

# 613 Laws of Torah

## Laws 350 - 399

### (350)

Do not plant a tree for worship. “You shall not plant for yourself any tree as a wooden image, near the altar which you build for yourself to Yahweh your God.” (Deuteronomy 16:21) I like trees. I’ve planted scores of them—and I live in the middle of a forest! Does that mean I’ve run afoul of the Torah here? No. Moses is referring to a particular pagan practice: planting a tree (‘ets, the ordinary Hebrew word for a tree or wood—any kind of relatively large woody plant) as an image. That’s asherah in the Hebrew—one of many names of the female component of the prototypical false Babylonian trinity of Nimrod, Semiramis, and Tammuz. Semiramis’ self-deified character would show up as Astarte among the Assyrians; she was known as Inanna by the Sumerians, Asthoreth by the Canaanites, Ishtar by the Akkadians, Isis by the Egyptians, and Diana by the Greeks—among others.

Her name is commemorated in “Christian” tradition, I’m sad to say, in the spring festival of Easter—which was supposed to be celebrated as Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the Feast of Firstfruits, the first three “holy convocations” on the annual festival calendar instituted by Yahweh. These days are prophetic of the death, burial, and resurrection of Yahshua our Messiah—and they center on the removal of our sins. Ishtar is a blatant counterfeit

Anyway, the Canaanite practice was to plant a tree (or a whole grove) near the altars where Asherah was to be worshipped—usually in a “high place” or hilltop. Yahweh’s warning notwithstanding, Israel fell (or perhaps jumped) into the same sort of idolatrous practices. For example: “They also built for themselves high places, sacred pillars, and wooden images on every high hill and under every green tree.” (I Kings 14:23) Yahweh wanted His people to be holy—set apart from the nations around them. The last thing He wanted was for the rites He instituted—which were all prophetic in some way of His plan of redemption for mankind—to be blended with and corrupted by the religions of the clueless idolaters.

**(351)**

Do not set up a pillar (for worship). “You shall not set up a sacred pillar, which Yahweh your God hates.” (Deuteronomy 16:22) This, of course, is a continuation and expansion of the previous thought. A pillar (Hebrew: matstsebah) could either be a stone obelisk (like the Washington Monument—oops) or a wooden stump. They were invariably placed in groves or under trees, and used as focal points of pagan worship. It’s no big surprise that Yahweh hates them.

**(352)**

Do not show favor to idolaters. “When Yahweh your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, and when Yahweh your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them.” (Deuteronomy 7:1-2) That’s a strange way of putting it, Maimonides. As the Israelites entered the Land of Canaan, they were to “conquer” and “utterly destroy” the idolaters they found there. Yahweh didn’t even hint at the idea of peacefully coexisting with them, tolerating their presence but “showing no favor” to them. Israel was to totally displace the nations of the Land in order to remain set apart for Yahweh’s purposes. They failed to do so, and the result is scrawled in their blood across the intervening centuries.

**(353)**

Do not make a covenant with the seven (Canaanite, idolatrous) nations. “I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. You shall make no covenant with them, nor with their gods. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against Me. For if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.” (Exodus 23:31-33) “When Yahweh your God brings you into the land which you go to possess, and has cast out many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and mightier than you, and when Yahweh your God delivers them over to you, you shall conquer them and utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them nor show mercy to them.” (Deuteronomy 7:1-2) Israel can’t say they weren’t warned. If they did not drive out the idolaters, they would be “snared” into serving their false gods. They didn’t, so they were.

Lest we conclude, however, that this is an open-ended call to slaughter or displace all who don't happen to toe our particular theological line, note that the list of nations to be thrown out of the Land was very precise and very limited: seven people groups whose depravity had reached its "fullness." The Amorites in particular had been given four generations to get their spiritual act together (see Genesis 15:16) and had not done so. The Torah is very precise here. If we are (1) Israelites who (2) are moving into the Land of Promise, we are to throw out any idolaters we find who (3) are Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, or Jebusites. Yahweh has even promised to do all the heavy lifting. All we have to do is follow His lead.

Haven't run across any Girgashites lately? Me neither. But it's safe to say that the bottom line still applies: we are not to make covenants with idolaters. On a national level, that would mean that a nation of believers should not support or defend nations that are not. The problem, of course, is that there's no such thing as a "nation of believers." America, if it ever was, left that place long ago. It would seem prudent, at the very least, to avoid supporting people who have sworn to kill us (that's any Qur'an-following Muslim, in case you didn't notice) but we can't even get that right.

#### **(354)**

Do not settle idolaters in our land. " You shall make no covenant with them, nor with their gods. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against Me. For if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you." (Exodus 23:32-33) When Israel declared statehood on April 14, 1948, Jews had been a majority in Jerusalem for as long as anyone had been keeping records—well over a century. They had never stolen or "annexed" Arab lands, but rather had purchased large tracts of land in Palestine from Arab Muslims who considered it worthless. Yet on Israel's independence day, Azzam Pasha, Secretary General of the Arab League, declared jihad, a "holy war" against the infant nation. He stated: "This will be a war of extermination and a momentous massacre." He ordered all Muslim Arab civilians to leave, in order to make it easier for the Islamic forces to drive the detested Jews into the sea. Those who followed the order became the "Palestinian refugees" we hear about so often. For her part, Israel offered full citizenship to any Arab who wanted to stay, and some did. After Israel won the war (at a horrendous price in terms of percentage of her population) those Arabs, mostly Islamic, became the freest, most prosperous Muslims in the region.

And they remained so until they turned on their benefactor in the first intifada—biting the hand that had fed them. These are the "Palestinians" (though no such people actually exist—the moniker is merely a useful media prevarication) who trouble Israel today.

Now, what would have happened if Israel had followed the Torah on this point? If, in 1948, they had said, “Alright, if the Muslims as a group are going to attack us, the Muslims as a group must leave,” they would have an entirely different kind of enemy today. The Islamic threat would still exist, to be sure, but the adversary would be outside the nation, not distributed throughout Israel like a cancer.

**(355)**

Slay the inhabitants of a city that has become idolatrous and burn that city. “If you hear someone in one of your cities, which Yahweh your God gives you to dwell in, saying, ‘Corrupt men have gone out from among you and enticed the inhabitants of their city, saying, ‘Let us go and serve other gods’—which you have not known—then you shall inquire, search out, and ask diligently. And if it is indeed true and certain that such an abomination was committed among you, you shall surely strike the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying it, all that is in it and its livestock—with the edge of the sword. And you shall gather all its plunder into the middle of the street, and completely burn with fire the city and all its plunder, for Yahweh your God. It shall be a heap forever; it shall not be built again. So none of the accursed things shall remain in your hand, that Yahweh may turn from the fierceness of His anger and show you mercy, have compassion on you and multiply you, just as He swore to your fathers, because you have listened to the voice of Yahweh your God, to keep all His commandments which I command you today, to do what is right in the eyes of Yahweh your God.” (Deuteronomy 13:12-18) The politically correct liberals among us are horrified at this sort of thing. Don’t people have a God-given right to worship any god they choose, in any way they want? Not in theocratic Israel, they don’t. Israel was called out of the nations to be “a holy people,” set apart for Yahweh’s plan and purpose. Granted, the “burn-the-city-and-kill-the-idolaters” rule no longer literally applies. The theocratic society for which this was written has been gone for some time. But the underlying principle is still germane: Believers in Yahweh are not to tolerate the inroads of false gods and false teachings into their assemblies. And at this late date, it bears mentioning that “false teachings” are those things that contradict Scripture—not the things that challenge our religious traditions.

**(356)**

Do not rebuild a city that has been led astray to idolatry. “...It shall be a heap forever; it shall not be built again.” (Deuteronomy 13:16) The idolatrous city is a metaphor for false teaching here. God’s point, I believe, is that you can’t build something of lasting value on a faulty foundation. If the premise is wrong, the conclusion will be wrong as well. I’ll offer a provocative example to make my point. We Americans usually assume that democracy is a good thing, where in reality,

it only “works” for the benefit of mankind when the majority revere Yahweh. So when we expend blood and coin in an attempt to impose democracy on places like Afghanistan or Iraq, we learn (or at least we ought to) the horrible truth about democracy: it’s nothing but mob rule in a three-piece suit. If the majority are convinced that Islamic law must be implemented because their god, Allah, said so, then democracy will inevitably enslave the populace and consign them to a life of misery and seething hatred for all mankind. Without Yahweh, dumping a brutal dictator for a democratically elected sharia-friendly government is simply trading a bellyache for an upset stomach.

### **(357)**

Do not make use of the property of a city that has been so led astray. “...You shall surely strike the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, utterly destroying it, all that is in it and its livestock—with the edge of the sword. And you shall gather all its plunder into the middle of the street, and completely burn with fire the city and all its plunder...So none of the accursed things shall remain in your hand, that Yahweh may turn from the fierceness of His anger.”

(Deuteronomy 13:15-17) With the exception of the original Israelite conquest of Canaan (for which this mitzvah was written), every “religious” war in history has been little more than an elaborate snatch-and-run. Islam, truth be known, is far less a religion than it is an acquisitive political doctrine—amply proved by their long and bloody history. And the Roman Catholic Church has grown obscenely rich plundering everyone from “heretics” to Jews to New

World indigenous tribes in the name of religion. But Yahweh—who knows the greed of the human heart—insisted that the eradication of false worship from theocratic Israel would not bring any financial rewards with it. Idolatry was to be destroyed because it was evil, not because there might be a buck in it.

## **AGRICULTURE AND ANIMAL HUSBANDRY**

### **(358)**

Do not cross-breed cattle of different species. “You shall not let your livestock breed with another kind.” (Leviticus 19:19) Neither Moses nor Maimonides knew anything about Linnaean taxonomy. But they did know the difference between a sheep and a goat, or between an ox and an ass. These animal “kinds” are not cross-fertile. This mitzvah and the next one are an obvious metaphor for the ubiquitous scriptural injunction against mixing reverence for Yahweh with pagan idolatrous practice. His point: “Nothing good can possibly come from this. My people are to be holy, set apart, pure and undefiled.”

**(359)**

Do not sow different kinds of seed together in one field. “You shall not sow your field with mixed seed.” (Leviticus 19:19) A variation on the “purity” theme, here we are (once again) being warned against mixing idolatrous practice with true faith. This very contingency was used by Yahshua to teach what the course of the kingdom of heaven would be like this side of Judgment Day. In Matthew 13:24-30, we read the parable of the wheat and tares, which, in a nutshell, says that although Yahweh planted good, fruitful “seed” (His believers) in His field, Satan came in afterward and planted look-alike weeds—people who may look “religious” but, being weeds, bear no fruit—they’re just taking up space and resources—choking out the truth. Yahweh has decided to let them both grow together side by side in His field (the world) until the “harvest” at the end of the age, at which time He will “gather” to Himself the believing “wheat,” but burn the tares.

Wheat produce fruit, tares do not. Each of us needs to look inside and see are we producing fruit or have we taken our talent and buried it.

**(360)**

Do not eat the fruit of a tree for three years from the time it was planted. “When you come into the land, and have planted all kinds of trees for food, then you shall count their fruit as uncircumcised. Three years it shall be as uncircumcised to you. It shall not be eaten. But in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, a praise to Yahweh. And in the fifth year you may eat its fruit, that it may yield to you its increase: I am Yahweh your God.” (Leviticus 19:23-25) Beyond the plain obedience of the command, this is a hard one to figure out. Why did Yahweh declare the fruit of a newly planted tree ceremonially forbidden for the first three years? As an enthusiastic arborist, I can tell you that it takes that long for a tree’s root structure to become established.

The “tree maxim” is: the first year they sleep, the second year they creep, and the third year they leap. Perhaps Yahweh is teaching us about patience—not to expect a new believer to bear edifying fruit for a few years, no matter how promising he or she might appear. If ever there was a “convert” who might have wanted to jump immediately into the fray, it was Paul. But as he testifies in his preface to the Galatians (1:18), he waited for a full three years before he even conferred with the leaders of the Ekklesia at Jerusalem. Three years. Paul was an acknowledged expert in the Torah. Perhaps he realized that he was a newly planted tree and none of his fruit would be usable for the first three years. So he sidelined himself until, as he himself put it (v. 15), “it pleased God....”

**(361)**

The fruit of fruit-bearing trees in the fourth year of their planting shall be sacred like the second tithe and eaten in Jerusalem. “When you come into the land, and have planted all kinds of trees for food, then you shall count their fruit as uncircumcised. Three years it shall be as uncircumcised to you. It shall not be eaten. But in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, a praise to Yahweh. And in the fifth year you may eat its fruit, that it may yield to you its increase: I am Yahweh your God.” (Leviticus 19:23-25) Orthodox Jews today have, as usual, turned what they don’t understand into a maze of mindless rules. They even have a special “New Year’s day” for trees—not the first day of Nisan, as Yahweh decreed, nor the first of Tishri (erroneously called Rosh Hashanah—head of the year—a phony New Year they picked up in Babylon), but Tu B’Shevat, or the fifteenth day of the month of Shevat, which falls in January or February. So presumably, if you get that peach tree into the ground by the middle of January, you can cut the better part of a year off the “three-year” rule. Good grief.

What’s really going on is that the fourth-year fruit is set apart to Yahweh. It is “a praise to Yahweh,” hilulim—offerings of praise similar to the Firstfruits offering. Hilulim is linguistically related to the usual word for praise, halal, which actually means to radiate light (Yahweh’s, in this case). I take all this to mean that the first thing a new believer should do upon getting himself grounded and rooted in the Word is to praise Yahweh.

**(362)**

Do not sow grain or herbs in a vineyard. “You shall not sow your vineyard with different kinds of seed, lest the yield of the seed which you have sown and the fruit of your vineyard be defiled.” (Deuteronomy 22:9) Again, “different kinds of seed” represent different approaches to God. Yahweh has ordained one way to reach Him: grace through faith in Yahshua—literally meaning “Yahweh is salvation.” Since the “vineyard” here is metaphorical of the world we live in, mixing our “seed,” is indicative of blending paganism with true reverence for Yahweh. In a word it is unholiness.

**(363)**

Do not eat the produce of diverse seeds sown in a vineyard. “You shall not sow your vineyard with different kinds of seed, lest the yield of the seed which you have sown and the fruit of your vineyard be defiled.” (Deuteronomy 22:9) A continuation of the thought of the previous mitzvah: holiness requires us to be set apart from the world, set apart to God for His purposes, for that is what the word means. Yahweh was instructing the Israelites not to mix the worship of Ba’al with that of Himself. In our age the names have changed, but the principle hasn’t. The early church

was warned against the inroads of the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:6, 15), a group who advocated compromise between Yahshua's Ekklesia and the pagan religions of the surrounding peoples. But Yahweh had spoken: "You shall not sow your vineyard with different kinds of seed."

### **(364)**

Do not work with beasts of different species yoked together. "You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together." (Deuteronomy 22:10) The lesson here is exactly the same as the previous two mitzvot, though Maimonides refuses to see beyond the agricultural ramifications. It's a plea for holiness, separateness. Not surprisingly, Paul saw exactly what was going on. He wrote: "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.' Therefore 'Come out from among them and be separate,' says Yahweh. 'Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters,' says Yahweh Almighty." (II Corinthians 6:14-18) If you yoke Yahweh's ox with Satan's ass, you'll be plowing in circles.

## **CLOTHING**

### **(365)**

A man shall not wear women's clothing. "A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment, for all who do so are an abomination to Yahweh your God." (Deuteronomy 22:5) Now you know why Satan works so hard trying to blur the gender lines in our society: it's because Yahweh, who created the sexes, likes to keep them separate and distinct. The question we should be asking ourselves is "Why?" Why is Yahweh so intent on preserving the family? Why does He want men to look like men, women to look like women, and marriages between them to last for a lifetime, fruitful and secure? It's because the human family is designed to be a picture of Yahweh and how He relates to us. Yahweh our "Father" is our provider, our strong protector, the ultimate authority. The more intimate, tender, and personal side of God's revelation to us comes through the Holy Spirit—Ruach Qodesh in Hebrew, a feminine term in that language. Yes, God's Spirit is quite literally our Heavenly Mother. And as anyone who grew up close to a brother or sister can attest, there is a special bond between siblings—a oneness that can't be achieved with a parent, no matter how warm the relationship. So Yahweh also manifested Himself as the "Son," God existing in the form of a man—whose brothers and sisters we are if we have been adopted into the family of God. The



family, then, is a metaphor for Yahweh's self-expression on our behalf. He created us, in fact, to reflect that expression in who and what we were: men and women whose lifelong love brings children into being—families.

So from Satan's point of view, one of the best ways to destroy this picture is to confuse the roles of the family members. He encourages men to be effeminate, women authoritative, and children rebellious. Step number one in achieving his goal of the breakdown of the family is to make men and women look the same, and the easiest way to achieve that is with clothing.

**(366)**

A woman should not wear men's clothing. "A woman shall not wear anything that pertains to a man, nor shall a man put on a woman's garment, for all who do so are an abomination to Yahweh your God." (Deuteronomy 22:5) What, exactly, are "women's clothes" or "men's clothes"? Since modes of dress are regional, and since fashion norms shift with time, the answers defy any hard and fast definition (which is probably why Yahweh worded His Torah so carefully). I've got no problem with ladies in pants, for the simple reason that most women still look unmistakably like women dressed that way. As with so many of these instructions, I'd have to say that intent is the key. We shouldn't be trying to look like the opposite sex, or trying to disguise what we are by adopting an androgynous look. Men should look like men, and women, women, in the context of their own regional customs.

**(367)**

Do not wear garments made of wool and linen mixed together. "You shall not wear a garment of different sorts, such as wool and linen mixed together." (Deuteronomy 22:11) Remember, Israel was to be the keeper of Yahweh's signs. What they did in their observance of the Torah was meant to be a witness to the world of Yahweh's plan of redemption—whether they understood the metaphor or not. Clean, white, linen garments are a common scriptural metaphor for holiness. For instance, we read of the marriage supper of the Lamb in Revelation 19:7-8, "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints." Our righteousness is a gift from God, thus these "righteous acts of the saints" with which we are clothed are imputed virtue—the sinlessness of Yahshua covering our transgressions. So this mixture of wool and linen that's prohibited in the Torah is symbolic of one's dependence upon both grace and good works. Good works, symbolized here by wool, are fine in their own context, so Yahweh doesn't prohibit its use. But good works are not germane to the subject of one's vindication—they aren't something to be "worn" in addition to the "fine linen, clean and bright" of God's grace.

Yahweh is admonishing us to rely upon Him alone.

## **THE FIRSTBORN**

### **(368)**

Redeem the firstborn human male. “All the firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. So it shall be, when your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What is this?’ that you shall say to him, ‘By strength of hand Yahweh brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. And it came to pass, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that Yahweh killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of beast. Therefore I sacrifice to Yahweh all males that open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.’” (Exodus 13:13-15) “Everything that first opens the womb of all flesh, which they bring to Yahweh, whether man or beast, shall be yours; nevertheless the firstborn of man you shall surely redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem. And those redeemed of the devoted things you shall redeem when one month old, according to your valuation, for five shekels of silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, which is twenty gerahs.” (Numbers 18:15-16) Yahweh declared that all the males in Israel who were firstborn, either of people or animals, belonged to Him. The rabbis, careful to avoid any subject that might have Messianic overtones, studiously stuck to the letter of the law on this one: if a male child opens the womb, he is to be “bought back from God”—redeemed—for five silver shekels (about \$20). Elsewhere (Leviticus 3:40-51), Yahweh explains that the males of the tribe of Levi are to serve as the substitution for the firstborn males of Israel, and the five shekels are just to cover those for whom there are insufficient numbers of Levites (273 of them when Moses first counted them up).

Redemption is deliverance from some evil circumstance by payment of a price. This evil could be debt, guilt of some crime, slavery, or some other predicament. Since we have all fallen short of

Yahweh’s perfect standard, we are all in need of redemption. By paying the token “ransom” for their firstborn male children, Israelites under the Torah were acting out Yahweh’s redemption of the whole human race—the offering up of His perfect “Lamb of God,” Yahshua the Messiah.

### **(369)**

Redeem the firstling of an ass. “You shall set apart to Yahweh all that open the womb, that is, every firstborn that comes from an animal which you have; the males shall be Yahweh’s. But every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb; and if you will not redeem it, then you

shall break its neck.” (Exodus 13:12-13) A donkey was a ceremonially “unclean” animal. A firstborn male donkey, being useful as a beast of burden, was allowed to be redeemed instead of being sacrificed and eaten as a clean animal would have been. The animal specified to take his place? A lamb. Yahweh’s point is that the price of redemption must be innocent, clean, perfect. Sacrificing a clean lamb in place of an unclean donkey is a perfect picture of what Yahshua did for us on Calvary.

### **(370)**

Break the neck of the firstling of an ass if it is not redeemed. “But the firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb. And if you will not redeem him, then you shall break his neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem. And none shall appear before Me emptyhanded.” (Exodus 34:20) There is choice involved, however. The donkey doesn’t have to be rescued by the lamb. But if he isn’t, his life is forfeit, and no benefit is derived from his life or his death. He provides no nourishment; he does no labor benefiting mankind; he’s of no use to anyone, not even himself. He has brought pain to his mother and inconvenience to everyone else. This is a picture of our sorry position if the sacrifice of Lamb of God is not invoked on our behalf.

We also read in Gen 16:12 “And he is to be a wild man, his hand against every one and every one’s hand against him, and dwell over against all his brothers.” This is speaking of Ishmael being a wild ass of a man. A donkey.

Job 39:5 Who set the wild donkey free? Who loosed the bonds of the wild donkey, Job 39:6 whose home I have made the desert, and the salt land his dwelling?

Job 39:7 He laughs at the commotion of the city; he does not hear the shouts of the driver.

Job 39:8 The range of the mountains is his pasture, and he searches for all that is green.

Ishmael and Esau are similar in the last days in their hatred of the children of Isaac and Jacob.

In the last days the yoke on the wild ass will be loosened and then broken in the last days.

Gen 27:40 And by your sword you are to live, and serve your brother. And it shall be, when you grow restless, that you shall break his yoke from your neck.”

Gen 27:41 And ?saw hated Ya?aqob? because of the blessing with which his father blessed him, and ?saw said in his heart, “The days of mourning for my father draw near, then I am going to kill my brother Ya?aqob?.”

Ishmael and Esau could be redeemed but they are not and will be broken.

(371)

Do not redeem the firstling of a clean beast. “Everything that first opens the womb of all flesh, which they bring to Yahweh, whether man or beast, shall be yours; nevertheless the firstborn of man you shall surely redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem. And those redeemed of the devoted things you shall redeem when one month old, according to your valuation, for five shekels of silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, which is twenty gerahs. But the firstborn of a cow, the firstborn of a sheep, or the firstborn of a goat you shall not redeem; they are holy. You shall sprinkle their blood on the altar, and burn their fat as an offering made by fire for a sweet aroma to Yahweh. And their flesh shall be yours, just as the wave breast and the right thigh are yours.” (Numbers 18:15-18) This subject is so important to Yahweh, it’s discussed in detail three separate times in the Torah (as we have seen), and other facets are covered in Leviticus 3:40-51 and 27:26. This mitzvah covers the “clean” animal. It is to be sacrificed when it has reached the requisite age, with its blood (representing its life) being sprinkled on the altar, and its inedible fat parts burned as an offering to Yahweh. The meat, however, remains the property of the animal’s owner.

Several things are going on here. The symbols are rich and varied. First, the animal’s owner has shown faith in Yahweh’s promises of future provision. He has killed an animal that showed promise, whether for breeding purposes, wool, or labor. The “bean-counter” in us may decry the “waste,” but Yahweh says, “If you trust Me, I’ll take care of you.”

Second, Yahweh is using the occasion as an excuse for a party. It’s a pot-luck barbeque: He gets the blood and fat, and the family gets the edible parts. Over and over again in scripture, we get the distinct impression that Yahweh loves nothing more than to get together with His children and have a feast. And by the way, there’s a big one coming soon—it’s going to last a thousand years.

Third, that which is already “clean” needs no redemption. As Moses says, if we are “clean,” we have been made holy, set apart for Yahweh’s purposes. Yes, death of the mortal body is part of the process, but we who are clean are only dying in emulation of our Savior—dying to sin so that we might live through Him.

And fourth, look at which clean animals were singled out as examples. The bullock or ox represents quiet service—one of the recurring metaphors of Messiah’s character. The male lamb, of course, represents Christ in His role as substitutionary sacrifice. As John put it, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” And the goat is symbolic of the sin Yahshua became for us as he bore our shame to the grave.

## Priests and Levites

If you consult the Tanach (the Old Covenant scriptures) you'll read about priests, Levites, judges, kings, and prophets being ordained by Yahweh to lead and serve His people. But if you look at Judaism today, who's in charge? Rabbis—literally, “masters”—self-appointed teachers and interpreters of the Torah. This unbiblical state of affairs has existed for a couple of thousand years now. We need to examine why the shift was made, how, and by whom.

This study, as you know, is organizationally based on the work of Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, a.k.a.

Maimonides, a.k.a. the Rambam (1135-1204 AD). But far from being the one who invented rabbinic Judaism, Maimonides merely collected and codified the opinions of influential rabbis spanning the previous millennium. So what had happened to the Levitical priesthood? From the gospel narratives, we know that during the time of Yahshua's earthly ministry (28 to 31 AD) the priesthood was still in business—dominated at the time by a liberal, “politically correct” sect called the Sadducees. They were countered by the strict and conservative Pharisee sect (who were far more influential among the people, according to Josephus) from whom arose the rabbis.

Since the chief priests didn't really believe the word of God they had been tasked to preserve and defend, it fell to these enthusiastic usurpers, the Pharisees, to pick up the slack. Or so they believed.

The key to the rise of rabbinism is the notion that in addition to the written Torah, there was also an “oral Torah”—without which one supposedly couldn't understand or perform the written version. Passed on by word of mouth from teacher to student without ever being written down (though no one could explain why anyone would want to do this), this “oral law” was, in the eyes of its adherents, of equal weight to the written Torah—the “Mosaic Law.” But the oral law is never mentioned in the Hebrew scriptures, never alluded to, never even hinted at. Why? Because in point of fact, it didn't exist—not until well after the close of the Old Covenant

canon, around 400 BC. Another evidence that an “oral Torah” that had been passed down intact from generation to generation didn't actually exist was that by the time of Christ, there was a raging controversy about what it supposedly said. The two dominant schools of thought were led by Rabbi Hillel and Shammai—and they agreed on very little. The oral law apparently wasn't worth the paper it was printed on.

The final defeat of priestly authority was brought about a century or so later, when Rabbi Akiba ben Joseph gained the upper hand, systematized the oral law according to his own views, and precipitated through his disciples the Mishnah (the previously forbidden written form of the oral law) and an impenetrable web of supporting works, including Greek and Aramaic translations of the Tanach that supported his own unique position on the halakah. Akiba instituted a whole new system of eisegesis (that is, reading into a text what you want to see, as opposed to exegesis—drawing out of the passage what is there). Judaic thought has been thoroughly permeated by Akiba's views ever since, including, of course, the writings of Maimonides that we've been reviewing.

If you're interested in the whole story, read Rabbi Akiba's *Messiah: The Origins of Rabbinic Authority*, by Daniel Gruber (Elijah Publishing, 1999). The crowning "achievement" of Rabbi Akiba's grab for power was his backing of Simeon ben Kosiba—a.k.a. Bar Kochba—as Israel's messiah. The Jews' anti-Roman revolt under this arrogant and brutal warlord was what ultimately persuaded Emperor Hadrian (in 135 AD) to evict every Israelite from the land, salt its farmland to make it barren and worthless, and change its name from Judea to Palestina (after the long-extinct Philistines) in an effort to break the Jews' emotional ties to the land. Remarkably however, Bar Kochba is still regarded as the ideal messianic "type" among orthodox Jews, and Akiba's disastrously errant theologies are the very foundation of Orthodox Jewish religious thought to this day.

That is why Judaism is a dry well when it comes to insight about God's word. It's foundation is a manmade construct. Only Yahweh's word—His written word—can be trusted. "For the word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are. Nothing in all creation can hide from him. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes. This is the God to whom we must explain all that we have done." Neither the "oral Torah" nor any of Akiba's prevarications can do any of that. And though the rabbis would have you believe that they alone stand between God and man serving as the gatekeepers of truth, Yahweh has something entirely different in mind: a Priesthood of One. "That is why we have a great High Priest who has gone to heaven, Yeshua the Son of God. Let us cling to him and never stop trusting him. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same temptations we do, yet he did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it." (Hebrews 4:11-16 NLT)

God's first gift to mankind was choice—the ability to choose whether or not to reciprocate His love through trusting Him. But the assignment of our place of service and responsibility remains

Yahweh's prerogative. It is not up to us to choose to be prophets, priests, or kings—or rabbis, for that matter. Rather, God chooses us for these tasks, based upon the wisdom or foolishness we've shown—our stewardship—in more fundamental matters. In the matter of the priesthood of Israel, God chose one family from one specific tribe to be priests: the family of Aaron, of the tribe of Levi. "Now a high priest is a man chosen to represent other human beings in their dealings with God. He presents their gifts to God and offers their sacrifices for sins. And because he is human, he is able to deal gently with the people, though they are ignorant and wayward. For he is subject to the same weaknesses they have. That is why he has to offer sacrifices, both for their sins and for his own sins. And no one can become a high priest simply because he wants such an honor. He has to be called by God for this work, just as Aaron was...." Service to God and man is a calling, not a career path.

In Israel, kings were to come from Judah, and priests from Levi. But Yahweh ordained Yahshua to be both king and priest. His was a unique calling. "That is why Christ did not exalt himself to become High Priest. No, he was chosen by God, who said to him, 'You are my Son. Today I have become your Father.' And in another passage God said to him, 'You are a priest forever in the line of Melchizedek.'" Melchizedek, if you'll recall, was the priest-king of Salem whom Abram met after the defeat of the "kings" who had raided Sodom and kidnapped his nephew Lot (Genesis 14). This incident predated the ordination of Aaron by half a millennium. "While Jesus was here on earth, he offered prayers and pleadings, with a loud cry and tears, to the one who could deliver him out of death. And God heard his prayers because of his reverence for God. So even though Jesus was God's Son, he learned obedience from the things he suffered. In this way, God qualified him as a perfect High Priest, and he became the source of eternal salvation for all those who obey him. And

God designated him to be a High Priest in the line of Melchizedek." (Hebrews 5:1-10 NLT)

The writer goes on to describe Mel's credentials. "This Melchizedek was king of the city of Salem and also a priest of God Most High. When Abraham was returning home after winning a great battle against many kings, Melchizedek met him and blessed him. Then Abraham took a tenth of all he had won in the battle and gave it to Melchizedek. His name means 'king of justice.' He is also 'king of peace' because Salem means 'peace.' There is no record of his father or mother or any of his ancestors—no beginning or end to his life. He remains a priest forever, resembling the Son of God...." It's possible that Melchizedek was a theophany; at the very least, he was a messianic metaphor.

Remember, Hebrews is a book of comparisons, ultimately comparing the Law of Moses with the finished work of Yahshua the Messiah as a path to salvation—and finding the Law wanting.

Here the Aaronic priesthood is compared to that of Melchizedek. “Consider then how great this Melchizedek was. Even Abraham, the great patriarch of Israel, recognized how great Melchizedek was by giving him a tenth of what he had taken in battle. Now the priests, who are descendants of Levi, are commanded in the law of Moses to collect a tithe from all the people, even though they are their own relatives. But Melchizedek, who was also Shem, collected a tenth from Abraham. And Melchizedek placed a blessing upon Abraham, the one who had already received the promises of God. And without question, the person who has the power to bless is always greater than the person who is blessed....” In other words, the priesthood represented by Melchizedek is superior to that of Aaron.

Here’s how. “In the case of Jewish priests, tithes are paid to men who will die. But Melchizedek is greater than they are, because we are told that he lives on. In addition, we might even say that Levi’s descendants, the ones who collect the tithe, paid a tithe to Melchizedek through their ancestor Abraham. For although Levi wasn’t born yet, the seed from which he came was in Abraham’s loins when Melchizedek collected the tithe from him.” All of which is stated to make a point, which is: “And finally, if the priesthood of Levi could have achieved God’s purposes—and it was that priesthood on which the law was based—why did God need to send a different priest from the line of Melchizedek, instead of from the line of Levi and Aaron?...” The answer, so obvious the writer of Hebrews didn’t bother saying it, is that the priesthood of Aaron could not have achieved God’s purposes—it was never intended to. “And when the priesthood is changed, the law must also be changed to permit it.

For the one we are talking about belongs to a different tribe, whose members do not serve at the altar. What I mean is, our Lord came from the tribe of Judah, and Moses never mentioned Judah in connection with the priesthood.” (Hebrews 7:1-14 NLT) Unlike His claims to the throne of Israel through His ancestor King David, Yahshua’s priesthood—His intercessory role between mankind and

Yahweh—did not depend on His physical lineage, but on a spiritual lineage going back to Melchizedek. The law hasn’t so much been “changed,” as it has been fulfilled—the metaphor of Aaron’s priesthood has been replaced by the reality of Melchizedek’s.

“The change in God’s law is even more evident from the fact that a different priest, who is like Melchizedek, has now come. He became a priest, not by meeting the old requirement of belonging to the tribe of Levi, but by the power of a life that cannot be destroyed.” Under the Torah, a priest served simply because he was a male born of a certain family who had reached a certain age. But the order of Melchizedek held a slightly stiffer standard: one must have “a life



that cannot be destroyed.” “And the psalmist pointed this out when he said of Christ, ‘You are a priest forever in the line of Melchizedek.’ Yes, the old requirement about the priesthood was set aside because it was weak and useless. For the law made nothing perfect, and now a better hope has taken its place. And that is how we draw near to God.” (Hebrews 7:15-19 NLT) Lest there be any confusion, let me reiterate for the umpteenth time: the Torah is not without value, for it speaks eloquently of the coming Messiah and His mission. But it is not in itself Yahweh’s plan for our salvation. It never was.

“God took an oath that Christ would always be a priest, but he never did this for any other priest. Only to Jesus did he say, ‘Yahweh has taken an oath and will not break his vow: You are a priest forever.’ Because of God’s oath, it is Jesus who guarantees the effectiveness of this better covenant....” That makes sense, for if a priest of the order of Melchizedek must have “a life that cannot be destroyed,” it follows that His life would continue “forever.” “Another difference is that there were many priests under the old system. When one priest died, another had to take his place. But Jesus remains a priest forever; his priesthood will never end. Therefore he is able, once and forever, to save everyone who comes to God through him. He lives forever to plead with God on their behalf.” Yahshua, then, is the only high priest we will ever need. Moreover, He is the right kind of intercessor. “He is the kind of high priest we need because he is holy and blameless, unstained by sin. He has now been set apart from sinners, and he has been given the highest place of honor in heaven. He does not need to offer sacrifices every day like the other high priests. They did this for their own sins first and then for the sins of the people. But Jesus did this once for all when he sacrificed himself on the cross. Those who were high priests under the law of Moses were limited by human weakness. But after the law was given, God appointed his Son with an oath, and his Son has been made perfect forever.” (Hebrews 7:20-28)

We began this chapter by noting that the rabbis had appointed themselves the keepers of the Torah in place of the priests. After all, the Romans had torn down the temple and scattered the populace, and the duly appointed priesthood had been corrupt and unbelieving anyway. So the Aaronic priesthood was dead three times over. But the rabbis—especially Akiba—failed to factor in that

Yahweh wasn’t exactly asleep at the wheel. He knew what had happened to the priesthood. He Himself had replaced the order of Aaron—a shadow of the Messiah’s priestly role—with the order of Melchizedek, the reality that casts the shadow—a priesthood that would never perish. That makes the rabbis nothing but pathetic wannabe usurpers of the Messiah’s mandate. “Here is the main point: Our High Priest sat down in the place of highest honor in heaven, at God’s

right hand. There he ministers in the sacred tent, the true place of worship that was built by the Lord and not by human hands....”

Yes, the earthly Temple was gone, but even this had been nothing but a reflection of the true Temple in heaven. The real High Priest was presiding in the real temple. “And since every high priest is required to offer gifts and sacrifices, our High Priest must make an offering, too. If he were here on earth, he would not even be a priest, since there already are priests who offer the gifts required by the law of Moses. They serve in a place of worship that is only a copy, a shadow of the real one in heaven. For when Moses was getting ready to build the Tabernacle, God gave him this warning: ‘Be sure that you make everything according to the design I have shown you here on the mountain.’ But our High Priest has been given a ministry that is far superior to the ministry of those who serve under the old laws, for he is the one who guarantees for us a better covenant with God, based on better promises.” (Hebrews 8:1-6 NLT) No more shadows, no more reflections. The Reality is here. All of which appears to make the mitzvot that follow somewhat beside the point. The Aaronic priesthood they describe no longer exists in the role the Torah specifies, and the Levites alive today don’t perceive who they are. But we can still learn something of the Reality by studying the image, and we can still glean valuable insight from God’s metaphors. As I said, the Torah may have been fulfilled, but that doesn’t mean it’s obsolete.

## **PRIESTS AND LEVITES**

**(372)**

The kohanim shall put on priestly vestments for the service. “Now take Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister to Me as priest, Aaron and Aaron’s sons: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty. So you shall speak to all who are gifted artisans, whom I have filled with the spirit of wisdom, that they may make Aaron’s garments, to consecrate him, that he may minister to Me as priest. And these are the garments which they shall make: a breastplate, an ephod, a robe, a skillfully woven tunic, a turban, and a sash. So they shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons, that he may minister to Me as priest. (Exodus 28:1-4) The clothing worn by the priests, and especially the High Priest, set them apart in appearance from the ordinary Israelite. Each article mentioned was subsequently described in detail in Exodus 28, and all of it speaks of the coming Messiah.

The breastplate (verses 15-29) was adorned with twelve gemstones, correlated to the twelve tribes of Israel. The picture is that each individual tribe was always near the heart of the High Priest (v.29). In the book of Revelation, John describes the foundations of the New Jerusalem

as being adorned with twelve precious stones, correlated this time to the twelve apostles (Revelation 21:14). I believe the stones are the same. Each stone points out a different facet of Messiah's character.

The High Priest's ephod (verses 6-14) was like a skirt that covered the hips and thighs (worn in addition to the thigh-length trousers mentioned in verse 42). It was attached beneath the breastplate with golden rings and a blue cord. It was also equipped with straps that suspended it from the shoulders. Upon the shoulders, like epaulets, were two onyx stones set in gold, each engraved with the names of six of the sons of Israel. Thus the High Priest symbolically bore the weight of Israel upon his shoulders—a picture of service and intercession.

The "robe of the ephod" was apparently built sort of like a poncho, with a single hole for the head, reinforced so it wouldn't tear (see #373). This robe would have been quite expensive, for it was entirely dyed blue (see Mitzvah #18), the color of the royalty whose sacrifice would someday redeem them—the same color specified for one thread of each Israelite's tsitzit, or tassel of remembrance.

The tunic (or outer garment), trousers, turban, and sash, were all made of fine white linen, representing (if other hints spread throughout scripture are germane) righteousness, and specifically, imputed righteousness—that which is not maintained through a faultless life, but rather is bestowed upon us through God's grace. The turban was adorned with a gold plate engraved with the words "Holiness to Yahweh." Thus the spiritual state of God's people would literally be on the mind of the High Priest.

### **(373)**

Do not tear the High Kohein's robe. "You shall make the robe of the ephod all of blue. There shall be an opening for his head in the middle of it; it shall have a woven binding all around its opening, like the opening in a coat of mail, so that it does not tear." (Exodus 28:31-32) "He who is the high priest among his brethren, on whose head the anointing oil was poured and who is consecrated to wear the garments, shall not uncover his head nor tear his clothes." (Leviticus 21:10) When Ezra the priest saw that some returning exiles had intermarried with gentiles, he tore his robe in dismay. But though he was a leader in Israel, he wasn't the High Priest at the time, Jeshua was. The only instance recorded in scripture of a High Priest rending his garments was Caiaphas, the High Priest during Christ's ministry. He tore his clothes in rage when Yahshua—commanded by the priest to reveal whether or not He was the Messiah—answered truthfully in the affirmative. If nothing else, it demonstrates that his observation of the Torah was strictly selective: he was perfectly willing to throw its precepts to the wind if it suited his political purposes.

**(374)**

The kohein shall not enter the Sanctuary at all times (i.e., at times when he is not performing service). “Yahweh said to Moses: ‘Tell Aaron your brother not to come at just any time into the Holy Place inside the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark, lest he die; for I will appear in the cloud above the mercy seat.’” (Leviticus 16:2) The High Priest was to enter the Most Holy Place only once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the day when the blood of the sacrifice would be sprinkled on the mercy seat to cover the sins of the people until the next Yom Kippur. This ritual, of course, was prophetic of the sacrifice the Messiah would eventually make on Calvary, this time removing the sins of God’s people. The reason given that the High Priest could only enter once a year was that Yahweh’s very presence was to appear in the cloud above the mercy seat. One doesn’t waltz into the presence of Almighty God uninvited. To do so is fatal.

So how do you suppose the Babylonians were able to tear Solomon’s temple apart stone by stone? How did Herod remodel the second temple from the ground up, and how did the Romans dismantle that one without fatally encountering Yahweh’s shekinah? There is only one possible answer: Yahweh was no longer there. Ezekiel even records His departure, in Chapters 10 and 11. The Ark of the Covenant wasn’t there either. The last Biblical mention of the Ark is in II Chronicles 35, during the reign of Josiah (about 621 B.C.). The temple was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar’s troops thirty five years later. But we read in II Maccabees 2:4-8 that the prophet Jeremiah removed the Ark and hid it away “until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy.”

My point is that without Christ’s fulfillment of the Passover sacrifice, this mitzvah and many others are pointless and impossible. There’s no priesthood, no temple, and no Ark of the Covenant to sprinkle the blood upon.

**(375)**

The ordinary kohein shall not defile himself by contact with any dead, other than immediate relatives. “Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: “None shall defile himself for the dead among his people, except for his relatives who are nearest to him: his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, and his brother; also his virgin sister who is near to him, who has had no husband, for her he may defile himself.”’” (Leviticus 21:1-3) The word translated “defile” (Hebrew tame) means to be unclean, to be ritually impure. There was no shortage of ways an Israelite could “defile” himself or herself, some of which were unavoidable in any practical sense: contact with animals not on the “clean” list, giving birth, having sexual relations, menstruation, bodily emissions, leprosy, and being in the presence of a

corpse. Thus being “defiled” didn’t mean you were evil, but it did mean you were temporarily disqualified from participation in certain facets of the life of the community.

Yahweh is seen here tempering law with compassion: under normal circumstances, a priest was to remain as ritually pure as he could, for it was his job to attend to the spiritual needs of the people, at least in a ceremonial sense (that is, metaphorically acting out the Messiah’s role as intercessor). But if a close family member had died, all bets were off. Compassion trumps correctness.

### **(376)**

The kohanim shall defile themselves only for their deceased relatives (by attending their burial), and mourn for them like other Israelites, who are commanded to mourn for their relatives. “Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: “None shall defile himself for the dead among his people, except for his relatives who are nearest to him: his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, and his brother; also his virgin sister who is near to him, who has had no husband, for her he may defile himself.”’” (Leviticus 21:1-3) As is so often true, the rabbis have added detail and definition to the Torah that simply isn’t there. This is nothing but an artificial expansion of Mitzvah #375. Of course, after Akiba redefined Judaism in his own image early in the second century, it didn’t really matter what was required of the priesthood—it had no further role to play.

The rabbis had put themselves in the place of honor. The Shekinah had departed and the temple was no more. The rabbis could have demanded that the kohanim must perform summersaults as they enter the Holy Place, and it wouldn’t have made any practical difference.

### **(377)**

A kohein who had an immersion during the day (to cleanse him from his uncleanness) shall not serve in the Sanctuary until after sunset. “Whatever man of the descendants of Aaron, who is a leper or has a discharge, shall not eat the holy offerings until he is clean. And whoever touches anything made unclean by a corpse, or a man who has had an emission of semen, or whoever touches any creeping thing by which he would be made unclean, or any person by whom he would become unclean, whatever his uncleanness may be—the person who has touched any such thing shall be unclean until evening, and shall not eat the holy offerings unless he washes his body with water. And when the sun goes down he shall be clean; and afterward he may eat the holy offerings, because it is his food.” (Leviticus 22:4-7) Maimonides has apparently confused emissions with immersions. An emission of semen was one of many things that would render a priest ceremonially unclean—temporarily unauthorized to participate in the temple

service or partake of the offerings that would have normally been his sustenance during his course of service. The remedy for being rendered ritually unclean was to wash one's body with water and wait until sunset—in Hebrew reckoning, the start of a new day. It was not (as Maimonides implies) the washing that disqualified the priest, but rather the contact with the unclean thing.

The whole subject is a lesson on forgiveness. We all sin—that is, fall short of Yahweh's perfect standard. But "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9) The washing of the priest's body is thus a picture of the confession—the admission of our faults—to a God who wants to maintain fellowship with us. However, there is more to it. The priest also had to wait until the sun had set. This tells us that there are consequences to our sins that follow us throughout our earthly lives. We may have been forgiven by God for robbing the convenience store, but we still have to do the jail time.

### **(378)**

A kohein shall not marry a divorced woman. "They [priests] shall not take a wife who is a harlot or a defiled woman, nor shall they take a woman divorced from her husband; for the priest is holy to his God." (Leviticus 21:7) The next three mitzvot prohibit priests from marrying certain classes of women, each of which defines them as—at the very least—not being virgins. Here, a divorced woman is specified. We will note shortly that the restrictions for the High Priest are even more stringent: a regular priest may marry a widow, while the High Priest may not (see Mitzvah #385). The reasons for the marriage restriction are purely symbolic, of course. The women described here represent relationships with the world, with other lovers, with other gods. The priests of Yahweh are to be set apart for His work in every way: they are "holy." Thus a relationship with the world, even by proxy, is forbidden. God is not saying that divorced women are necessarily evil people. The symbol is what's important, and they symbolize broken relationships.

### **(379)**

A kohein shall not marry a harlot. "They [priests] shall not take a wife who is a harlot or a defiled woman, nor shall they take a woman divorced from her husband; for the priest is holy to his God." (Leviticus 21:7) A harlot, or prostitute, is not only someone who has multiple sexual relationships out of wedlock. In the context of the times, she was often associated with the worship of false gods like Ba'al or Astarte. The Mosaic metaphor is quite plain. Those who minister before Yahweh are not to have relationships with false gods. That may sound obvious, but I must reiterate that both Judaism and Christianity were—and are—permeated with vestiges of pagan worship practices. The letters to the seven Asian churches in Revelation 2 and 3 warn

against this very thing. In particular, Thyatira was found to be up to her neck in it. Yahshua, then as now, warns us to repent.

### **(380)**

A kohein shall not marry a profaned woman. “They [priests] shall not take a wife who is a harlot or a defiled woman, nor shall they take a woman divorced from her husband; for the priest is holy to his God.” (Leviticus 21:7) We’re going to have to go back to our Hebrew dictionaries for insight into this last category—the defiled or profaned woman. The word is *chahal*, which literally means: the dead, one who has been slain or fatally wounded, a casualty that has died—contact with which, of course, brings a state of ritual defilement. Is God telling us not to marry dead people? Sort of. As John 3:18 reminds us, “He who does not believe is condemned already...” The “dead” are those who have no relationship with Yahweh. So the priest—the one who serves before God—is warned not to be related in marriage to one who has no such desire to serve. As we saw in Mitzvah #364, it’s a question of being unequally yoked together with an unbeliever.

### **(381)**

Show honor to a kohein, and to give him precedence in all things that are holy. “The priest is holy to his God. Therefore you shall consecrate him, for he offers the bread of your God. He shall be holy to you, for I Yahweh, who sanctify you, am holy.” (Leviticus 21:7-8) Although it’s a fine sentiment to show honor to those whom God has appointed for a special purpose, that’s not really what the verse says. The Hebrew verb translated both “consecrate” and “sanctify” (*qadas*) is from the same root as the word translated “holy” (*qados*). The consonant root *qds* literally means “to cut” or “to separate.” The point is that the priests of Israel were to be set apart from ordinary Israelites, dedicated to the service of Yahweh, because He Himself was unique—set apart from all others—in terms of purity, power, and purpose.

A High Kohein shall not defile himself with any dead, even if they are relatives. “...Nor shall he [the High Priest] go near any dead body, nor defile himself for his father or his mother.” (Leviticus 21:11) A distinction has been made between ordinary priests and the High Priest. The rules were stricter for the High Priest: he could not approach the corpses of even the closest of relatives. His position as symbolic intercessor for the people was too important to them; thus personal sacrifices, as in this mitzvah, were required on his account. We should not be surprised to find that the High Priesthood was not a position of power (as Caiaphas saw it), but one of responsibility. It was the High Priest who was required to risk his life on the Day of Atonement by entering the Most Holy Place, approaching the Ark of the Covenant, and sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice upon it. People had died by touching the Ark. The Levitical High Priest’s responsibilities mirror those of the ultimate High Priest, Yahshua, whose own

blood was shed for the remission of our sins, and whose death rent the curtain blocking access to the Most Holy Place. From that moment on, we—His followers—became priests in our own right, with direct access to the Father through prayer. We have thus become holy through the sacrifice of our High Priest. But more than that, He has made us alive by giving us His Spirit, because after all, the High Priest may not go near the dead.

A High Kohein shall not go (under the same roof) with a dead body. "...Nor shall he go near any dead body, nor defile himself for his father or his mother; nor shall he go out of the sanctuary, nor profane the sanctuary of his God; for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is upon him: I am Yahweh." (Leviticus 21:11-12) Maimonides is giving lip service to rabbinic tradition here, but as you can see, the Torah says nothing about it. But as long as we're here, let's look at the prohibition against departing from or profaning the sanctuary. The sanctuary is the Hebrew miqdas, which is linguistically derived from the same root as qodesh —holy, or set-apart. Miqdas can refer to any holy place or thing, the most obvious and prominent of which in the life of Israel being the temple. The Hebrew word for "go out" is yatsa, parallel to the noun yowtse't which connotes (according to the Dictionary of Bible Languages with Semantic Domains): "captive, i.e., one going out of the land into captivity and exile, so changing one's place of habitation." What Yahweh is saying here is not that the High Priest can't ever leave the sanctuary—in Moses' day, the Tabernacle. He's saying that he is not to switch affiliations, allowing himself to be "taken captive" by false gods. The reason given is that the "anointing oil" of God is upon him. The word "anointing," of course, (mishchah) is related to the word we transliterate Messiah—Yahweh's anointed One. Further, the oil with which he is anointed is a common Biblical metaphor for the Holy Spirit. All of this adds up to one thing: Israel's High Priest is a stand-in, a metaphor, for Yahshua our High Priest.

### **(382)**

A High Kohein shall not defile himself with any dead, even if they are relatives. "...Nor shall he [the High Priest] go near any dead body, nor defile himself for his father or his mother." (Leviticus 21:11) A distinction has been made between ordinary priests and the High Priest. The rules were stricter for the High Priest: he could not approach the corpses of even the closest of relatives. His position as symbolic intercessor for the people was too important to them; thus personal sacrifices, as in this mitzvah, were required on his account. We should not be surprised to find that the High Priesthood was not a position of power (as Caiaphas saw it), but one of responsibility. It was the High Priest who was required to risk his life on the Day of Atonement by entering the Most Holy Place, approaching the Ark of the Covenant, and sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice upon it. People had died by touching the



Ark. The Levitical High Priest's responsibilities mirror those of the ultimate High Priest, Yahshua, whose own blood was shed for the remission of our sins, and whose death rent the curtain blocking access to the Most Holy Place. From that moment on, we—His followers—became priests in our own right, with direct access to the Father through prayer. We have thus become holy through the sacrifice of our High Priest. But more than that, He has made us alive by giving us His Spirit, because after all, the High Priest may not go near the dead.

**(383)**

A High Kohein shall not go (under the same roof) with a dead body. "...Nor shall he go near any dead body, nor defile himself for his father or his mother; nor shall he go out of the sanctuary, nor profane the sanctuary of his God; for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is upon him: I am Yahweh." (Leviticus 21:11-12) Maimonides is giving lip service to rabbinic tradition here, but as you can see, the Torah says nothing about it. But as long as we're here, let's look at the prohibition against departing from or profaning the sanctuary. The sanctuary is the Hebrew miqdas, which is linguistically derived from the same root as qodesh—holy, or set-apart. Miqdas can refer to any holy place or thing, the most obvious and prominent of which in the life of Israel being the temple. The Hebrew word for "go out" is yatsa, parallel to the noun yowtse't which connotes (according to the Dictionary of Bible Languages with Semantic Domains): "captive, i.e., one going out of the land into captivity and exile, so changing one's place of habitation." What Yahweh is saying here is not that the High Priest can't ever leave the sanctuary—in Moses' day, the Tabernacle. He's saying that he is not to switch affiliations, allowing himself to be "taken captive" by false gods. The reason given is that the "anointing oil" of God is upon him. The word "anointing," of course, (mishchah) is related to the word we transliterate Messiah—Yahweh's anointed One. Further, the oil with which he is anointed is a common Biblical metaphor for the Holy Spirit. All of this adds up to one thing: Israel's High Priest is a stand-in, a metaphor, for Yahshua our High Priest.

**(384)**

The High Kohein shall marry a virgin. "And he shall take a wife in her virginity. A widow or a divorced woman or a defiled woman or a harlot—these he shall not marry; but he shall take a virgin of his own people as wife." (Leviticus 21:13-14) Dan Brown had lots of satanic help with his best-selling novel, The Da Vinci Code. Now you know why Satan loves (and promotes) the odd idea that Yahshua married Mary Magdalene (who had once been "defiled," even if she

wasn't a harlot). It would (if true) disqualify Yahshua as High Priest material, leaving us without an Intercessor, and without a Savior. No, Yahshua our High Priest would wed a pure virgin—us—even if He had to die to attain our chastity for us. Paul wrote, “For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” (II Corinthians 11:2) And John saw in a vision the wedding of this virgin to the Lamb of God: “And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, ‘Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready.’ And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.” (Revelation 19:6-8)

### **(385)**

The High Kohein shall not marry a widow. “...A widow or a divorced woman or a defiled woman or a harlot—these he shall not marry; but he shall take a virgin of his own people as wife.” (Leviticus 21:13-14) The death of a woman's husband made her legally and morally eligible for remarriage. Thus regular priests, though they couldn't marry divorcees, weren't prohibited from marrying widows (see Mitzvot #378-380). But not so for the High Priest. He was to marry a virgin, and only a virgin. This difference points out something significant concerning our relationship with Yahshua. He, being our High Priest, may be joined only to one who is pure and undefiled, for He is holy. (Of course, He alone has the power to make us pure.) But we (who have been made priests through our faith in Him—see Revelation 1:5-6) may have things in our lives that were once joined to other gods. As long as those other gods are dead and gone, we can still be of service. If they are alive to us, however, we may not serve—which explains why priests could not be married to harlots or profaned women.

### **(386)**

The High Kohein shall not cohabit with a widow, even without marriage, because he profanes her. “...Nor shall he [the High Priest] profane his posterity among his people, for I, Yahweh, sanctify him.” (Leviticus 21:15) Fornication and adultery are specifically forbidden elsewhere, so this is not a loophole that Yahweh is attempting to close. Rather, it is a restatement (a common literary device in Hebrew speech) confirming and explaining what had just been said, that the High Priest was not to marry a widow, harlot, or divorced woman. To do so would chalal—defile, profane, or treat with contempt his zera'—his seed, semen, children, offspring, or posterity.

### **(387)**

A person with a physical blemish shall not serve (in the Sanctuary). “And Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to Aaron, saying: “No man of your descendants in succeeding generations, who has any defect, may approach to offer the bread of his God. For any man who has a defect shall not approach: a man blind or lame, who has a marred face or any limb too long, a man who has a broken foot or broken hand, or is a hunchback or a dwarf, or a man who has a defect in his eye, or eczema or scab, or is a eunuch. No man of the descendants of Aaron the priest, who has a defect, shall come near to offer the offerings made by fire to Yahweh. He has a defect; he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God. He may eat the bread of his God, both the most holy and the holy; only he shall not go near the veil or approach the altar, because he has a defect, lest he profane My sanctuaries; for I Yahweh sanctify them.””

(Leviticus 21:16-23) It’s not that God doesn’t like short people with acne. The lesson here is that just as the sacrifice must be perfect, without spot or blemish, so also must the one offering the sacrifice be spotless. The reason (we can see in hindsight) is that Yahshua was not only making the sacrifice, but also being the sacrifice—the ultimate High Priest was the Lamb of God.

Note that though the man with the defect was disqualified from serving in his hereditary role as a priest, he was not prohibited from eating his share of the sacrifices that were brought before God—as was the privilege of all the priests. Yahweh, as always, is fair and merciful. But we need to remember, the priesthood—whether under Moses or under Yahshua—is not a job; it’s a calling.

### **(388)**

A kohein with a temporary blemish shall not serve there. “No man of the descendants of Aaron the priest, who has a defect, shall come near to offer the offerings made by fire to Yahweh. He has a defect; he shall not come near to offer the bread of his God.” (Leviticus 21:21) This isn’t rocket science. The persistence or duration of the blemish has absolutely nothing to do with it. A priest with a defect doesn’t serve. Period. If the defect or blemish is no longer there, there is nothing to keep the priest from serving. If we come to terms with the fact that the defect is a metaphor for sin—and that the sin must be removed before the priest can minister—it will all make sense. But if we refuse to look beyond the letter of the law, we will spend our lives looking for loopholes.

### **(389)**

A person with a physical blemish shall not enter the Sanctuary further than the altar. “...Only he shall not go near the veil or approach the altar, because he has a defect, lest he profane My sanctuaries; for I Yahweh sanctify them.” (Leviticus 21:23) The altar was a big barbeque that stood outside the entrance to the tent of meeting, and later the temple. The only reason a priest

would approach the altar was to participate or assist in the offering of a sacrifice. Maimonides would have you believe that geographical limitations were being placed on priests with blemishes. Seems that even when he's right, he's wrong. The point (again) is that sin precludes service. If we haven't been cleansed of our sins—our shortcomings—by the blood of Yahweh's Lamb, then the best things we can do are worse than worthless in God's sight, as we are reminded in Isaiah 64:6.

### **(390)**

A kohein who is unclean shall not serve (in the Sanctuary). "Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, 'Speak to Aaron and his sons, that they separate themselves from the holy things of the children of Israel, and that they do not profane My holy name by what they dedicate to Me: I am Yahweh. Say to them: "Whoever of all your descendants throughout your generations, who goes near the holy things which the children of Israel dedicate to Yahweh, while he has uncleanness upon him, that person shall be cut off from My presence: I am Yahweh.'" (Leviticus 22:1-3) There were quite a few things that could make a priest or Levite ceremoniously unclean (not so much "dirty" as disqualified). Some of them are listed in the following verses, things like having a discharge of some sort, being a leper, touching something that had been touched by a corpse, or coming into contact with something that was defined as unclean. Some of these things were avoidable, and some were not. For example, if a bug landed on you, you were unclean as far as the temple service was concerned, and the condition would persist until the sun went down and you washed yourself with water. Worse, you couldn't really be sure what had touched you without your knowledge—you might be unclean and not even know it.

If this had no application beyond the raw letter of the law, one could easily get the impression that Yahweh was some sort of heavenly hypochondriac. Keep your grubby germs away from Me! But the obvious truth, once again, is that Yahweh is stressing His unique nature, because of which we are to be set apart from the world around us. We can't be immersed in the world's system of values and expect to be of any use to God or His people. No, it's worse than that: if we are not "clean" as we stumble about in the temple trying to assume the role of God's priesthood, then we will be "cut off from His presence." This is an admonition to the false teachers the New Testament writers warned us about: having a form of godliness without God's power (see II Timothy 3:5). Paul told Timothy to turn away from such people, for Yahweh certainly has.

### **(391)**

Send the unclean out of the Camp of the Shechinah, that is, out of the Sanctuary. "And Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying: 'Command the children of Israel that they put out of the camp every

leper, everyone who has a discharge, and whoever becomes defiled by a corpse. You shall put out both male and female; you shall put them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camps in the midst of which I dwell.” (Numbers 5:1-3) Maimonides is trying to shift the playing field to his advantage here, saying the “camp” is actually the “Sanctuary.” Sorry, rabbi. Machaneh really does mean camp, a settling of nomadic people, a temporary dwelling place with several tents in close proximity. The Shekinah, the cloud of Yahweh’s glory, isn’t mentioned here—because His presence actually was in the Tent of Meeting. Maimonides’ agenda here is transparent. He’s saying it’s okay to make the tabernacle/temple/sanctuary a holy place with godly standards. (After all, the Romans tore the temple down half a century before the rabbis under Akiba grabbed the reins of power for themselves, so who cares what has to be done there? It’s a moot point.) But the “camp” is the whole community of Israel. If the “unclean” can’t stay within the camp, then the false teachers like Maimonides and the other rabbis (symbolized by unclean priests—see #390) are in big trouble.

It’s interesting, though, how the rabbis’ obvious twisting of the Torah reveals their mindset. They pride themselves not on truth, but on being able to prove anything they want from scripture. Theirs is a god of power, pride, and intellectual prowess—not Yahweh.

### **(392)**

A kohein who is unclean shall not enter the courtyard. (This refers to the Camp of the Shechinah.) “And Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Command the children of Israel that they put out of the camp every leper, everyone who has a discharge, and whoever becomes defiled by a corpse. You shall put out both male and female; you shall put them outside the camp, that they may not defile their camps in the midst of which I dwell.’” (Numbers 5:1-3) This is merely the negative statement of the affirmative mitzvah discussed above. Note that Yahweh includes all Israelites in His injunction, while Maimonides speaks only of priests (Kohein). Since the sons of Aaron couldn’t be identified with written genealogical records after the sack of the temple in 70 A.D., this was one more factor helping to mitigate the holiness required of Israel by Yahweh in the eyes of the rabbis. They looked at this as sort of a “get out of jail free” card, comprehending neither the extent nor the reality of the prison they had built for themselves.

### **(393)**

The kohanim shall bless Israel. “And Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, ‘This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them: “Yahweh bless you and keep you; Yahweh make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; Yahweh lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.” So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them.’” (Numbers 6:22-27) Webster’s Dictionary defines “bless” as: “To

invoke the divine favor upon; to express a wish for the good fortune or happiness of; to bestow happiness, prosperity, or good things of any kind upon.” How surprising it is then to discover that the Hebrew word for bless here (barak) literally means: to kneel, or to cause to kneel. It is derived from the word for “knee,” berek. What’s going on?

It turns out that the Hebrew word incorporates within its meaning the relationship between the blessing and the blessed. As one would normally kneel before a potentate when receiving a grant or blessing, so also were the priests to come in humility and thankfulness before Yahweh. The word barak implies an admission that “blessings” are not given between equals, but rather by the greater to the lesser (see Hebrews 7:7 above). But note: even though it may look something like the fawning submission required of their worshippers by false gods from Ba’al to Allah, this is fundamentally different. We are being told that Yahweh wishes to give us good things (something false gods never do), but arrogance on our part can impede those blessings. If we approach God in a spirit of realistic humility, however, Yahweh will be gracious to us, bless us, and give us peace. All we have to do is ask.

### **(394)**

Set apart a portion of the dough for the kohein. “When you come into the land to which I bring you, then it will be, when you eat of the bread of the land, that you shall offer up a heave offering to Yahweh. You shall offer up a cake of the first of your ground meal as a heave offering; as a heave offering of the threshing floor, so shall you offer it up. Of the first of your ground meal you shall give to Yahweh a heave offering throughout your generations.” (Numbers 15:18-21) Let’s get something straight here. The “heave” or “wave” offering was not for the priests, although they were the ones who would eat of it. The offering was made to Yahweh. It was an acknowledgment that His blessing and provision has enabled the Israelites to put food on their tables. This offering is distinguished from the wave offerings made at the beginning of the barley and wheat harvests, celebrated at the Feast of Firstfruits and at the Feast of Weeks. This time, “the first of your ground meal” was being offered, in other words, the processed product of the barley or wheat that had already been harvested.

The heave offering (called the t’rumah) was a part of the tithe. We’ll discuss tithes in detail in the next chapter. But perhaps this would be a good place to lay out the basic structure of how it all works. “Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting.” A “tithe” (ma’aser) simply means one tenth—derived from asarah, meaning ten. A tenth of the produce of the Land was to be given to the Levites. “Hereafter the children of Israel shall not come near the tabernacle of meeting, lest they bear sin and die. But the Levites shall perform the work of the

tabernacle of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity; it shall be a statute forever, throughout your generations, that among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance.” That is, the Levites would be given no tribal lands like the other eleven tribes. Their jobs were not to be agricultural (that is, “normal”), like everyone else, but would be, rather, concerned with the operation of the sanctuary, the tabernacle or temple. The tithes of Israel paid for all that. “For the tithes of the children of Israel, which they offer up as a heave offering to Yahweh, I have given to the Levites as an inheritance; therefore I have said to them, ‘Among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance....’” It was a trade-off, then. The non-Levites all got more land, but what was grown on that extra land (more or less) was to go back to the Levites, freeing them to work directly in the service of Yahweh on their behalf. Not a bad deal for anybody.

So much for instructions to the non-Levites. “Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak thus to the Levites, and say to them: “When you take from the children of Israel the tithes which I have given you from them as your inheritance, then you shall offer up a heave offering of it to Yahweh, a tenth of the tithe. And your heave offering shall be reckoned to you as though it were the grain of the threshing floor and as the fullness of the winepress.” In other words, though the Levites didn’t have fields, vineyards and pastures of their own, the tithes they received from the other eleven tribes were to be considered as if they had been produced on “Levite” lands. Therefore, a tithe of the tithe was given, this time to support the Levitical sub-tribe of Aaron—the priesthood (see Mitzvah #412). This was presented as the t’rumah, or heave offering. “Thus you shall also offer a heave offering to Yahweh from all your tithes which you receive from the children of Israel, and you shall give Yahweh’s heave offering from it to Aaron the priest. Of all your gifts you shall offer up every heave offering due to Yahweh, from all the best of them, the consecrated part of them.’ Therefore you shall say to them: ‘When you have lifted up the best of it, then the rest shall be accounted to the Levites as the produce of the threshing floor and as the produce of the winepress. You may eat it in any place, you and your households, for it is your reward for your work in the tabernacle of meeting. And you shall bear no sin because of it, when you have lifted up the best of it. But you shall not profane the holy gifts of the children of Israel, lest you die.’” (Numbers 18:21-32)

The question, then, is: “Are we to tithe today?” After all, there is no temple; there are no Levites to maintain it, or priests to intercede there for us. Or are there? Paul points out that our bodies are now the temple of the Holy Spirit (II Corinthians 6:19). And John relates that we have been made both kings and priests to Yahweh through the cleansing blood of Yahshua (Revelation 1:5-6). Does this mean we are to pay the tithe to ourselves? Perhaps, if we are devoting one hundred percent of our energies and resources toward the furtherance of Yahweh’s kingdom (and let’s be honest, now—how many of us do that?). But remember, even the t’rumah first went

through the hands of the Levites. Who are they in the context of Yahweh's order of things? In practical terms, they were (1) specifically set apart by Yahweh to (2) do a particular service for God and man and (3) had been denied by their divine calling the capacity to earn a living in the normal way. I'll leave it to you to figure out who the "Levites" in your world are. But I'll offer a word of caution: not everyone who stands behind a pulpit is called of God.

sh shall not enter the Sanctuary further than the altar. "...Only he shall not go near the veil or approach the altar, because he has a defect, lest he profane My sanctuaries; for I Yahweh sanctify them." (Leviticus 21:23) The altar was a big barbeque that stood outside the entrance to the tent of meeting, and later the temple. The only reason a priest would approach the altar was to participate or assist in the offering of a sacrifice. Maimonides would have you believe that geographical limitations were being placed on priests with blemishes. Seems that even when he's right, he's wrong. The point (again) is that sin precludes service. If we haven't been cleansed of our sins—our shortcomings—by the blood of Yahweh's Lamb, then the best things we can do are worse than worthless in God's sight, as we are reminded in Isaiah 64:6.

### **(395)**

The Levites shall not occupy themselves with the service that belongs to the kohanim, nor the kohanim with that belonging to the Levites. "Then Yahweh said to Aaron: 'You and your sons and your father's house with you shall bear the iniquity related to the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear the iniquity associated with your priesthood. Also bring with you your brethren of the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may be joined with you and serve you while you and your sons are with you before the tabernacle of witness. They shall attend to your needs and all the needs of the tabernacle; but they shall not come near the articles of the sanctuary and the altar, lest they die—they and you also. They shall be joined with you and attend to the needs of the tabernacle of meeting, for all the work of the tabernacle; but an outsider shall not come near you.'" (Numbers 18:1-4) The work of the priests (Aaron and his sons) was to nasa—lift, bear, carry, or take away—the avon—sin, wickedness, iniquity, and wrongdoing—and the punishment that falls as its consequence—from the people of Israel. They were to do this through the performance of symbolic prophetic rituals and the offering of sacrifices brought by the people. The ordinary Levites, on the other hand, were to assist them and "attend to their needs," but not to actually serve as priests themselves.

That seems straightforward enough, but we should be aware of two instances where Yahweh expanded or contracted the roles of priests and Levites. When King Hezekiah restored the worship of Yahweh to Jerusalem, there were too few consecrated priests to do what was needed, so the Levites, who "were more diligent in sanctifying themselves than the priests," took



up the slack. See II Chronicles 29:34. And in Ezekiel 44:15, in the prophet's description of the future Millennial temple service, the Aaronic priesthood has been reduced to one priestly sub-family—that of Zadok. Yahweh reserves the right to fine-tune His own commandments, based upon our faithfulness (or lack of it).

**(396)**

One not a descendant of Aaron in the male line shall not serve (in the Sanctuary). “And you shall attend to the duties of the sanctuary and the duties of the altar, that there may be no more wrath on the children of Israel. Behold, I Myself have taken your brethren the Levites from among the children of Israel; they are a gift to you, given by Yahweh, to do the work of the tabernacle of meeting. Therefore you and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for everything at the altar and behind the veil; and you shall serve. I give your priesthood to you as a gift for service, but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.” (Numbers 18:5-7) A continuation of the previous mitzvah, this one also stresses the division of labor between the Aaronic priesthood and the ordinary Levites. The males of Aaron's line were first set apart for the priesthood in Exodus 28:1, 41 and 43. It is abundantly clear that “priesthood,” that is, the privilege of interceding between God and man, is something Yahweh ordains, not something we aspire to.

**(397)**

The Levite shall serve in the Sanctuary. “Hereafter the children of Israel shall not come near the tabernacle of meeting, lest they bear sin and die. But the Levites shall perform the work of the tabernacle of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity; it shall be a statute forever, throughout your generations, that among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance.” (Numbers 18:22-23) As we have seen, the priests (a subset of the Levites) were to attend the altar itself and do what was needed within the sanctuary—especially behind the veil. The remainder of the Levites, though they got closer to the action than the other Israelites, did not perform the work of the priests, but served as porters, scribes, musicians, and custodians of the tithes of Israel. They supervised weights and measures and served as builders and maintenance staff in the temple environs.

**(398)**

Give the Levites cities to dwell in, these to serve also as cities of refuge. “Command the children of Israel that they give the Levites cities to dwell in from the inheritance of their possession, and you shall also give the Levites common-land around the cities. They shall have the cities to dwell in; and their common-land shall be for their cattle, for their herds, and for all their animals.

The common-land of the cities which you will give the Levites shall extend from the wall of the city outward a thousand cubits all around. And you shall measure outside the city on the east side two thousand cubits, on the south side two thousand cubits, on the west side two thousand cubits, and on the north side two thousand cubits. The city shall be in the middle. This shall belong to them as common-land for the cities. Now among the cities which you will give to the Levites you shall appoint six cities of refuge, to which a manslayer may flee. And to these you shall add forty-two cities. So all the cities you will give to the Levites shall be forty-eight; these you shall give with their common-land. And the cities which you will give shall be from the possession of the children of Israel; from the larger tribe you shall give many, from the smaller you shall give few. Each shall give some of its cities to the Levites, in proportion to the inheritance that each receives.” (Numbers 35:2-8) The Levites weren’t to have their own tribal territory in the promised land, but they had to live somewhere. So Yahweh instructed that the other tribes each provide them with cities to live in (presumably captured from the Canaanites)—48 in all. Maimonides has oversimplified a bit here. Not all of them were to be cities of refuge (see Mitzvah #260), only six of them. (And only three of those were in territory actually deeded to the Israelites, land west of the Jordan River.) These had to be real cities—that is, big enough to have a wall around them. And because livestock was essential to the Bronze Age society to which the law was first given, a green belt of common grazing land over half a mile wide surrounding the entire city was to be included. The Levites could own homes within the cities.

This, of course, was all a big anachronism to Maimonides. There were no Levites he could identify through genealogical records, and besides, the Israelites had been kicked out of the Land a thousand years before his time. What instruction, then, does this mitzvah hold for us? As I hypothesized above, if the “Levites” metaphorically represent today’s servants of Yahweh—those who have made personal sacrifices in order to further His kingdom, then these cities are indications that Yahweh has not forgotten their selflessness. “For God is not unjust to forget your work and labor of love which you have shown toward His name, in that you have ministered to the saints, and do minister.” (Hebrews 6:10) We may not all have vast worldly resources, but we have Yahweh’s love, and that’s plenty.

### **(399)**

None of the tribe of Levi shall take any portion of territory in the land (of Israel). “The priests, the Levites—all the tribe of Levi—shall have no part nor inheritance with Israel; they shall eat the offerings of Yahweh made by fire, and His portion. Therefore they shall have no inheritance among their brethren; Yahweh is their inheritance, as He said to them.” (Deuteronomy 18:1-2) Yahweh compensated for the Levi’s lack of a tribal “homeland” with the provision of the tithe

from the other eleven tribes (actually, twelve, since Joseph was split into Manasseh and Ephraim). The priests' portion, you'll recall, was a tithe of that tithe. This points out some very interesting facts of life for both the givers and receivers of the tithe. Levi obviously depended on the tithe. They were forced to live by faith that the other tribes would do as Yahweh had instructed, for they had no productive land of their own.

What is not so obvious is the other tribes' dependence on the blessing and provision of Yahweh. Remember, the tithe wasn't characterized as a tax paid to the Levites, even though that's how it ended up being used. Rather, it was seen as remuneration given back to Yahweh Himself—a return of one tenth of what He had already provided: it was based on past blessings. So if an Israelite “shaved” his tithe, he was in effect robbing God. The prophet Malachi points out this very thing: “Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, ‘In what way have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you have robbed Me, even this whole nation. Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me now in this, says Yahweh of hosts, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, so that he will not destroy the fruit of your ground, nor shall the vine fail to bear fruit for you in the field, says Yahweh of hosts.” (Malachi 3:8-11)

Yahweh usually says, “I am Almighty God: trust Me.” Rare indeed are the times when God says, “Go ahead, test Me on this issue. I dare you.” This is one of those times.