

Dear Rabbi Fried,

Why can't a Kohen marry a divorced woman? Is she less than others because of her unfortunate situation?

Michelle P.

Dear Michelle,

The source of the prohibition for a Kohen to marry a divorced woman is in the book of Vayikra (Leviticus 21:7) "...neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband, for he is holy unto G-d". One needs to look at this verse in context of the entire chapter, rather than at this prohibition specifically, to understand its true meaning. This chapter outlines a number of prohibitions, which are specific to the tribe of Kohen, the priestly tribe whose function was to perform the ritual worship in the holy Temple in Jerusalem. Many laws, both "do's and don'ts", apply to this tribe and to no other. This is due to the lofty state of the Kohen, as the "chosen tribe" to be the emissaries of the Jewish nation to bring their offerings upon the altar of G-d, and perform for the entire nation the myriad responsibilities included in that chosenness.

This tribe of Aaron was also, as part of their responsibilities, chosen to be the principle teachers of the Jewish nation. They lived upon the community chest and not as farmers or other livelihoods, in order that they should be free to study and teach. They taught not only in classes and the like, but, more importantly, by example. Their lives were to be a paradigm for holiness in their relationships to G-d, and their interactions with their fellow Jews. This is implicit in the words at the end of the verse "for he is holy unto G-d". The simple meaning is that the Kohen is holy. R' S.R. Hirsch translates the word "hoo" as referring to the entire tribe, since the tribe is holy, they have these laws.

More specifically, one who has gone through a divorce is, of course, not looked down upon as being unworthy of being remarried in any way. But, unfortunately, they have gone through a certain amount of strife, hurtful statements and feelings. It is difficult for them to become a paradigm for the entire nation of the quintessential Jewish life of peace and harmony. The tribe of Kohen descends from Aaron, who was a paragon of peace, bringing peace between quarreling individuals and families. That is one reason he merited to be the patriarch of the priestly tribe, whose purpose was to bring peace between G-d and the Jewish people, (and the entire world, as gentiles were invited to bring their offerings to our temple). One who has unfortunately been through a cataclysmic event, as a divorce, doesn't fit that paradigm. The Talmud says that when a divorce is consummated, the altar sheds tears. This is because the altar represents the ultimate peace between the Jewish people and G-d, and the break in peace through divorce is a tear in that peaceful relationship. G-d Himself is said to cry. Those who perform the service on that altar need to be completely above that entire scenario.

Although today we do not have our Temple, in our state of Diaspora, the laws of the Torah are timeless, and the specific laws, which apply to the tribe of Kohen, continue to apply today. We believe with a complete faith that the Temple will be rebuilt, and the Kohanim will be reinstated to their elevated positions.