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Wanted – A Priest

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Rabbi Aryeh Azriel

Rabbi Milton Steinberg once shared a special moment with his congregation. He told them about the first time he was permitted to step out of doors after a long illness:

“As I crossed the threshold, sunlight greeted me. This is my experience – all there is to it. And yet, so long as I live, I shall never forget that moment. The sky overhead was very blue, noticeably clear and very, very high. A faint wind blew from off the western plains, cooling and somehow tinged with warmth. Like a dry chilled wine. Everywhere in the firmament above me, in the great vault between earth and sky, on the pavement, the buildings, the golden glow of the sunlight. It touched me too with friendship, with warmth, with blessings. In that moment, I looked about me to see whether anyone else showed on his or her face the joy I felt. But no, there they were, men and women, children, in the glory of a golden flood and so far, as I could detect, there was none to give it heed. And then, I remembered how often, I too, had been indifferent to sunlight. How often, preoccupied with petty and sometimes mean concerns I had discarded it, and I said to myself how precious is the sunlight. But alas, how careless of it are we. How precious – how careless. This has been a refrain sounding in me ever since.”

Indeed, as Rabbi Steinberg observed, we live in a world filled with a myriad of wonders. Yet we seem to take so many of them for granted. The order by which the sun rises every day, the rains which nourish plant life, the close friendship of another human being, or even the miracle of love, these are all wonders. The structure of atoms and molecules, the order of genetics, even the timely disorder of genetic mutation. The ability to learn and create. These are miracles close to us. They cry out for acknowledgement. Yet too often we take these wonders of life for granted. We even take for granted life itself.

A Yiddish proverb notes that when a Jew breaks one leg, he thanks God that he did not break both. When he breaks both, he thanks God he did not break his neck. In Judaism there is a blessing for everything. The splendor of the rainbow, the miracle of human functions, the gift of food and drink and the miracle of living to experience a special event. In every moment there is a person to thank or acknowledge our Creator. Every moment of existence is not to be taken for granted.

Our ancestors, the Israelites, believed that it was important to express appreciation to God. They felt it was so important that a special group of people, the Kohaneen had the responsibility of making sure the Israelites did not

take their lives and the world around them for granted. Each act of a person's life presented another opportunity to thank God, the Source of life.

The position of the priest was special. Everyone was not eligible. Not everyone could be entrusted to thank God. Based on the text of our Torah portion, the following want-ad might appear: "Wanted – A Priest to make offerings to God in the Holy Temple. Must be a descendant of Aaron. Must not defile himself by contact with the dead nor with the harlot. Must not cut his hair or his beard. Cannot be blind, lame, not have any physical defects. He must be willing to work long hours and have anointing oil poured on his head. If you qualify, contact Moses or Aaron."

Difficult qualifications? High expectations? Yes, but isn't it a special person, the unique one, who does not take life for granted?

The responsibility of experiencing the people's gratitude was viewed as very important. Our ancestors wanted those whom they considered to be most holy, most disciplined, the purest, in short, the best, to be their representative giving thanks to God. They were making sure that life was not taken for granted.

The importance of showing gratitude or not taking life for granted, can be seen in many actions of the ancient Israelites. A shepherd was required to make an offering from his flock. This was his way of saying: "Thank you, God, for the good flock of sheep!" the farmer offered part of his crops from the first fruit of his produce to God. Thanking God for the good harvest which produces his sustenance.

Yet another way in which our ancestors showed their gratitude for life's wonders was the observance of the festivals. Shabbat, Pesach, Sheva'oth, rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot. Each one of these times was and is a chance to view life as special. Our weekly Shabbat is a chance to thank God and acknowledge the wonder of creation. Shabbat is also a time to appreciate the value of work and the privilege of rest.

_____! "The Israelites shall keep the Sabbath for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth but on the seventh day He rested from His labor."

At Passover we take our freedom not for granted as we remember:

_____ "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt." Yom Kippur teaches us not to take life itself for granted. The rewards for our atonement are to be inscribed in the Book of Life. At Sukkot we give thanks to God for the wonders of nature. We give thanks for the harvest which provides our sustenance. We acknowledge the trees which give us shade and provide our shelter. We appreciate the sky which serves as part of the roof of our festival

booth. We praise the ground, the floor of our sukkah, which is the place from which our plants sprout forth. No aspect of nature is to be taken for granted.

While our ancestors had priests, Kohaneen , to officially express their appreciation, we today have only ourselves. Each one of us has the responsibility to express our gratitude. It is our task to show our appreciation, to give thanks to God. And thus, we become the priests of contemporary Judaism. All of us become the special people to raise life to a level of joy and gratitude.

God, we pray to You with sincerity for the ability to appreciate all wonders, large and small. We pray for the good sense to appreciate the efforts of others. Through our appreciation of gifts of life, we acknowledge You and praise Your great name. Amen.