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THE ULTIMATE JEWISH MOTHER'S JOY IN THE YERUSHALMI © Judith Z. Abrams, 2009

Jewish mothers have been getting nachus from their children for a very, very long time, all the way back to the Second Temple, at least. The Yerushalmi tells us an interesting tale of a woman named Kimchit and her sons:

Shimon ben Kimchit went out to talk with a non-Jewish king on the eve of the Day of Atonement at twilight and a spur of spit from the king's mouth splattered on the priest's garment and so rendered him unclean. Therefore, his brother Judah served as the high priest in his place. Their mother had the pleasure of seeing two sons in the office of the high priest on the same day (//T. Kippurim 3:20).

Kimchit had seven sons and all of them served in the high priesthood. Sages sent and said to Kimchit: What good deeds did you do to merit such glory?

She said to them: May so and so happen to me if even the beams of my house ever once gazed upon the hair of my head or the thread of my chemise in my entire life (i.e., she was very modest).

They said: All meal (kemach) is fine, but the meal of Kimchit is the finest of fine flour.

They recited in her regard the following verse: "The princess goes inside with all her goods (k'vudah). Among her garments are those embroidered with gold. (Psalm 45:14)" (Y. Yoma 1:1)

A little background may make this passage more comprehensible. The high priest had to officiate in a state of absolute purity at all times; all the more so on Yom Kippur. The king may not have been in a state of ritual purity and when his spit made contact with the priest, he was thereby disqualified from officiating at the cult for that day. Apparently, Shimon ben Kimchit (17-18 C.E.) began the day (which begins at sundown) as the officiating high priest but had to step down from officiating the next day since this incident happened in the evening. Therefore, his brother stepped in and took his place. What is interesting is that this is characterized as the height of maternal, but not paternal, nor spousal, satisfaction.

Discussion Questions:

1. This story raises many questions but the one I'm most curious about is why these men are named "Ben Kimchit." Their father had to have been a priest: priestly status is conveyed only through the father's lineage. So why are these men called by their mother's name? There could be no doubt of their legitimate right to the priesthood or they would not have been made high priests. So what happened to the father? And what did Kimchit do to overshadow him so? Or could this be just one recording of a common phenomenon? Could priest have often

been called by their mother's names?

2. The verse in Psalms, above, and Exodus 28's description of the high priest's garments, describe the only garments in Tanach that are to be embroidered with gold. Is the Yerushalmi saying that a high priest's mother has a special status, particularly on Yom Kippur? We know that high priests' mothers robe their sons in special garments beyond those standard clothes issued by the Temple (T. Kippurim 1:21-22). What other role might mothers play in the high priests' service on Yom Kippur?
3. The Yerushalmi adds that Kimchit has seven sons. This is a literary convention. The Bavli does not describe Kimchit as having seven sons. Why would the Yerushalmi add this? Or, conversely, why would the Bavli suppress it? Could it be that, since her story is local news, so to speak, the memory of her is more vivid in the land of Israel?