

Parashat Emor 5771, 2011

The Jewish People: Bringing Light Unto Darkness

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka, and in the commemoration of my mother's *yahrzeit* – Miriam Tova bat Aharon Hakohen *zatzal*.

The beginning of our *parasha* concerns itself with a variety of laws that pertain solely to the Kohanim. For all intents and purposes, we have a virtual “mini-*Shulchan Aruch*” for this singularly important group of our people. Upon hearing this *parasha* read in shul, I have often asked myself, “What does this section have to do with me and other non-Kohanim?” Upon due study and reflection, however, I firmly believe that these laws are directly relevant to all Jews - and not just to the Kohanim.

On a certain level, we all have the potential to be “Kohanim.” Of course, the *kahunah* (Priesthood) is a biologically endowed status. As such, numerous studies have shown that there are even genetic markers that are shared by nearly all Kohanim. Therefore, both physically and halachically, we cannot all be Kohanim. Such a statement would be absurd and nonsensical. I am, instead, referring to the unique role that the Kohanim play in the great drama of Jewish history. As a group, they ideally represent the pursuit of *kedushah* (holiness) and unswerving devotion to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He). Moreover, by their words and deeds, both in the soon to be rebuilt *Beit Hamikdash* (Holy Temple) and outside of its environs, they will serve as role models and teachers of all that is good and noble. In my estimation, it is precisely in this sense that the entire Jewish nation can be Kohanim.

My observation is offered in the spirit of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzatto (1707-1746), who taught us a noteworthy lesson in his introduction to his classic work of *Musar* (moral exhortation), *Mesilat Yesharim*: “I have not written this work to teach people what they do not know. Rather, I have written this to remind them of what they already know, and regarding that which is well known amongst them in a very public sort of manner.” (Translation my own) With this in mind, let us explore some of the thoughts and ideas of a few of the *meforshei hachumash* (Torah expositors) regarding how we all can become Kohanim.

In *Sefer Shemot* 19:5-6, Hashem tells us: “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 (*mamlechech Kohanim*) and a holy nation...” (This and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my emendations). Rashi (1040-1105), the premier Torah commentator, rejects the literal translation of *mamlechech Kohanim* as a “kingdom of priests.” Instead, he believes it should be interpreted as a “kingdom of princes,” since in a literal (*peshat*) sense we cannot all be Kohanim. Nonetheless, the Seforno (1470-1550) 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 men. In that way, everyone will call upon Hashem and worship Him, shoulder to shoulder. As it says in *Sefer Yeshiyahu* [61:6]: “And you will be called the Priests of Hashem.”

Ideally, according to the Seforno, we should be role models for the world. As *bonei Avraham*, *Yitzhak*, and *Yaakov*, we are obligated to bring spiritual and moral illumination

as an “*or l’goim*,” a “light unto nations” (See *Sefer Yeshiyahu* 42:6 and 49:6). We are duty-bound to follow our unchanging and G-d-given ethical code that differs in kind and degree from the relativistic values currently in fashion. As the moral compass of the world, it is our responsibility to live lives that reflect the highest standards of human behavior, and thereby help “*l’takane haolam b’malchut Shakai*” (“to perfect the universe through G-d’s sovereignty”). Moreover, in our role as a “light unto nations,” we will be able to teach the world about the existence of our Creator, and provide a path for all people to recognize His greatness and glory. This, after all, is one of the underlying rationales for having been chosen as G-d’s holy and exalted nation. For the Seforno, at least, this is how we all may be Kohanim.

Rabbeinu Shimson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) adopted a complementary approach to that of the Seforno. Thus, Rav Hirsch explains *Sefer Shemot* 19:6 primarily in regards to what it means for us to be Kohanim so that we, in turn, may positively impact the world:

Each and every one of you will be a “Kohan” in the sense that one will accept upon himself My hegemony [My power to rule] in every action that one will do. In doing so, one will accept upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven and its overall orientation. One will then be able to spread the knowledge of, and subordination to, Hashem via the very words of one’s mouth and the demonstration of one’s actions. (Translation my own)

Once again, these ideas are not new; they are not *chidushim*. Rather, they are fundamental to the very fiber of who and what we are as a people, and a powerful description of our ultimate role as G-d’s servants.

May Hashem give us the wisdom and ability to recognize and fulfill the mitzvot that are incumbent upon us as G-d’s chosen nation, so that we may fulfill our obligations to the nations of the world. In this way, and with His help, may we bring Hashem’s light to the

great darkness that so often envelops our troubled and fractious world. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my new website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at rdbe718@gmail.com.