

Parashat Tetzaveh

Finding the good side: A Portrait of the Priestly Class

by Noach Dzmura on Friday March 06, 2009

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Exodus 27:20 - 30:10

Summary of the Parasha The unique verb that identifies this *parasha* is *tetzaveh*, “and you shall command.” The verb reinforces the nature of this Biblical hierarchy: God commands, Moses relays the command, and the people perform the commandment. In this *parasha*, Moses commands us to kindle an eternal flame (*ner tamid*, continuously burning light) in front of the *Mishkan*. In the main body of the *parasha* Moses commands us to fabricate some costly and complicated ritual garb for Aaron. Finally, God commands Moses to elevate the status of Aaron and his sons (and their sons, forever) over the rest of the people. This puts a little balloon in the arrow of Divine hierarchy, and, ostensibly, lightens Moshe’s load: God commands, then Moses (or the Priests) relay the command, and the people perform the commandment.

What’s Bothering Noach The priests stick in my craw. God requires sacrifice? This is abhorrent. There is a priestly class of people whose relationship to God is closer or more intimate than the rank-and-file person? This is insupportable. Priests get – for free and without laboring to produce them—the best part of the produce and the meat? Who says they qualify for a free lunch! The sons of Aaron and their sons—forever—get this gig too? This is permanent inequality. How can we stand for this?

Reading the text from the perspective of an outsider to power, as I did in the above paragraph, results in a recipe for rebellion. Reading from the perspective of a fully enfranchised member of the community, who is yoked to God’s will by choice, because it is directly tied to the will of the people by the Covenant, yields a more peaceful outcome. I want to read in this more productive, less rebellious manner in the rest of the essay.

Economic Advisers to Moses When I read about a class of priests and their troublesome (to me) sacrifices, it helps me to think of “sacrifices” as part of a tribal economy with the Covenant as its ethical center. It also helps me to think of Moses’ role as the leader of a people, and the practical duties of governing such a large number of people. Not an easy job to accomplish alone. So why might the formation of a class of people to manage the sacrifices have seemed like a good, practical idea? Lightens the load.

It seems to me that elevating a priestly class signifies a separation of governing powers a little like the one we are familiar with in America. Moses (in this time period) holds the executive powers of government as the leader, and heads up the judicial powers of government by serving as the highest judge or magistrate. *Parashat Yitro* established for *b'nei Yisrael* a combined judicial and legislative body made up of the heads of tribes and the heads of groups (of ten, a hundred and a thousand persons). Moses sits at the head of this council of magistrates.

I'm accustomed to reading the Priests as taking over what appears at first glance to be the symbolic, ceremonial duties of the Executive powers of government (for which America has a Vice President). But I propose that the Priests are responsible for managing a sacrifice-based economy, which means that the Priests might, in addition to their ceremonial responsibilities, serve as Economic advisers.

How is it that I construe the sacrifices to be part of a sacrificial economy? In his [The Mishnah: A New Translation](#), Jacob Neusner describes the idealized Biblical world as an economy centered on the Covenant. The people are counted, taxed and represented in the magisterial system according to their numbers, the meat and produce are counted and taxed, the poor and strangers are accounted for and fed. The sacrifices are directly related to how many people there are and how many of each item have been produced, as well as to the boons of daily life (for which a sacrifice is made) or the penalties of wrongdoing (for which a sacrifice is made). The portion for the priests and for the people is related to how much the entire economy of sacrifices has produced. The priests were integral to a rational system of governance for that idealized Biblical time and place.

The sacrifices – the animals and grain and fruit grown and tended by Israel—are the GNP (Gross National Product) of the sacrificial economy. It seems to me that, positioned as they are, the *kohenim* mediate between the wealth of a nation and the nation's Covenanted values. That's a very cool and powerful role in a social system. With the economic information the priests acquire, it seems to me logical to assume that they provide insight to Moses about G-d's will for the people, and what steps must be taken to ensure continued prosperity.

No advisory capacity is spelled out for the Priests in Torah. I come to this conclusion by taking the duties of the priests as they are spelled out in our parasha, and deriving the advisory duties based on the duties we do know. I am convinced they must have served as economic advisers to Moses because of their sole access to the kinds of information that would have helped to make decisions about the community's economic viability. For example, if the priests preside over the sacrificial rites, they must know whether the appropriate number and kind of sacrifices are being offered, which means they are aware of how much of each thing has been produced.



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So instead of reading the priests as merely ceremonial, I read them as useful economic advisers, helping Moses by separating off the Economic management from the business of interpreting the law and determining the nomadic troupe's direction. Since I don't value sacrifice in and of itself, for me, this derivation of a new priestly role takes some of the sting out of the Priests by making them useful members of society. But there's a bad effect of this separation of governmental powers, too. It creates a class system.

The Birth of a Class System Class systems systematize oppressions and hide them from the public eye. The visibly opulent clothing and the ritual food we are commanded to provide (we learn elsewhere that a portion of almost every sacrifice is given to the Priests) to those who do not labor to produce it, seems to elevate the status of the priests above the status of those who work. It seems that we the people serve the hereditary priesthood, simply because they were born that way. Such entitlement doesn't fit modern notions of egalitarianism. "Born that way" is never a good reason to obtain one's due in an egalitarian society.

This week's Torah portion shows us the visible, opulent high end of a social and political economy centered on a Covenant that expresses ideas of strict hierarchical obedience and a Divine justice system. It's easy to see why a class system might be the result of such a Covenant.

The focus on hierarchy and retribution ('disobey and I will smite you') appears out of step with my values. While present day American society still contains a class system, a liberal Jewish understanding of Divine justice focuses on leveling the playing field through socialistic notions of shared resources and egalitarian distribution, raising up the downtrodden while bringing down the upper echelons. In the Rabbinic Judaism of the present day, the Priests are gone; the sacrificial, mitzvah-driven economy has been replaced by a secular, profit-driven economy, and all the benefit one garners from the surname *kohen* is a special blessing on Yom Kippur as a kind of disempowered nostalgia.

Moderating the Inequalities in Torah is a Queer Task Nonetheless, in this text, the priestly hierarchy is being birthed, and it is our task to make egalitarian meaning of this newborn inequality. Why is the making of egalitarianism a queer task? Because discussion that focuses on a Center and its Margins often paints queers into a powerless position; our task is to see this scheme differently, queerly, to empower persons equally. I propose three ways to moderate the sting of the social inequality entrenched in our Sacred Text.

The first of these is to recognize the labor-value of public service. The Priests are public servants. Their role is equivalent to a role that is—in our time and place—historically underfunded: priests function socially as Wives of the Deity. They cook for God and clean God's house. (The High Priest enters into Sexual Union with God, too, there in the Holy of Holies, but that's not today's tale.) There is justice in the fact that these Priestly wives get some



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recognition for their otherwise unsung labor. And these are male wives, which is an even cooler way to challenge the heteronormative status quo.

The second way to take the sting out of a priestly class is to recognize the people's role in (literally) investing (in) the Priestly class. The specifications for manufacturing the vestments worn by the high priest are given by God to Moses, but it is the product of the peoples' labor and trade that produces those garments. The spinner, the weaver, the dyer, the metalsmith, the jeweler, the seamstress, the engraver, the dye producer, the mussel hunter, the shepherd, the shearer: each of these contributes their labor to the production of the vestments. And for each of these to be able to contribute, they must receive a share of the nation's food, which is grown by other laborers. Samson Raphael Hirsch says,

The fact that the priestly garments must be supplied and owned by the nation makes it clear to us why only a *kohen* dressed in these garments can be regarded as a priest at all. Only in this attire does he come forward as the servant of the nation for the Sanctuary of the Law. Only in this manner does the ritual he performs become the service which the nation was commanded to render to the Sanctuary of the Law of God. Only thus can the ideas to be expressed by the ritual attain the character of a duty commanded by the Law God gave to the nation. (The Pentateuch, Samson Raphael Hirsch, p. 323)

The third way to moderate the sting of hierarchy is to recognize the undesirable qualities of the Priestly job. Take for instance Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons who God zorched into French fries because they brought "strange fire" before the Sanctuary. And then there's a special quality to Aaron's vestments: they are built with bells in the hem, to trigger an alarm in the Sanctuary so God won't accidentally zorch him for entering "un-announced". It's risky work.

Our Role in Producing Inequalities The point is, I don't want the Priest's job; I don't want the decisions I make to have any effect on the purity of the nation, and I really don't want to go around wearing a dress with bells on the hem. I'd rather just let the priests do it and stay the heck away from the Sanctuary. The Priests bear the brunt of the potential zorching, so I can see my way clear to sending over a good part of my freshly sheared wool. The point of this long explication is to say that's where the people go wrong, including me. That's why people don't vote. That's why people don't go to political rallies or labor union demonstrations. That's why people don't get involved in the school board. It's even why hereditary classes come to be, in my guess. As a habitual slacker and lover of comfort, I hate to say this, but the inescapable conclusion is that unless we mutually bear the unpleasant effects of social life, we face the consequence of inequity.



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In Sum The net effect of moderating the sting of social inequality in these ways is to recognize that the Priestly job is just another kind of labor, that is not separate but dependently arising from the sum total of the community's labor, and that the role of Priest is "elevated" of the people, by the people, and for the people, and holds aloft the symbolic value of right relations between the people and God written in the Covenant. There are still problems with this ancient system, from an American perspective: Priests aren't democratically elected, the role of priest is hereditary and there are no term limits, and the people have no representation, no voice in changing rituals that no longer work for them. An even larger difficulty that arises when the link between the Priestly role and the Relationship it was put in place to reverse, is obscured or lost altogether. In due time, because absolute power corrupts absolutely, the Symbol of Power comes to be recognized as the Power Itself. It's where the narrative of the Torah is headed. Are we?



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