

Kohenet Kirvi: Call a Bat Kohen a Kohenet

Approved on December 5, 2022 by a vote of 21-0-2. Voting in favor: Rabbis Jaymee Alpert, Adam Baldachin, Pamela Barmash, Emily Barton, Suzanne Brody, Nate Crane, Elliot Dorff, David Fine, Judith Hauptman, Joshua Heller, Rachel Isaacs, Barry Leff, Amy Levin, Daniel Nevins, Avram Reisner, Tracee Rosen, Rachel Safman, Robert Scheinberg, Mordecai Schwartz, Deborah Silver, Ellen S. Wolintz-Fields. Abstaining: Rabbis Aaron Alexander and Micah Peltz.

שאלה (Question)

What is the status of daughters of kohanim and leviyim? How should we refer to the daughter of a kohen or of a levi, especially when calling her up to the Torah for an aliyah in a congregation that gives women aliyot yet preserves the distinction between a kohen, levi and yisrael in terms of aliyot? How should she be referred to in religious documents?

תשובה (Response)

The general practice in our communities has been to use the terms *bat kohen* (daughter of a kohen” and *bat levi* (daughter of a levi). Why are the sons of kohanim recognized as kohanim in their own right, whereas the daughters of kohanim are called up as daughters of male kohanim? A careful reading of rabbinic and supporting literature will show that the feminine forms *kohenet* and *leviyah* are authentic possibilities if not preferable terms.

Judith Plaskow, in *Standing Again at Sinai*, challenged us to do more than simply append women to a male-centered Judaism. More than change the way we practice Judaism, Plaskow challenged us to rethink the way we imagine the Jewish past and the content of Torah. This, she argued, was not unprecedented. “When the rabbis profoundly transformed Jewish religious life after the destruction of the second Temple,” she writes, “they also reconstructed Jewish memory to see themselves in continuity with it. So deeply is the Jewish present rooted in Jewish history that changes wrought in Jewish reality continually have been read back into the past so that they could be read out of the past as a foundation for the present. Again and again in rabbinic interpretations, we find contemporary practice projected back into earlier periods so that the chain of tradition can remain unbroken.”¹ But Plaskow is not suggesting that we write fictions into Jewish history as much as recover what was lost by correcting for ancient and current androcentric bias. “To accept androcentric texts and contemporary androcentric histories as the whole of Jewish history,” she argues, “is to enter into a secret collusion with those who would exclude us [i.e., women] from full membership in the Jewish community....The Jewish community today is a community of men and women, and it has never been otherwise.”² Now that women have taken

I am grateful to my father, Rabbi Robert E. Fine, and to Rabbis Daniel S. Nevins, Marcus Mordecai Schwartz and other colleagues on the CJLS for their helpful suggestions.

¹ Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from the Feminist Perspective* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), p. 30.

² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

an equal role with men in (Conservative egalitarian) Jewish worship, must we only refer to the daughter of a kohen as her father's daughter, whereas her brother can be called הַכֹּהֵן ?

The question of calling the daughter of a kohen to the Torah as a kohen was resolved by our Committee in 1989 when it approved a responsum by Rabbi Joel Roth, arguing that in congregations that preserve the distinction between kohen, levi and yisrael in terms of aliyot, the daughters of kohanim and leviyim should receive the respective aliyot reserved for the sons of kohanim and leviyim.³ In early 1990 (within the same Jewish year of 5750), the CJLS also permitted congregations to eliminate the kohen/levi/yisrael distinctions for aliyot, as argued by Rabbi Mayer Rabinowitz.⁴ Rabbi Roth's analysis, applying to congregations that preserve the kohen/levi/yisrael distinctions, begins by establishing that women are included in the "general sanctity" of kohanim which is not restricted to those kohanim invested with "sacrificial responsibility," a category that excluded not only women but also male kohanim who had physical blemishes (*ba'alei mumim*), and yet still enjoyed certain priestly prerogatives. Rabbi Roth then focuses on the question of whether the holiness of the daughter of a kohen is "linear" or "associative," that is, whether she inherits her priestly holiness from her father, or if it is dependent on the status of her immediate family. An unmarried daughter of a kohen eats terumah (the food given to priests off the produce of the land) but no longer does so when married to a non-kohen. If she is widowed or divorced and has no children, she returns to "her father's [priestly] house." Pragmatism here interferes with linear status. A woman from a priestly family must eat *hullin* (non-sacred food) with her Israelite family. If she is later widowed or divorced with no children, then she can only return to her priestly family, and reverts to eating terumah.⁵ Comparing the laws of terumah with the other priestly foods, and the possible right of women from priestly families to receive the redemption money for a Pidyon Haben (redemption of the first born), Rabbi Roth concludes that the woman's priestly sanctity is linear, dependent on her father being a kohen, irrespective of her marital status. Therefore, he concluded, the daughter of a kohen receives the kohen aliyah, and the daughter of a levi receives the levi aliyah.⁶

³ Joel Roth, "The Status of Daughters of Kohanim and Leviyim for Aliyot" CJLS OH 135:3.1989a. [roth_daughtersaliyot.pdf \(rabbinicalassembly.org\)](#). Rabbi Roth also clarified that daughters of kohanim may receive the redemption coins for a pidyon haben.

⁴ Mayer Rabinowitz, "Rishon or Kohen" CJLS OH 125:3.1990. [rabinowitz_rishon.pdf \(rabbinicalassembly.org\)](#).

⁵ On Lev. 22:13, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22* (New York: Anchor Bible, 2000), p. 1863. Rabbi Daniel S. Nevins suggests that the rule that the woman returns to "her father's [priestly] house" might be in part motivated by poverty-relief (rather than reversion to her essential priestly status) since she would not have inherited lands from her deceased or divorced husband and would thereby be dependent on tithes for subsistence. I prefer to read the essential status as priestly for the daughter of a kohen, and that the compromise originating in the Torah is due to pragmatism (i.e. the need for families to eat the same food) rather than poverty-relief. A widow with children would have a greater financial burden than one without children, and yet only the widow without children can return to eating terumah.

⁶ The interested reader is referred to Rabbi Roth's paper (see above, note 3) for the details of the argument.

The Conservative movement prayer books edited by Rabbi Jules Harlow predated the CJLS's 1989 decision that the daughter of a kohen receives the kohen aliyah (as well as the 1990 decision permitting congregations to call the first aliyah as *rishon* instead of *kohen*). The text for the gabbai who calls up the first aliyah is: כהן, קרב. יעמד _____ בן _____ הכהן.⁷ The Shabbat and Festivals edition of *Siddur Sim Shalom* that was published in 1998 introduces new language offering options for the gabbai that incorporate both the 1989 decision that daughters of kohanim receive the first aliyah, and the 1990 decision that the first aliyah may go to anyone as *rishon*. The siddur offers four options:⁸

1. כהן, קרב. יעמד _____ בן _____ הכהן.
2. בת כהן, קרבי. תעמד _____ בת _____ הכהן.
3. יעמד _____ בן _____ ראשון.
4. תעמד _____ בת _____ ראשון.

The editorial committee, chaired by Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan, that produced the 1998 siddur provides for a male or female receiving an aliyah under either Rabbi Roth's or Rabbi Rabinowitz's responsum. When preserving the kohen/levi/yisrael distinctions (as per Rabbi Roth's responsum), a congregation (that gives aliyot to women) would call the daughter of a kohen up as a *bat kohen*. The title *hakohen* that appears at the end of her name remains in a masculine form as it refers properly to her father. When not preserving the kohen/levi/yisrael distinctions (as per Rabbi Rabinowitz's responsum), a congregation (that gives aliyot to women⁹) would call a woman up to the first aliyah as *rishon*. The ordinal number *rishon* that appears at the end of her name remains in the masculine form as it refers to the portion being read, not to the person. Additionally, by concluding with הכהן in reference to the woman's father, the siddur does not advise (or consider) what to do if the woman is being called up with a matronymic as well as a patronymic, as is often done in many congregations today. One can assume, however, that since הכהן, in the masculine form, refers properly to her father, then we would call the woman up either as פלונית בת פלוני הכהן or as פלונית בת פלונית ופלוני הכהן, depending on the preferred order (by the honoree or congregation) of patronymic and matronymic.

The weekday edition of *Sim Shalom* (2002), whose editorial committee was chaired by Rabbi Avram Israel Reisner, followed the 1998 format, except that it eliminated the title הכהן at the end of the name.¹⁰ Perhaps that omission was intended to eliminate the confusion on what to

⁷ See Jules Harlow, ed., *Mahzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: A Prayer Book for the Days of Awe*, 2nd edition (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1978), pp. 166, 306, 622, 486; Jules Harlow, ed., *Siddur Sim Shalom: A Prayerbook for Shabbat, Festivals and Weekdays* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly and United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 1985), pp. 140, 400, 568.

⁸ *Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly and United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 1998), pp. 141, 230.

⁹ I doubt there are any congregations that do not distinguish between kohen/levi/yisrael aliyot and yet do not give aliyot to women.

¹⁰ *Siddur Sim Shalom for Weekdays* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly and United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 2002), pp. 66, 174.

do when using the matronymic with the patronymic and when the mother is not a bat kohen. While leaving a literal “blank,” the siddur allows for greater flexibility. *Mahzor Lev Shalem* (2010) and *Siddur Lev Shalem for Shabbat and Festivals* (2016), both edited by committees chaired by Rabbi Edward Feld, changed the fourth option (when a woman is called to the first aliyah in a congregation that does not preserve the kohen/levi/yisrael distinctions) to end with ראשונה instead of ראשון, understanding the title of “the first” as referring to the person being honored rather than to the aliyah to be read.¹¹ All four liturgical publications (those published in 1998, 2002, 2010 and 2016), refer to the woman receiving the kohen aliyah as a *bat kohen*, whereas a man is referred to as *hakohen*. That is the precedent that this paper seeks to challenge.

In 1994, when the CJLS discussed the question of whether the daughters of kohanim should join male kohanim in the Priestly Blessing, the Committee split between two positions. One responsum, by Rabbi Mayer Rabinowitz, argued that a bat kohen is permitted to participate, and another responsum, by Rabbis Stanley Bramnick and Judah Kogen, argued that a bat kohen may not.¹² The reason for Rabbi Bramnick’s and Rabbi Kogen’s prohibition was that “as a continuation of a Temple ritual, the Priestly Benediction should be performed by those who were authentically eligible to do so in the Temple.”¹³ Rabbi Rabinowitz argued that the Priestly Blessing ritual stands independent of the Temple ritual. The question for us here is, if women were not *kohanot* in the Temple, may they be considered *kohanot* today in the synagogue?

Jewish women did not serve as kohanot in the ancient Temple. As archeologist Carol Meyers, referring back to the First Temple period, writes: “To be sure, women did not function as priests with the establishment of official and formal public shrines; neither did most men.”¹⁴ Meyers proceeds to argue in her book that just because women did not function as kohanot in the (central) shrine does not mean that they did not play important public functionary roles in ancient Israelite society. The exclusion of women from the priesthood, Meyers argues, was either for pragmatic reasons (they were needed elsewhere) or symbolic ones (to distinguish from Canaanite practice). The language of the Torah confirms this understanding since a daughter of a kohen is only referred to in the Torah as a *bat kohen* (e.g., Lev. 22:13).

However, a careful reading of the Rabbinic literature opens up other possibilities and permits us to read egalitarianism back into the past without the incorporation of fictions as the Rabbis were wont to do with so many other topics. The rabbinic literature does not exclusively

¹¹ *Mahzor Lev Shalem For Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2010), pp. 99, 183, 277, 362; *Siddur Lev Shalem for Shabbat and Festivals* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2016), pp. 171, 219, 325.

¹² Mayer Rabinowitz, “Women Raise Your Hands” CJLS OH 128:2.1994a. [rabinowitz_women.pdf \(rabbinicalassembly.org\)](http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/2016-09/rabinowitz_women.pdf). Stanley Bramnick and Judah Kogen, “Should N’siat Kapayim Include B’not Kohanim?” CJLS OH 128:2.1994b. [bramnick_kogen.pdf \(rabbinicalassembly.org\)](http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/2016-09/bramnick_kogen.pdf)

¹³ Bramnick and Kogen, from the conclusion of the responsum.

¹⁴ Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 163.

refer to the daughter of a kohen as a *bat kohen*. Quite often she is called a *kohenet*.¹⁵ The term *kohenet*, a feminine form of *kohen*, appears ten times in the Mishnah (and about ten times that number in the gemara). However, the term can be used to apply to the daughter of a kohen (*bat kohen*) or to the wife of a kohen (*eshet kohen*).¹⁶ As Bernadette J. Brooten explains, “*Kohenet* is not a biblical but a rabbinic term. Although linguistically *kohenet* is the feminine of *kohen* (Aramaic: *kahantta*), it is not exactly parallel in meaning to *kohen*. A man may become a *kohen* in one way, by birth....A woman becomes a *kohenet* in two ways, by birth and by marriage. *Kohenet* can therefore be defined as a ‘daughter of a *kohen*’ (*bat kohen*) or as ‘wife of a *kohen*’ (*eshet kohen*).”¹⁷ Similarly, the *Encyclopedia Talmudit*’s entry on *kohenet* directs the reader to the articles on *eshet kohen* and *bat kohen*.¹⁸ The rabbinic term is used in both contexts. Of the ten appearances in the Mishnah, five use *kohenet* for the daughter of a priest¹⁹ and five for the wife of a priest.²⁰ That the term is used to refer to a *bat kohen* even when married to a *yisrael* is clear and unambiguous, as the Mishnah at Sotah 3:7 has: כהנת שנשאת לישראל, a *kohenet* married to a *yisrael*. Clearly, the usage of the term *kohenet* is preceded in reference to the daughter of a kohen.

While the term *bat kohen* appears (by my count) twelve times in the Mishnah,²¹ the term *kohenet* appears a comparable ten times (if we combine both contexts of the daughter and wife of a kohen). While this survey is based on the standard printed editions, and manuscript comparisons might illuminate further patterns, it may be that certain sections of the Mishnah prefer one usage over others. Mishnah Kiddushin uses the term *kohenet* whereas Mishnah Yevamot prefers *bat kohen*.²² The interchangeability of the terms is clear from Sotah 3:7: בת ישראל שנשאת לכהן...וכהנת, a *bat yisrael* married to a *kohen*, and a *kohenet* married to a *yisrael*. However, even in this reference, it seems like *kohenet* is preferred to *bat kohen*. Why does the mishnah not read *bat kohen* to match *bat yisrael*, or *yisraelit* to match *kohenet*? Perhaps because *kohenet* is a title whereas *bat yisrael* is merely descriptive, and as such is less ambiguous than *yisraelit* which can simply mean a Jewess.

The rabbinic use of the term *kohenet* is not unique to the Mishnah; it also appears in the Tosefta, the gemara of both Talmuds, and later rabbinic literature. The only question through the

¹⁵ The rabbinic literature also used the term *leviyah*. While I focus on this paper on the term *kohenet*, the same argument is inferred regarding the term *leviyah* as an alternative to *bat levi*.

¹⁶ I am grateful to my congregant Miriam Bakal for challenging me on the implications of this ambiguity of the term.

¹⁷ Bernadette J. Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue: Inscriptional Evidence and Background Issues* (Atlanta: Brown Judaica Studies, 2020), p. 78. I have modified the quotation to eliminate the scholarly diacritical marks in the transliterated terms. Brooten’s 1982 monograph was reissued digitally in 2020 with a new introduction.

¹⁸ *Encyclopedia Talmudit* 27:369, s.v. *kohenet*.

¹⁹ Mishnah Sotah 3:7, Kiddushin 3:5, 3:12, 4:4, Bekhorot 8:1.

²⁰ Mishnah Yevamot 11:5, 16:7, Ketubbot 4:8, 7:1, 7:2.

²¹ Mishnah Terumot 7:2, Yevamot 7:3, 7:5, 7:6, 9:4, 9:6, 10:1, 13:2, Gittin 8:5, Kiddushin 3:1, Sanhedrin 11:1, 11:6.

²² Mishnah Yevamot uses *bat kohen* seven times and *kohenet* twice, but the two *kohenet* references are to the wife of a kohen.

commentaries is when the term is referring to a *bat kohen* and when to an *eshet kohen*, but the term itself is not surprising. Rashi says in one comment on the gemara, לכהנת—בת כהן אפילו אשת איש, clarifying that the term *kohenet*, in a discussion about priestly prerogatives, refers to the daughter of a kohen, even if she is a married woman.²³ In other places the Talmud itself allows for the ambiguity. On Bekhorot 47a, the gemara understands the Mishnah's usage of *kohenet*, in a list of women whose sons are exempt from pidyon haben, as referring to the daughter of a kohen. As the Tosafot clarify, כהנת אשת ישראל --a *kohenet* married to a *yisrael*.²⁴ But the gemara records a dissenting opinion of Rab Papa that *kohenet*, in this particular example, refers to a *bat yisrael*, an Israelitess. ואמאי קרי לה כהנת?—then why is she called a *kohenet*, the gemara asks. The answer, allowing for the dissenting view of Rav Pappa, is דבנה כהן, that her son is a kohen. While the gemara allows for the two interpretations (*bat kohen* and *eshet kohen*), it is noteworthy that *kohenet* as *bat kohen* is the more “natural” interpretation from the point of view of the gemara, illustrated by the gemara's query, ואמאי קרי לה כהנת?, if she is in fact a *bat yisrael eshet kohen*, a daughter of an Israelite and wife of a kohen! *Bat kohen* seems to be the default interpretation.

The ambiguity around the term *kohenet* in late ancient sources seems to resolve in favor of the *kohenet* in the medieval literature. In the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides uses the term *kohenet* twenty-five times, while he uses the term *bat kohen* eighteen times.²⁵ But not only is *kohenet* the more common term. Of the twenty-five usages of the term *kohenet*, all of them, according to my reading, have the sense of *bat kohen*; not a single usage appears to mean *eshet kohen*. Maimonides, known for his careful use of language, at one point clarifies that a particular law applies to both a כהנת אשת ישראל או כהנת אשת כהן --a *kohenet* the wife of a *yisrael* or an Israelitess the wife of a *kohen*.²⁶ If the term *kohenet* were still used to apply to both a *bat kohen* and an *eshet kohen* then Maimonides would have said כהנת אשת כהן או כהנת אשת ישראל --a *kohenet* the wife of a *yisrael* or a *kohenet* the wife of a *kohen*. The fact that he does not, and only uses the term *kohenet* to refer to the *bat kohen*, clearly indicates that, for Maimonides, the term *kohenet* had but one meaning.

In the Shulhan Arukh, the term *kohenet* is used nine times, while *bat kohen* is not used at all.²⁷ All nine usages of the term *kohenet* appear to refer to a *bat kohen*, not an *eshet kohen*. The term *kohenet* will be found pervasively through any search of halakhic sources. The prevalence of the term in contemporary usage as an alternative to *bat kohen* is illustrated by the *Encyclopedia*

²³ Rashi to b. Hulin 131b s.v. לכהנת.

²⁴ Tosafot to b. Bekhorot 47a, s.v. מר.

²⁵ *Kohenet*: Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Ishut 8:6, Hilkhoh Isurei Biah 18:3, 19:11, 21:31, Hilkhoh Terumot 6:5, 6:10, 6:13, 6:15, 6:16, 7:20, 7:21, 7:22, 7:23, 8:8, 8:9, 8:14, 9:3, 11:9, Hilkhoh Bikurim 9:20, 10:17, 11:10, 11:11, Hilkhoh Maaseh Hakorbanot 12:10, 12:12, Hilkhoh Sanhedrin 19:4. *Bat kohen*: Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Naarah Betulah 2:3, Hilkhoh Isurei Biah 1:6, 3:3, 3:15, Hilkhoh Terumot 6:13, 6:14, 6:15, 6:16, 6:18, 7:14, 7:19, 8:3, 8:7, 9:2, 10:12, Hilkhoh Sanhedrin 14:10, 15:11, Hilkhoh Edut 20:10.

²⁶ Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Terumot 9:3.

²⁷ Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 61:8, 305:8, 306:1, 321:19, 333:14, 373:2, Even Ha'ezer 2:8, 7:22, 38:24.

Talmudit's article on *bat kohen*, where the term *kohenet*, while apparently used interchangeably with *bat kohen*, appears (by my count) no less than twenty-six times.²⁸

This responsum asks whether it would not be more appropriate to refer to a woman as a *kohenet* than a *bat kohen*, especially when a man is referred to as a *kohen* and not a *ben kohen*. While the term *bat kohen* is biblical, there are other times when the Torah refers to the priestly class in both genders. Legislation on the priestly prerogatives is addressed to Aaron, and “your sons and daughters”—*ובניך ובנותיך*.²⁹ If we support an egalitarian worship environment, and if we choose to honor the sons and daughters of kohanim with the first aliyah to the Torah, then we should use the term *kohenet* as the feminine equivalent of *kohen*, as opposed to *bat kohen*, which is equivalent only to *ben kohen*.³⁰ While the rabbinic term *kohenet* can sometimes mean *eshet kohen* rather than *bat kohen*, it more often means *bat kohen* in the classical rabbinic literature. In medieval usage it almost exclusively refers to the *bat kohen*. It appears throughout the literature; it should therefore be seen as a well preceded term available for our liturgical usage.

²⁸ *Encyclopedia Talmudit* 4:752-764, s.v. *bat kohen*.

²⁹ Lev. 10:14. See also Num. 18:11, 18:19.

³⁰ Is a *kohenet* equivalent to a *kohen*? While Mishnah Sotah 3:7 does ask *מה בין כהן לכהנת?*—what are the [halakhic] differences between a *kohen* and a *kohenet*?—the three distinctions offered by the Mishnah (a *kohenet* can become disqualified from marrying kohanim or eating terumah, may acquire impurity from a corpse, and may not eat from the “most holy” sacrifices) are irrelevant in terms of synagogue participation. The eating of sacrificial meat is academic without a sacrificial cult. Our Movement has essentially eliminated the category of *halal* (disqualification) for a *kohen* by eliminating the special restrictions on whom a *kohen* may marry (as Rabbi Arnold Goodman wrote in the responsum approved by our Committee in 1996: “With the negating of the prohibition in Leviticus 21:7, children born of marriages between a כהן and a גרושה are not הללים, and the כהן is no longer disqualified to serve as a כהן in our services or rituals” Arnold M. Goodman, “Solemnizing the Marriage Between a כהן and Divorcee” CJLS EH 6:1.1996 [Goodman - Marriage Divorcee \(rabbinicalassembly.org\)](http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org), conclusion item 5), while the restrictions around corpse impurity are matters of personal observance that a woman may certainly choose to observe or not. The question of whether a *kohenet* would officiate alongside a *kohen* in an egalitarian Third Temple pushes the limits of the imagination. The only halakhic difference between the sons and daughters of kohanim today is that only a male *kohen* passes the status to his offspring (if the mother is Jewish). However, that is of consequence for the status of the children, not of the parent. By way of comparison, a male Jew does not pass on Jewish status, whereas a female does. The absence of patrilineal descent for Jewish status does not make a male Jew any less Jewish than a female Jew. For our purposes therefore, in our synagogues, a *kohenet* is equivalent to a *kohen*. Even if one follows the opinion of Rabbis Bramnick and Kogen that the daughter of a *kohen* should not *dukhen* (see above, n. 12), one should still see a *kohenet* as equal to a *kohen* in a congregation that gives women aliyot and maintains the *kohen* aliyah, as per the opinion of Rabbi Roth (see above, n. 3). My thanks again to my congregant Miriam Bakal for challenging me on this point.

There is also ancient evidence for the term *kohenet* among extra-rabbinic, epigraphical sources.³¹ Bernadette J. Brooten has identified four ancient Jewish burial inscriptions where a woman is called *hiereia/hierissa*.³² At Tel El-Yahudiyeh (Leontopolis) in Egypt, in a catacomb in Rome, the cave burials of Bet She'arim in the Galilee, and a burial cave from the Kidron Valley in Jerusalem, the Greek word *hiereia/hierissa*, meaning “priestess,” is used as a title following the woman’s name.³³ Brooten analyzes the usages and finds that it could mean either the daughter or the wife of a priest. Although the Bet She'arim source can only mean the wife of a priest, the other three inscriptions could be read either way. In any case, it was clearly a title associated with women. Although admittedly there are only four sources, they are found over a five-hundred-year period (first century BCE through fourth century CE) and ranging over 2500 miles. As Brooten writes: “I suggest three possible options for understanding inscriptions in which women bear the title *hiereia/hierissa*: (1) it could be simply the Greek equivalent of Hebrew *kohenet*; Aramaic *kahantta*’; (2) it could mean “priest” in the cultic sense of the term; or (3) it could denote a synagogue function.”³⁴ The one source from Tel El-Yahudiyeh, near the ancient Jewish temple of Leontopolis in Egypt, raises the possibility that the woman (Marin was her name) served as a priestess in the ancient (egalitarian?) alternative to the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Brooten responds to criticism of the lack of evidence for that suggestion by asserting that she was only offering possibilities since all the evidence tells us is that Marin was remembered as a priestess. While only Marin (among the four burial inscriptions) could have functioned as a cultic priestess (because of the local Jewish sacrificial cult), Brooten does suggest the possibility that all of the women of these inscriptions may have functioned as priestesses in the synagogue, receiving the first aliyah and/or performing the Priestly Benediction as the sons of kohanim do.³⁵ Through a careful reading of the rabbinic sources on Torah reading and the Birkat Kohanim that runs parallel to our Committee’s reading of the sources in our decades-long effort to permit and authorize women’s participation in worship and ritual, Brooten asks the reader not to discount the possibility

³¹ Epigraphical and other archeological evidence may be considered as “extra-rabbinic” or what Joel Roth calls “extra-legal sources.” While such sources are not technically “legal sources” they may be considered in a legal decision as “historical sources” giving context to the law and providing the legal decision-makers with outside evidence (see Joel Roth, *The Halakhic Process: A Systemic Analysis* [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1986]). In this case, epigraphical evidence on the title *kohenet* helps us understand what it meant to the Rabbis.

³² Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue*, pp.73-77 (for the Tel el-Yahudiyeh, Bet She'arim and Rome sources) and introduction to the digital edition, pp. 6-7 (for the Kidron Valley source). See also Bernadette J. Brooten, “Inscriptional Evidence for Women as Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue,” *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies* 8 (1981): 3-4.

³³ The historian Hans Lietzmann was the first to recognize *hierissa* as a title rather than a name. See Hans Lietzmann, “Jüdisch-griechische Inschriften aus Tell el Yehudieh,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentlicher Wissenschaft* 22 (1923): 284, and Brooten, *Women Leaders*, p. 73 and p. 244, n. 2.

³⁴ Brooten, *Women Leaders*, introduction to the digital edition, p. 6.

³⁵ Brooten, *Women Leaders*, pp. 90-95.

that women participated in synagogue leadership in ancient times and not to assume that they did not because of later practice.³⁶

While Bernadette Brooten sought to suggest possibilities of imagining a past more inclusive of women's religious leadership, her default position, that the term "priestess" in ancient Jewish burial inscriptions might *merely* be an honorific (rather than descriptive) title identifying the woman as the daughter or wife of a kohen, is nonetheless sufficient support for the argument of this responsum. The epigraphical evidence is limited in number but rich in expanse across time and space in confirming the literary evidence preserved by the rabbinic tradition that women were honored as *kohanot* by Jewish communities along with men.

The question remains how a *kohenet* or *leviyah* should be referred to when being called to the Torah and in religious documents. The challenge here is that usually the title הלוי or הכהן appears only after the father's name when giving the name in the full formal version with the patronymic. Priestly and Levitical status is inherited from the genetic father (when one is born of a Jewish mother).³⁷ Today, especially in egalitarian circles, we are increasingly using the matronymic together with the patronymic. In that case, it would be incorrect to include הכהנת at the end of the mother's name because that might imply that the daughter of the *kohenet* is a *kohenet*, when in fact she would only be a *kohenet* if her father were a *kohen* (and her mother Jewish). Similarly, if someone is raised by two fathers and uses two patronymics, the title הכהן or הלוי should only be added after the genetic father's name. An exception would be when both parents are *kohanim* or *leviyim*, in which case there would be no danger of confusing the status of the child. Some have raised the suggestion that the title הכהן or הלוי appear after the individual's name instead of or in addition to the (genetic) father's. While that may be a more elegant approach and would also permit use of the feminine form for *kohanot* and *leviyot*, I prefer to maintain the traditional form appending the title only to the parent(s) for the following reasons: 1) there is a comfort with preserving traditional forms where possible, 2) more information is transmitted in the traditional form which is useful for posterity (whether in synagogue records, ketubbot or gravestones), and 3) there is a notion of humility in the traditional form in granting the title to

³⁶ As Brooten writes: "Although the recitation by priestly women of the priestly blessing seems unlikely in light of the explicit 'Aaron and his sons' in Num. 6:22, it is not impossible that certain communities could have interpreted this to mean 'Aaron and his children' and have asked both the priestly women and the priestly men present to bless them. Further, although there is no solid evidence for women having read the Torah publicly in the synagogue service, it cannot be excluded, particularly for the Greek-speaking congregations (about which we know next to nothing), that they did" (Ibid., p. 95).

³⁷ Whenever I am challenged about the inequity of the rule that kohen/levi/yisrael is patrilineal, I respond that Jewishness is matrilineal, which is a more significant matter. When I was a college student at Wesleyan the Catholic chaplain was a man name Gerald Cohen. Since his mother was Catholic, he understood that the only way he could become a kohen like his father was to become a Catholic priest. He happened to have been a wonderful priest, as well as a good teacher to at least one Jewish student.

one's parent but not one's self. However, there should be no halakhic objection if one wanted to use the term immediately after one's name.

The only time *כהנת* will occur in general liturgical usage (unless a woman applies it directly after her name rather than or in addition to her father's) is when a gabbai calls up a woman for the kohen aliyah with the introductory phrase *כהנת קרבי*. However, because we recognize that language matters, in discourse we should use the term *kohenet* when referring to the daughter of a *kohen*, just as we use the term *kohen* when referring to the son of a *kohen*. Similarly, we should use the term *leviyah* when referring to the daughter of a *levi*, just as we use the term *levi* when referring to the son of a *levi*.

Rabbis Guy Austrian, Robert Scheinberg and Deborah Silver, in a responsum approved by the CJLS in 2022, address the question of how non-binary individuals should be called to the Torah.³⁸ They propose that the introductory formula used by the gabbai to call someone to the kohen aliyah be modified when calling up a non-binary person to avoid using either *kohen krav* or *bat kohen kirvi*. Since they did not propose that the gender-neutral alternative be used when calling up males or females, their conclusion does not conflict with this paper except with regard to the title *bat kohen*. The essential teaching of their important responsum is that “people be called [to the Torah] in the way that they prefer to be called, as a basic gesture of respect.”³⁹ Applying that principle to the questions raised in this paper, questions which apply to discourse about personal status beyond the specific question of how to be called to the Torah, the only reasonable approach would be for the individual offspring of a male kohen to determine how they would like to be called, as a *kohen* or *kohenet*. When being called to the Torah, the non-binary formula suggested by Rabbis Austrian, Scheinberg and Silver (*na la'amod...mibeit hakohen*) offers an elegant solution. But, when calling up an identifying-female to the kohen aliyah, we should fully accept her status as a female and call her a *kohenet*.

As mentioned above, this responsum affirms the traditional precedent that kohanic and levitic status is only passed on to the next generation from the genetic father. How should a kohen/kohenet, or levi/leviyah be called up or named when the “genetic father” is a transgender woman (i.e., identifies as female) or nonbinary? As already determined by the CJLS in 2017 in a responsum by Rabbi Leonard A. Sharzer, “a transgender person is to be recognized as their publicly declared gender and to be addressed by their publicly declared name and pronouns.”⁴⁰ It would in such a case be improper to use masculine terms to denote a genetic father and thereby disrespect the gender identity of the parent and our own precedents on transgender and nonbinary Jews. It seems to me that the nonbinary language proposed by Rabbis Austrian, Scheinberg and Silver of *mibeit hakohen* (from the house of the kohen) or *mibeit halevi* (from the house of the

³⁸ Guy Austrian, Robert Scheinberg and Deborah Silver, “Calling non-binary people to Torah honors” CJLS OH 139:3.2022. [calling-non-binary-people-to-torah-honors-cjls-oh-139_3-2022-final.pdf](https://www.cjls.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/calling-non-binary-people-to-torah-honors-cjls-oh-139_3-2022-final.pdf) ([rabbinicalassembly.org](https://www.cjls.org))

³⁹ Ibid., p. 10, from the Psak #1.

⁴⁰ Leonard A. Sharzer, “Transgender Jews and Halakhah” CJLS EH 5:11.2017. [transgender-halakhah.pdf](https://www.cjls.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/transgender-halakhah.pdf) ([rabbinicalassembly.org](https://www.cjls.org))

levi) should be used following of the name of the parent who is/was the “genetic author” of the sperm from whom the individual was conceived, as that is the way that kohanic and levitic status is transmitted. While it would be tempting to use the title *הכהנת* after the name of the parent who is a transgender woman, I fear that that would cause confusion in suggesting that one is taking on the status of a *kohenet* or *leviyah* from one’s mother, which would only be correct in the case of a transgender mother. I suggest that using *mibeit hakohen* or *mibeit halevi* after the parent’s name is still preferable to using the title directly after the person’s name rather than the parent’s name (whether it be *kohen/kohenet* or *levi/leviyah*) for the reasons discussed above. The only time I could see it make sense to use the title after one’s own name rather than the parent’s would be when one knows that one is a *kohen/kohenet* or *levi/leviyah* from a genetic parent (or sperm donor) whom one does not remember in one’s full Hebrew name (in masculine, feminine or nonbinary form) because one prefers to use the names of the parent(s) by whom one was raised.⁴¹

Before concluding, four questions must be addressed that suggest a counter-intuitiveness of this argument: 1) If motivated by the egalitarian ethos of Conservative Judaism, would it not be better to use *kohen* and *levi* as gender-neutral terms rather than introduce a gendered feminine for women? 2) Along those same lines, does not the whole distinction of *kohen-levi-yisrael* strike one as caste-like and irreconcilable with egalitarianism? 3) If we are to maintain the *kohen-levi-yisrael* distinctions, would it not be more “egalitarian” to consider inheriting kohanic or levitic status from either parent rather than from just the father? And 4) even if the terms *kohenet* and *leviyah* are permissible, are they desirable given the contemporary usage, especially of *kohenet*, in contexts that might seem at variance with the concerns of this paper?

- 1) The gendered nature of language is a challenge that we are not alone in addressing. Both gender and language are artificial constructs of culture, ultimately imperfect modes and models of interpretation of the complexities of reality. The debate over whether we should retain or eliminate gendered forms is more deeply a discussion about how much *difference* we can accept without mitigating *equality*.⁴² While the feminine endings of nouns have for the most part been dropped in English (the *ess* in *Jewess*, for example), there are many exceptions, while usage in other languages throughout the world demonstrates greater variety. I see no objection should a woman prefer to be called a *kohen* or *levi* so as not to distinguish herself from men. But should a woman choose to distinguish herself as a woman in distinction to men, then *kohenet* and *leviyah* are appropriate *equivalent* terms. We are still divided on whether the word *avot* means “ancestors” or just “patriarchs.” But we should all agree that *imahot* (matriarchs) is a better term than *nashei ha’avot* (wives of the patriarchs).

⁴¹ See Avram Israel Reisner, “On the Conversion of Adopted and Patrilineal Children” CJLS YD 268:7.1988 [reisner_conversion.pdf \(rabbinicalassembly.org\)](https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/2019-08/268-7-1988_reisner_conversion.pdf) who rules that one may use the Hebrew name of the patrilineal father or of the adoptive parents.

⁴² See Frans de Waal, *Different: Gender Through the Eyes of a Primatologist* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2022) for an illuminating argument for the acceptance of difference and variety among humans.

- 2) Some find the kohen-levi-yisrael distinction problematic. Thirty-two years ago our Committee permitted the option of eliminating the distinction in terms of aliyot.⁴³ The question of whether the remembrance of such ancient ceremonial distinctions and of the Temple cult in general is advisable or not is an important question of which various opinions will be found among our colleagues and congregations. In my view, the memories that we maintain and construct tie us to the past and give structure and authenticity to our identity as traditional Jews. But however one feels about the general distinctions, the calling up of a *kohen* or *levi* as a *kohen* or *levi* for the first and second aliyot to the Torah was not to honor them so much as to use them to avoid conflicts over who merits the first and second aliyot. According to the Mishnah, the practice in terms of aliyot was instituted מפני דרכי שלום, “for the sake of peace.”⁴⁴ A congregation that calls up an undistinguished kohen for the first aliyah over a scholar or prominent leader does so out of a traditional sensitivity to the equality of all worshippers.⁴⁵ For me, the inclusion of women as *kohanot* along with male *kohanim*, both in receiving the first aliyah and in reciting the Priestly Blessing, as well as *leviyot* along with *levi'im* in receiving the second aliyah, make the retention of the kohen-levi-yisrael distinctions “kosher” in an egalitarian context. The difference of opinion of the CJLS on the priestly blessing notwithstanding, in my opinion *kohanot* and *kohanim* (and *leviyot* and *levi'im*) are fully equal in terms of rights and responsibilities, the only difference being that only men transmit the status to their Jewish progeny.
- 3) The kohen-status comes from the genetic father and the levi-status from the genetic father. While a strict approach to egalitarianism would want to see the status inherited from either parent, a change in the way the status is transmitted would, in my opinion, create too much of a caesura with the past that we would lose the symbolic power that the distinction is meant to invoke as an affirmation of historical memory. For example, it would be nice to imagine a priesthood that never offered animal sacrifices, but historical memory needs to be based on genuine continuity with what came before. Maimonides struggled with this balance in understanding the heritage of the ancient Temple cult, and so must we.
- 4) The title *kohenet* has been popularized by the Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute which seeks to develop “embodied, earth-based transformative Jewish ritual.”⁴⁶ Recognizing that *kohenet* is an ancient and “lost” term that once honored Jewish women in a sacred context, the Kohenet Institute seeks to reappropriate the title for “Jewish spiritual

⁴³ Mayer Rabinowitz, “Rishon or Kohen” CJLS OH 135:3.1990 rabinowitz_rishon.pdf (rabbinicalassembly.org)

⁴⁴ Mishnah Gittin 5:8.

⁴⁵ See Shulḥan Arukh Orah Hayim 135:4 (that a kohen who is an am ha’aretz [ignoramus] goes before a yisrael who is great scholar), and further, my discussion on the importance of kohanim in Conservative Judaism in *Passionate Centrism: One Rabbi’s Judaism* (New York: United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, 2016) pp. 18-22.

⁴⁶ See Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute (Accessed November 7, 2022).

leadership.” Looking at many of the same sources that I have in this paper, both rabbinic and epigraphical, Jill Hammer and Taya Shere have suggested that the term apply to a new development in Jewish spiritual culture quite different from the very traditional usages that I advocate here (albeit in an egalitarian hue).⁴⁷ This alternative contemporary usage of the title *kohenet* argues for our rediscovery of the term as well in the synagogue’s liturgy. If one supports the work of the Kohenet Institute, then the use of the term in other contexts should augment the effort to empower Jewish women’s spiritual expression. And if one sees the work of the Kohenet Institute as a challenge to the culture of Conservative/Masorti Judaism, then one should no less seek to use the term in a liturgical context that one might find more familiar. The different ways we appropriate and contest the fragments of the past are the means by which we continue to understand and affirm our own authenticity.

פסקי דין/Rulings:

1. We may use the term *kohenet* in reference to a woman who is the daughter of a kohen, and the term *leviyah* in reference to a woman who is the daughter of a levi.
2. Given our commitment to the recognition of the equality of men and women in halakhah, and the precedented usage from both rabbinic and extra-rabbinic sources of referring to Jewish women as *kohanot* in their own right, our Movement liturgy may be modified so that when the daughter of a kohen is called for the first aliyah in a synagogue where women receive aliyot and which preserves the kohen/levi/yisrael distinctions, the gabbai need not say _____ בת _____ תעמד קרבי. תעמד , but may rather say: _____ תעמד קרהנת, קרבי. תעמד בת כהן, but may rather say: _____ בת _____ בת.
3. Since the term *hakohen* at the end of the father’s name refers the kohenet’s father, it remains in the masculine.⁴⁸ The same applies when *halevi* appears after the father’s name.⁴⁹
4. Priestly and Levitical status is inherited from the genetic father (when one is born of a Jewish mother). Therefore, to avoid confusion when the matronymic is used along with the patronymic, the term *hakohenet* (or the corresponding *haleviyah* for the daughter of a levi) should not be used after the mother’s name. Rather, the terms *hakohen* or *halevi* should only follow the father’s name.⁵⁰ This rule should apply to all sons and daughters of kohanot and leviyot.
5. If one is raised by two fathers and uses two patronymics, the terms *hakohen* or *halevi* should only be used after the name of the genetic father.
6. As an exception to the above two rules, the terms *hakohenet* or *haleviyah* may follow the mother’s name or the non-genetic father’s name if the individual’s genetic father was also

⁴⁷ See Jill Hammer and Taya Shere, *The Hebrew Priestess: Ancient and New Visions of Jewish Women’s Spiritual Leadership* (Teaneck, NJ: Ben Yehuda Press, 2015).

⁴⁸ For example: חנה בת אהרון הכהן .

⁴⁹ For example: מרים בת עמרם הלוי .

⁵⁰ For example, a kohenet: חנה בת אהרון הכהן or חנה בת פנינה ואהרון הכהן ; or a leviyah: אלישבע בת ציפורה ומשה הלוי or אלישבע בת משה הלוי וציפורה .

a kohen or levi, respectively, since in these cases there is no danger of confusing the status of the individual (i.e. the child of the *kohenet* or *leviyah*).⁵¹

7. A woman who is the daughter of a transgender woman or nonbinary person from whom the kohen or levi status is transmitted should be called up *mibeit hakohen* or *mibeit halevi* after the name of the respective parent.⁵²
8. The term *hakohenet* or *haleviyah* may be used after the individual's name rather than the parent if the genetic father's name is not used in one's formal Hebrew name.⁵³ (The genetic father's name might not be used if, for example, the individual was raised someone else.)
9. Alternative approaches discussed in this paper, such as use of the term *kohen* and *levi* for all irrespective of gender, or the use of the title *kohen/kohenet* or *levi/leviyah* after the individual's name in addition to or in lieu of the parent's name, while not recommended by this tshuvah, are not objectionable.

Conclusion

A daughter of a kohen is a kohenet, just as the son of a kohen is a kohen. The daughter of a kohen may be called a kohenet just as the son of a kohen is called a kohen. Similarly, the daughter of a levi is a leviyah, just as the son of a levi is a levi. The daughter of a levi may be called a leviyah just as the son of a levi is called a levi.

⁵¹ For example: חנה בת אהרון הכהן ודינה הכהנת or חנה בת אהרון הכהן or חנה בת אהרון הכהן or חנה בת אהרון הכהן; or a leviyah: מרים בת עמרם הלוי ויוכבד הלוייה or מרים בת עמרם הכהן or מרים בת עמרם הכהן or מרים בת עמרם הכהן.

⁵² For example: חנה בת מרים מבית הכהן ויהודית.

⁵³ For example: דינה הכהנת בת אסתר והדסה.