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By
Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Angel for Shabbat, Tazria-Metsora

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The priests of old (the cohanim) had high prestige positions, serving as spiritual leaders of the people of Israel. They received priestly gifts and seem to have lived comfortable lives.

Yet, when we read this week's Torah portion, we see that the cohanim had some unpleasant responsibilities. They had to examine the wounds of lepers and arrange for their purification. They had to check out clothing and houses that were struck by a leprosy-type plague. If we also consider that the tasks of the cohanim included the daily slaughtering of animals in the Tabernacle (and later in the Temples in Jerusalem), we realize that the cohanim did not always have an easy go of things.

Let us imagine how three cohanim would have described their duties.

Cohen A: I have a miserable job, but I have no choice in the matter. I'm a cohen, so this is my lot. I toil at many unpleasant tasks; but I need to do these things to make a living. I have a job..

Cohen B: My work has its ups and downs. Although I don't enjoy all aspects of my responsibilities, I do my best. I want to gain the respect of my peers and the public at large. Perhaps if I work hard enough, I will rise in the priestly ranks, and maybe even become the High Priest. I have a career.

Cohen C: I am privileged to be a servant of the Lord and to fulfill His commandments. When I bring sacrifices I feel I am helping people to come closer to God. When I examine the wounds of lepers, I have the opportunity to help the forlorn and downtrodden and to bring them purification. I am blessed to have these special opportunities. I have a calling.

What is the difference between these three cohanim? They all perform the same duties and have the same responsibilities. The difference isn't objective, but subjective. The difference is in how they interpret their lives and their duties.

Cohen A sees himself as a victim trapped in a bad job. He derives little satisfaction from his work, and probably looks forward to the day when he can retire. He has to work, because he needs to feed himself and his family.

Cohen B is not enthusiastic about his work, but sees it as a framework for personal advancement. If he works hard and well, he may advance to a higher position. Even if he doesn't like all aspects of his work, he has the inner satisfaction of feeling a challenge to rise in the ranks.

Cohen C focuses on the good he can do in his position--how he can help people come closer to God and to achieve spiritual purification. He views the unpleasant tasks as positive opportunities to serve God and the community. He feels a special joy in having been chosen to do his work.

While Cohen A is probably unhappy most of his working days, and while Cohen B is modestly pleased with himself--Cohen C is by far the happiest. He is the only one who interprets his work not as a job or a career--but as a calling. He sees ultimate value in his responsibilities, even in those things that seem so tedious and messy.

Now, let us apply the lessons of these three cohanim to ourselves.

We all need to work for a living. We all have aspects of our work that are pleasing, and aspects that are not so pleasing. Some of us are miserable at our work, some are moderately satisfied, and some are really happy. The difference is not necessarily in the kind of work we do: but in our attitude toward our work.

Some people have jobs. They work for their paycheck. They need to earn a living and support themselves and their families. But they don't particularly like their work. They don't see any ultimate value in it, or much personal fulfillment in it. They may spend thirty or forty years at a job they really don't like and don't enjoy. But they feel trapped. They have no choice. They have to work, and this is their job.

Some people have careers. They work for a company that gives incentives for increased pay, and higher prestige positions. They don't necessarily see ultimate value in their work, but it's a living and provides a certain degree of excitement and upward mobility. They work for thirty or forty years at it, and can't figure out exactly what they accomplished in their years, except for receiving paychecks and rising to higher ranks in the company. What difference did it all make?

Some people have callings. They work not for themselves and not for their companies--but for some higher vision of what life is supposed to be. They seek meaning and fulfillment in life. They are idealists who can view the simplest and most menial tasks as an entryway to personal redemption. They genuinely want to help others, to do their share to create a better society and a better world, to fulfill the expectations that the Almighty has for them.

In the final anaylysis, all of us can be in the category of Cohen C--if only we will set our minds to it, if only we will see our lives in larger brushstrokes, if only we can imagine that what we do really has ultimate value. We are not just cogs in a wheel who perform tasks for pay. We are not just go-getters who strive to get ahead of others on the treadmill. No, we are human beings seeking personal meaning and fulfillment in our lives.

Whatever kind of work we do, we can see it as a job, or a career--or a calling. A shift in vision, a shift in attitude--and we can become different and better and happier people.

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