitude reminds us of the headspace in the time of the Judges when, "Everyone did whatever is right in his or her own eyes" (*Shoftim* 17:6). At that time, they appointed their own Kohanim – not from the lineage of Aharon – to officiate in Temples of Idolatry, as the previous bible verse testifies: "Now the man Micha had a house of idolatry. And he made an ephod and teraphim, and initiated one of his sons, who became his Kohen" (*Ibid.* 5). In a way, *Chiddush* is only a renewal of the idolatry of old, in the robes of democracy, emancipation and the right of the individual to do "whatever is right in his or her own eyes" (*Ibid.* 6).

### The Claim of Individualism Hinders Creating Holy Hierarchic Communities

While the Torah places great emphasis on the freedom of choice, and the right of the individual to make her own decisions, the community of Israel is even more important. We don't live in a vacuum, where each person can make their own hole under his or her seat, without causing the boat to sink. Therefore, it is vital in any society that personal freedom be secondary to the physical and spiritual welfare of the community. There must be restrictions on the individual's right to choose actions that harm others such as murder and theft. In the Torah, these kinds of laws are called *מִשְׁפָּטִים/mishpatim* – 'ordinances.' They are evident to every humanitarian society, even to those in *Chiddush*. Yet, the laws of the Kohanim belong to the super-rational kind of laws, called *chukim*, which are harder to understand, and therefore unacceptable to secular Jews. These laws impart the importance of accepting the Divine authority of the Torah, which supersedes humanly ordained rules and regulations. True spirituality recognizes the limitations of the human mind to tune into absolute truth and justice. Only the Creator and Master of the universe knows the way that leads to our ultimate good. He set up the rules which segment society, appointing the Kohanim with the responsibility to represent Israel through service in the Temple and synagogue. Opposition

to a hierarchical Torah leadership undermines the entire authority of halacha. Yet, this hierarchy is based on greater responsibility rather than worthiness. Just because the Kohanim are singled out and called to the Torah first, and grace us with their special Kohanim blessing, it doesn't imply that every Kohen is more righteous than any other person. All ranks are exterior, yet our true level of merit depends on our heart and the actions we perform through our freedom of choice. Claims of liberalism and tolerance actually do not leave room for the right of the individual to keep the laws of the Torah and establish Torah communities. Allowing people to keep poking more holes under their individual seat does not tolerate those who want to sail in an unsinkable boat.

### The Sacrilege of Female Kohanot

Let's return to our original question as to why a woman can't be a Kohen? Several 'progressive' Jewish congregations refuse to accept the notion behind this question. In a certain *Congregation Etz Chaim*, women descended from Kohanim through their fathers' lineage (Bat Kohen), recite the priestly blessings over the congregation, together with male Kohanim., *The Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute* opens its door to any woman, Bat Kohen or not to participate in its training program in spiritual leadership for women on a Jewish path. Kohenet reclaims the traditions of women, from prophetesses, healers, dreamers and seekers throughout the Jewish tradition. It claims to honor the ways in which divinity appears to us in female form...creating a paradigm of earth-based, embodied, feminist, Judaism. Under the leadership of 'Rabbi' Jill Hammer who lives in Manhattan with her 'wife' and daughter. I agree with Kohenet in its celebration of the sacred in the body, the earth, and the cosmos, and holding the world to be an embodiment of the Shechinah – the Divine Presence. However, claiming the role of the Kohen for women only chases the Shechinah away. A Kohen, according to the Torah, is not something that anyone can just become. It is a birthright granted to the male descendants of Aharon alone. The Bible clearly preempted the opposition against the exclusiveness of the male Kohanim in no less than 77 repeated Bible verses, in which it mentions "Aharon and his sons" as the perpetual members of the priestly class. The last of these Torah verses reads as follows:

**ספר דברי הימים א פרק כג פסוק יג** בְּנֵי עֲמֶרָם אֶהְרֹן וּמֹשֶׁה וַיִּבְדֵּל אֶהְרֹן לְהַקְדִּישׁוּ קֹדֶשׁ קֹדָשִׁים הוּא וּבָנָיו עַד עוֹלָם לְהַקְטִיר לִפְנֵי הָשֵׁם לְשָׁרְתוֹ וּלְבַרְךְ בְּשֵׁמוֹ עַד עוֹלָם:

"The sons of Amram; Aharon and Moshe, and Aaron was separated, to be sanctified as most holy, he and his sons forever, to burn incense before Hashem, to serve Him, and to bless with His Name to eternity" (I *Divrei HaYamim* 23:13).

Thus, the Torah clearly leaves no place for the Kohenet – the female Kohen.

### Exploring Renewed Halachic Rituals of Spiritual Service for Women

The fact that women can't be Kohanim doesn't preclude women from serving in spiritual leadership as spiritual healers, Medicine Women, Torah teachers, leaders of Women's Prayer Circles, and more. Like Kohenet, Torah observant women reclaim the centrality of ritual as a transformative force in Jewish and human life, viewing spiritual leadership as the act of holding sacred space, time, and soul. Yet, unlike Kohenet, we exemplify through earth-based Torah rituals, geulah gatherings, supportive sisterhood, performances, soul-dance, and creative expression by women for women, all within the framework of halacha. I founded B'erot Bat Ayin 23 years ago as a halachic alternative to Jewish Renewal. My motto has always been that spirituality doesn't have to negate Torah law. There is certainly leeway within the halacha to explore meaningful ways and renew rituals of spiritual service for women. For example, Midreshet B'erot Bat Ayin conducts prayer and women's emuna healing circles, where we explore non-verbal ways of prayer. On Yom Kippur, we host mini mussaf prayer circles for women in which we share and discuss parts of the confession prayer. We conduct blessing circles as well as singing together and dancing. With self-confidence in our feminine spiritual role as the embodiment of the Shechina, why would we need a title such as 'Kohenet' or 'Rabbi' to express spiritual leadership?