

Parashat Emor 5784, 2024

To Illuminate the World

Rabbi David Etengoff

The beginning of our *parasha* focuses upon a variety of laws that pertain solely to the *kohanim*. From a halachic perspective, they have little to do with the majority of the Jewish people, as the *kahunah* is a biologically endowed status. Yet, from a broader perspective, all members of the Jewish people have the inherent ability to be “*kohanim*.”

How can we actualize this innate spiritual potential to be *kohanim*? Two *pasukim* in *Sefer Shemot* help us answer this question: “And now, if you obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be to Me a treasure out of all peoples, for Mine is the entire earth. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests (*mamlechet kohanim*) and a holy nation...” (19:5-6, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my emendations). Rashi (1040-1105) rejects the literal translation of *mamlechet kohanim* as a “kingdom of priests.” Instead, he opines that the correct explication of “*mamlechet kohanim*” is “a kingdom of princes,” since, as noted, we cannot all be *kohanim*. The Seforno (1470-1550), however, takes an entirely different approach:

Precisely by being *kohanim* you will be chosen (*segulah*). You will be a kingdom of priests in the sense that you will explain and teach [the existence and knowledge of G-d] to all manner of people. In that way, everyone will call upon Hashem and worship Him, shoulder to shoulder. As it says in *Sefer Yeshayahu* [61:6]: “And you will be called the Priests of Hashem.”

According to the Seforno, our foremost obligation is to bring spiritual illumination to humankind as an *ohr l'goyim* (“light unto nations,” *Sefer Yeshayahu* 42:6 and 49:6). It is our responsibility to act as the moral compass of humanity by embodying the highest

standards of ethical behavior, and thereby be *metakane ha'olam b'malchut Shakai*—perfect the Universe through the proclamation of Hashem's sovereignty.” In this way, we pave the way for all people to recognize His greatness and glory.

Rabbeinu Shimson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) presents a complementary approach to the Seforno's analysis. He explains *Sefer Shemot* 19:6 in terms of our people's mission to be *kohanim* and the resulting positive impact we can have on humankind:

Each one of you will be a “*kohane*” in the sense that you will accept upon yourselves My hegemony [My power to rule] in every action that you will do. In so doing, you will take upon yourselves the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven in its overarching sense. One will then be able to spread the knowledge of, and loyalty to, Hashem through the words of one's mouth and the performance of one's deeds. (Translation from the Hebrew my own)

These presentations serve as compelling descriptions of our role as Hashem's servants. Beyond a doubt, however, it is the Rambam (1135-1204) who gives this concept its most powerful voice. Moreover, he underscores the notion that anyone, Jew, or gentile, can be sanctified to the point that they can emulate the *levi'im* and *kohanim*. As such, everyone can potentially become a light unto nations:

Not only the tribe of Levi, but any one of the inhabitants of the world whose spirit generously motivates him and understands with his wisdom [how] to set himself aside and stand before Hashem to serve Him and minister to Him and to know Hashem, proceeding justly as Hashem made him...is as sanctified as the holy of holies. Hashem will be His portion and heritage forever and will provide what is sufficient for him in this world like He provides for the *kohanim* and *levi'im*. And thus, David declared: “Hashem is the lot of my portion; You are my cup, You support my lot.” (*Sefer Tehillim* 16:5, Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Shemitah v'Yovel* 13:13, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger)

May we be counted among those who strive to create a *mamlechet kohanim*, and thereby dedicate ourselves to the holy task of *tikkun haolam* (perfecting the Universe). *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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