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Priestly particulars

Congratulations on the very interesting article by John Travis ("The Priests' Chromosome?" SN: 10/3/98, p. 218). However, it contained several errors regarding the priestly laws. It stated, "A daughter of a cohen can become a priest . . ." While it is true that a very few of the priestly offerings may be given to a cohen's daughter, she can never be a cohen and cannot perform any of the priestly rites. It further stated, "Cohanim cannot get married to widows, divorcees, . . ." Only the cohen gadol—the high priest, a position that has not existed for about 2,000 years—was barred from marrying a widow. Finally, the priestly blessing that you described as "at Jewish festivals" is offered daily in Israeli synagogues.

*Ari Z. Zivotofsky
Bethesda, Md.*

When I was a boy growing up in Brooklyn, the folklore in the Jewish community was that all true cohen's have the peculiar ability to form the fingers of both hands into a symbolic

blessing. They could hold their thumbs apart from their index finger, hold the index and middle finger together, and separate the third finger from the middle finger but hold it close to the pinky. I was never able to do this feat.

I am curious to know whether that bit of lore surfaced during the research for this study. If so, was there any correlation to the genetic data?

*Al Rosen
Aptos, Calif.*

Several of the researchers noted this priestly blessing and that Leonard Nimoy reportedly used it as the basis for the hand gesture accompanying the Vulcan saying "Live long and prosper." This ability was not considered in their DNA analysis, however. —J. Travis

Water mold is no fungus

The genus *Aphanomyces*, which you mention in the story "Pfiesteria blamed unfairly for fish sores?" (SN: 10/10/98, p. 231), is not a fungus, as the various sources in the article call it, but rather a water mold. It may look like a fungus and may have a similar mode of nutrition but is in fact, unlike the green algae,

in the kingdom Protista in the six-kingdom system or Chromista in the better, eight-kingdom system.

*Gam Dykstra
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Boulder, Colo.*

Flawed syphilis analysis

The recent syphilis explosion in Baltimore is more plausibly linked to the coeval implosion of innercity housing units than to "escalating use of crack cocaine, the practice of exchanging sex for drugs, and the breakdown of the public health system" ("Stamping Out Syphilis," SN: 9/26/98, p. 202). This housing decrement process probably served to shred confined sexual networks maintaining endemic syphilis. As special consultant to the 1997 investigation team, I examined the evidence on which the article in the March 1, 1996 MORBIDITY AND MORTALITY WEEKLY REPORT was based. My review suggests that the analysis is flawed.

*John J. Potterat
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Cover: New experimental evidence supports an unusual model of quasicrystal structure in some metal alloys. Such a material's complex atomic arrangement (inset) can be understood in terms of a single repeating cluster that shares atoms with neighboring clusters, like overlapping 10-sided tiles (background). **Page 60** (Images: Paul Steinhardt)

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