

CHAPTER L

THE PRIEST-PEOPLE AND ITS LAW OF HOLINESS

1. The checkered, stormy, and yet triumphant march of the Jewish people through the ages remains the great enigma of history for all those who do not believe in a divine plan of salvation to be consummated through Israel. The idea of Israel's mission alone throws light on its law and its destiny. Even before God had revealed to the people at Mt. Sinai the Ten Commandments, the foundation of all religion and morality, and there concluded with them a covenant for all time, He spoke: "Ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation," thus consecrating them to be a priest-people among the nations, and enjoining them to a life of especial holiness. Possessing as a heritage from the Patriarchs the germ of a higher religious consciousness, in distinction from all other peoples, they were to make the cultivation, development, and promotion of the highest religious truth their life-task, and thus to become the people of God. At first they were to establish in the Holy Land a theocratic government, a State in which God alone was the Ruler, while they lived in priestly isolation from all the nations around. Thus they prepared themselves for the time when, scattered over all the earth, they might again work as the priest-people through the ages for the upbuilding of the universal kingdom of God. This was Israel's destiny from the very first, as expressed by the great seer of the Exile when he beheld Israel wandering forth among the nations, "Ye shall be named the

priests of the Lord; men shall call you the ministers of our God."¹

2. Among all religions the priest is considered especially holy as the mediator between God and man, and in his appearance as well as in his mode of life he must observe special forms of purity and holiness. He alone may approach the Godhead, ascertain its will, and administer the sacrificial cult in the sanctuary. He must represent the Divinity in its relation to the people, embody it in his outward life, enjoy nothing which it abhors, and touch nothing which could render him impure. These priestly rules exist among all the nations of antiquity in striking similarity, and indicate a common origin in the prehistoric period, during which the entire cult developed through a priestly caste, beginning with simple, primitive conceptions and transmitted in ever more elaborate form from father to son. It goes without saying that the priests of the original Hebrew race, which migrated from Babylonia, retained the ancient customs and rules. They must also have adopted many other things from neighboring peoples. During the entire period of the first temple, the priests — despite all prophetic warnings — preferred the heathen cult with its vainglorious pomp to the simple worship of the patriarchal times. As everywhere else, the priesthood of Israel, and later of Judæa as well, thought only of its own interests, of the retention of its ancient prerogatives, unmindful of the higher calling to which it had been chosen, to serve the God of truth and justice, to exemplify true holiness, to stand for moral rather than ceremonial purity. Yet the sacerdotal institutions were indispensable so long as the people required a sanctuary where the Deity should dwell, and where the sacrificial cult should be administered. Every trespass by a layman on the sanctuary reserved for the priests was considered sacrilege and called for divine punishment.

¹ Isa. LXI, 6.

It was thus necessary to deepen the popular notion of holiness and of the reverence due the sanctuary, before these could be elevated into the realm of spirituality and morality. The priesthood had to be won for the service of the loftier religious ideas, so that it might gradually educate the people in general for its sublime priestly mission. This conception underlies both the Mosaic law and its rabbinical interpretation.

3. Through Biblical and post-Biblical literature and history there runs a twofold tendency, one anti-sacerdotal, — emanating from the prophets and later the Hasideans or Pharisees, — the other a mediating tendency, favorable to the priesthood. The ritualistic piety of the priests was bitterly assailed by the prophets as being subversive of all morality, and later on the Sadducean hierarchy also constituted a threat to the moral and spiritual welfare of the people. Before even the revelation at Sinai was to take place, we read that warning was given to the priests “not to break through” and stand above the people.¹

On the other hand, the law demands of the Aaronites a peculiar degree of holiness, since “they offer the bread of their God upon the altar.”² Their blood must be kept pure by the avoidance of improper marriages. Everything unclean or polluting must be kept far from them.³ The law, following a tradition which probably arose in ancient Babylon, prescribed minutely their mode of admission into the divine service, their vestments and their conditions of life, the ritual of sacrifice and of purity; and every violation of these laws, every trespass by a layman, was declared to be punishable with death.⁴ The sanctuary contains no room for the *nation* of *priests*; no layman durst venture to cross its threshold. Even in the legal system of the rabbis the ancient rights and privileges of the priesthood, dating from the time when they

¹ Ex. XIX, 22 f.

³ Lev. VIII, 2, 8.

² Lev. XXI, 6; XXII, 2.

⁴ Num. XVIII, 7.

possessed no property, remained inviolate, and their precedence in everything was undisputed.¹

The glaring contrast between the idea of a universal priesthood of the people and the institution of the Aaronites is explained by a deeper insight into history. The success of the reformation under Josiah on the basis of the Deuteronomic code rested in the last analysis on the fact that the priests of the house of Zadok at Jerusalem were placed in the service of the higher prophetic teaching by being rendered the guardians, executors, and later, in conjunction with the Levites, the teachers of the Law, as it was presented in the book of the law of Moses, soon afterward completed. The priesthood, deprived of everything that might remind one of the former idolatry and heathenish practices, was, in its purer and holier character, to lead the priest-people to true moral holiness through its connection with the sanctuary and its ancient cult. Still the impulse for the moral rebirth of the nation, for the establishment of a priest-people, did not emanate from the Temple priesthood, nor even from the sacred soil of Palestine; but from the Synagogue, which began in the Exile, under the influence of the prophetic word and the Levitical song, in the form of public worship by the congregation of the pious. Here arose a generation of godly men, a class of singularly devout ones, living in priestly holiness, who consecrated their lives to the practice of the law, and whom the exile seer had designated as the true Israel, the servant of the Lord, and these formed the nucleus of the renewed Israel.

4. That which the prophet Ezekiel had attempted in his proposed constitution² was accomplished in a far more thorough manner by the Holiness Code, which emanated from his school and became the central portion of the Mosaic books, and by the so-called Priestly Code, which followed later. The object was to bring about the sanctification of

¹ M. K. 28 b.

² Ezek. XL-XLVIII.

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the entire people upon the holy soil of the national land, through institutions embodying the ideal of the holiness of God in the life and cult of the people. Circumcision, idealized by the prophetic author of Deuteronomy,¹ was to be made the sign of the covenant to mark as holy the progeny of Abraham; ² strict laws of marriage were to put an end to all heathenish unchastity; the Sabbath rest was to consecrate the labors of the week, the Sabbatical month and year the produce of the soil.³ The prohibition of unclean foods, heretofore reserved, as among other nations, for the priests and other consecrated persons, was now applied to the whole community in order that Israel should learn "to set itself apart from all other nations as a holy people."⁴ Even their apparel was to proclaim the priestly holiness of the people by a blue fringe at the border of the garments.⁵

Whereas from the time of Ezra to Simon the Just priestly rulers endeavored to promote the work of educating the people for holiness, the pious men from among the people made still greater efforts to assert the claim of holiness for the entire Jewish people as a priest-nation.⁶ The repasts of these pious fellowships should be in no way inferior in sanctity to those of the priests in the Temple. New ceremonies of sanctification were to open and close the Sabbaths and festivals. Symbols of priestly consecration should adorn forehead and arm in the form of the phylacteries (*tefillin*), and should be placed at the entrance of every house in the so-called *mezuzah*. "God has given unto all an heritage (the Torah), the kingdom, the priesthood, and the sanctuary"⁷ — this became the *leitmotif* for the Pharisaic school, who constantly enlarged the domain of piety so that it should include

¹ Deut. X, 16. Comp. Jer. IX, 24.

² Gen. XVII, 9.

³ Lev. XXV, 1-24.

⁴ Deut. XIV, 2-11; Lev. XI. Comp. Ezek. XLIV, 31, and Judg. XIII, 4.

⁵ Num. XV, 40.

⁶ See J. E., art. Pharisees.

⁷ II Macc. II, 17.

the whole of life. Whoever did not belong to this circle of the pious was regarded with scorn as one of the lower class (*am ha-aretz*).

5. The chief effort of the pious, the founders of the Judaism of the Synagogue, was to keep the Jewish people from the demoralizing influences of pagan nature-worship, represented first by Semitic and later by Greek culture. The leaders of the Pharisees "built a fence about the law"¹ extending the prohibition of mingling with the heathen nations so as also to prohibit eating with them and participating in their feasts and social gatherings, — not for the preservation of the Jewish race merely, as Christian theologians maintain, but for the sake of keeping its inner life intact and pure.² "God surrounded us with brazen walls, hedged us in with laws of purity in regard to food and drink and physical contact, yea, even to that which we see and hear, in order that we should be pure in body and soul, free from absurd beliefs, not polluted by contact with others or through association with the wicked; for most of the peoples defile themselves with their sexual practices, and whole lands pride themselves upon it. But we hold ourselves aloof from all this" — so spoke Eleazar the priest to King Ptolemy Philadelphus, according to the Letter of Aristaeus, thus giving expression to the sentiment most deeply rooted in the souls of the pious of that period.³ They strove to build up a nation of whom the Tannaim could say, "Whoever possesses no sense of shame and chastity, of him it is certain that his ancestors did not stand at Sinai."⁴

Naturally enough, the Greek and Roman people took offense at this aloofness and separation from every contact with the outer world, and explained it as due to a spirit of hostility to mankind. Even up to the present it has been the lot of Jewry and Judaism to be misunderstood by the world

¹ Aboth. I, 1.

² See Perles: *Bousset*, 68, 89.

³ Aristaeus 139-152.

⁴ Ned. 20 a.

at large, to be the object of either its hate or its pity. The world disregards the magnificence of the plan by which an entire people were to be reared as a priest-nation, as citizens of a kingdom of God, among whom, in the course of centuries, the seed of prophetic truth was to germinate and sprout forth for the salvation of humanity. If, in complete contrast to heathen immorality, the Jew in his life, his thinking, and his will was governed by the strictest moral discipline; if, in spite of the most cruel persecutions and the most insidious temptations, the Jewish people remained steadfast to its pure belief in God and its traditional standards of chastity, exhibiting a loyalty which amazed the nations and the religious sects about, but was neither understood nor followed by them, this was mainly due to the hallowing influences of the priestly laws. They steeled the people for the fulfillment of their duty and shielded them against all hostile powers both within and without. The very *burden* of the law, so bitterly denounced by Christianity since the time of Paul, lent Judaism its dignity at all times, protecting it from the assaults of the tempter; and that which seemed to the outsider a heavy load was to the Jew a source of pride in the consciousness of his divine election.¹

6. But most significant in the character and development of Judaism is the fact that all the leading ideas and motives which emanated from the priesthood of the Jewish people were concentrated in one single focus, the *hallowing of the name of God*. Two terms expressed this idea in both a negative and a positive form, the warning against "*Hillul ha Shem*" — profanation of the name of God — and the duty of "*Kiddush ha Shem*" — sanctification of God's name. These exerted a marvelous power in curbing the passions and self-indulgence of the Jew and in spurring him on to the greatest

¹ See Schechter, *Studies*, I, 233 ff. I. Abrahams in J. Q. R. XI, 62; b ff., and Claude Montefiore, J. Q. R. XIII, 161-217.

possible self-sacrifice and to an unparalleled willingness to undergo suffering and martyrdom for the cause. These terms are derived from the Biblical verse, "Ye shall not profane My holy name, but I will be hallowed among the children of Israel; I am the Lord who halloweth you."¹ This verse forms the concluding sentence of the precepts for the Aaronitic priesthood and warns them as the guardians of the sanctuary to do nothing which might in the popular estimation degrade them or the divine cause intrusted to them. When, however, during the Maccabean wars, the little band of the pious proved themselves to be the true priesthood in their opposition to the faithless Aaronites, offering their very lives as a sacrifice for the preservation of the true faith in God, the Scriptural word received a new and higher meaning. It came to signify the obligation of the entire priest-people to consecrate the name of God by the sacrifice of their lives, and also their duty to guard against its profanation by any offensive act. In connection with this Scriptural passage the sages represent God as saying, "I have brought you out of Egypt only on the condition that you are ready to sacrifice your lives, if need be, to consecrate My name."² From that period it became a duty and even a law of Judaism, as Maimonides shows in his Code, for each person in life and in death to bear witness to His God.³ "Ye are My witnesses, saith the Lord, and I am God"⁴ — and witnesses being in the Greek version martyrs, the word afterward received the meaning of "blood-witnesses." — This passage of the prophet is commented on by Simeon ben Johai, one of the great teachers who suffered under Hadrian's persecution, in the following words, "If ye become My witnesses, then am I your Lord, God of the world; but if ye do not witness to Me, I cease to

¹ Lev. XXII, 32.

² *Sifra* Emor. IX.

³ *Yesode ha Torah* V. Comp. Lazarus: *Ethics*, 29, 184.

⁴ Isa. XLIII, 12.

be, as it were, the Lord, God of all the world."¹ That is to say, it is the martyrdom of the pious which glorifies God's name before all the world. Or, as Felix Perles says so beautifully, "As every good and noble man must ever bear in mind that the dignity of humanity is intrusted to his hand, so should each earnest adherent of the Jewish faith remember that the glory of God is intrusted to his care."² The Jewish people has fulfilled this priestly task through a martyrdom of over two thousand years and has scornfully resisted every demand to abandon its faith in God, not consenting to do so even in appearance. Surely historians or philosophers who can ridicule or commiserate such resistance betray a hatred which blinds their sense of justice. As a matter of fact, it was the consciousness of the Jewish people of its priestly mission that has made it a pattern of loyalty for all time.

7. Moreover, the fear of profaning the divine name became the highest incentive to, and safeguard of the morality of the Jew. Every misdeed toward a non-Jew is considered by the teachers of Judaism a double sin, yea, sometimes, an unpardonable one, because it gives a false impression of the moral standard of Judaism and infringes upon the honor of God as well as that of man. The disciples of Rabbi Simeon ben Shetach once bought an ass for him from an Arab, and to their joy found a precious stone in its collar. "Did the seller know of this gem?" asked the master. On being answered in the negative, he called out angrily, "Do you consider me a barbarian? Return the Arab his precious stone immediately!" And when the heathen received it back, he cried out, "Praised be the God of Simeon ben Shetach!"³ Thus the conscientious Jew honors his God by his conduct, says the Talmud, referring to this and many similar examples. Such lessons of the Jew's responsibility for the recognition

¹ Pesik. 102 b.² Perles, l. c., 68 f.³ Yer. B. M. II, 8 c.

of the high moral purity of his religion have ever constituted a high barrier against immoral acts.

The words, "Be ye holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" form significantly the introduction to the chapter on the love of man, the nineteenth chapter of Leviticus, placed at the very center of the entire Priestly Code. "Your self-sanctification sanctifies Me, as it were," says God to Israel, according to the interpretation of this verse by the sages.¹ In contrast to heathendom, which deifies nature with its appeal to the senses, Judaism teaches that holiness is a moral quality, as it means the curbing of the senses. And in order to prevent Israel, the bearer of this ideal of holiness, from sinking into the mire of heathen wantonness and lust, the separation of the Jew from the heathen world, whether in his domestic or social life, was a necessity and became the rule and maxim of his life for that period. All the many prohibitions and commands had for their object the purification of the people in order to render the highest moral purity a hereditary virtue among them, according to the rabbis.²

8. It is true that the accumulation of "law upon law, prohibition upon prohibition" by the rabbis had eventually the same injurious effect which it had exerted upon the priests in the Temple. The formal law, "the precepts learned by rote," became the important factor, while their purpose was lost to sight. The shell smothered the kernel, and blind obedience to the letter of the law came to be regarded as true piety. It cannot be denied that adherence to the mere form, which was transmitted from the Temple practice to the legalism of the Pharisees and the later rabbinic schools with their casuistry, impaired and tarnished the lofty prophetic ideal of holiness. It almost seems as if the clarion notes of such sublime passages as that of the Psalmist,

¹ *Sifra* Kedoshim 1.² Mak. 23 b.

“Who shall ascend into the mountain of the Lord,
 And who shall stand in His holy place?
 He that hath clean hands and a pure heart;
 Who hath not taken My name in vain, and hath not sworn deceitfully,”¹

no longer found its full resonance in the heart of Judaism. In the practice of external acts of piety religion became petrified and the spirit took flight. That which is of secondary importance became of primary consideration. This is the fundamental error into which the practice and the development of the Law in Judaism lapsed, and to which no careful observer can or dares close his eyes. Undoubtedly the Law, as it embraced the whole of life in its power, sharpened the Jewish sense of duty, and served the Jew as an iron wall of defense against temptations, aberrations, and enticements of the centuries. As soon as the modern Jew, however, undertook to free himself from the tutelage of a blind acceptance of authority and inquired after the purpose of all the restrictions which the Law laid upon him, his ancient loyalty to the same collapsed and the pillars of Judaism seemed to be shaken. Then the leaders of Reform, imbued with the prophetic spirit, felt it to be their imperative duty to search out the fundamental ideas of the priestly law of holiness, and, accordingly, they learned how to separate the kernel from the shell. In opposition to the orthodox tendency to worship the letter, they insisted on the fact that Israel's separation from the world — which it is ultimately to win for the divine truth — cannot itself be its end and aim, and that blind obedience to the law does not constitute true piety. Only the fundamental idea, that Israel as the “first-born” among the nations has been elected as a priest-people, must remain our imperishable truth, a truth to which the centuries of history bear witness by showing that it has given its life-blood as a ransom for humanity, and is ever bringing new sacrifices for its cause.

¹ Ps. XXIV, 3-4; XV, 1-5.

Only because it has kept itself distinct as a priest-people among the nations could it carry out its great task in history; and only if it remains conscious of its priestly calling and therefore maintains itself as the people of God, can it fulfill its mission. Not until the end of time, when all of God's children will have entered the kingdom of God, may Israel, the high-priest among the nations, renounce his priesthood.