

## Spiritual Insight For The Week

with Rabbi Bentzion Kravitz

### Why I Challenged the Priest About Marriage



When I was young and attended high school, “Coffee Houses” were popular, but they were not cafes like Starbucks, and they weren’t that much about coffee. Instead, they were a safe place where young people could hang out, talk, and enjoy music.

The first coffee house I attended met in the basement of a Catholic church in Connecticut.

Although these were not religious events, I somehow ended up in a dialogue with a priest who attempted to convince me to believe in Jesus. In response, I challenged him as to why the church did not allow priests to be married.

Celibacy of religious leaders did not make sense to me since every rabbi I knew was married. They were fulfilling the biblical directive to be “*Joined with his wife*” (Genesis 2:24) and to be “*Fruitful and multiply*” (Genesis 1:27; 9:6). Furthermore, even Jewish priests [כהנים—*Kohanim*] were permitted to marry, which is understandable since the priesthood is a hereditary position, and marriage is the way to ensure future generations of priests.

The priest explained that there is a complex and controversial history concerning the decision to ban priests from marriage. The issue was even debated by a council of bishops known as the Council of Nicaea, convened in the city of Nicaea by the Roman Emperor Constantine in 325 CE. I later learned that the city of Nicaea was named for Nike, the Greek goddess of victory. It is ironic that in a city named for its pagan roots, this council drafted the Nicene Creed, which decreed several non-biblical and pagan doctrines such as the Trinity, the bodily incarnation of God.

No Jews were present at the Council of Nicaea. In fact, a Jewish sect known as the Ebionites were excommunicated at Nicaea because they insisted that Jesus would have rejected these pagan beliefs as heretical. Even before Jesus, the Jewish rejection of pagan beliefs was the main point that clearly distinguished Judaism from civilizations that sought to assimilate Jews.

**I somehow ended up in a dialogue with a priest.**

Many scholars, including Hyam Maccoby (1924-2004), attribute the rapid growth of Christianity to Constantine, who wielded the political clout to establish it as the official state religion of the Roman Empire. Constantine also saw the Nicene Creed, with its pagan overtones, as a way to make Christianity palatable to the masses who had deep-rooted, and hard-to-break ties to paganism. Tragically, Constantine, also, influenced the Church to be anti-Jewish and labeled the Jews as “detestable” and “depraved.” He also decreed that the Jewish commandments [which God said were eternal] were now obsolete.

The eventual decision by the Catholic Church to ban marriage for priests is even more baffling since the High Priest [כהן גדול—*Kohen Gadol*] was required to be a married man in order to perform the Yom Kippur service, a day when only he would enter the Temple’s Holy of Holies.

Concerning the first High Priest, the Torah says, “*Aaron shall bring the bull for his sin-offering to make atonement for himself and his household*” (Leviticus 16:11). Our sages, in Yoma 13a, point out that the word “*household*” refers to his wife.

Marriage requirements for Kohanim are outlined in this week’s Torah portion, *Emor* (Leviticus 21:1–24:23). Since Kohanim were required to maintain a higher level of holiness than non-Kohanim, God commanded them to marry only women who had not been in certain previous relationships. These rules and regulations are far from the vow of celibacy found in other religions.

How do these regulations contribute to the Kohen’s holiness?

The Hebrew word for holy, [קֹדֶשׁ–*kodesh*], means “separate,” as we see in the verse, “*You are to be holy to Me because I, the Lord, am holy, and I have separated you from the nations to be My own*” (Leviticus 20:26). Being holy and separate indicates that God wants us, in partnership with our spouse, to have a personal relationship with Him alone and not share our allegiance with any other entity or false god.

## **God wants us to have a personal relationship with Him alone.**

The Torah highlights this special relationship with the powerful proclamation, “*You shall have no other gods before Me*” (Exodus 20:3), and the statement, “*I will not SHARE My glory to another or My praise to idols*” (Isaiah 42:8).

Kohanim, in particular, hold an elevated position, and their personal and intimate [not shared] relationship with God is alluded to in the act of marriage and the restrictions that require that they avoid marrying a woman who was previously “shared” with someone else.

Marriage is also a metaphor for the relationship between God and the entire Jewish people, as it says, “*I will betroth you to Me forever*” (Hosea 2:19), and “*I was a husband to them*” (Jeremiah 31:32).

Furthermore, the Torah refers to the entire Jewish people as “*a nation of priests and a holy nation*” (Exodus 19:6). In this capacity, we also need to pledge allegiance to God, Who tells us, “*Do not follow other gods to serve and worship them*” (Deuteronomy 6:14). God also instructs us to “*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might*” (Deuteronomy 6:5).

By following the Torah, we can achieve a personal and intimate relationship with God and not share this relationship by following false gods; as it says, “*It is not too difficult for you, and it is not beyond your reach*” (Deuteronomy 30:11).

Shabbat Shalom,

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