

Parashat Emor 5777, 2017

How to Become A Kingdom of Priests

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Shoshana Elka bat Etiel Dina and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The beginning of our *parasha* focuses upon a variety of laws that pertain solely to the *kohanim*. From a purely Jewish juridic perspective, they have little to do with the majority of the Jewish people, since the *kahunah* (Priesthood) 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*? I believe two *pasukim* (verses) in *Sefer Shemot* provide us with a basis to 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 (*mamlechech kohanim*) and a holy nation...” (19:5-6, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my emendations). Rashi (1040-1105) rejects the literal translation of *mamlechech kohanim* as a “kingdom of priests.” Instead, he opines that the correct explication of “*mamlechech kohanim*” is “a kingdom of princes,” since, as we have 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 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, as the children of Avraham, Yitzhak, Ya’akov, Sarah, Rivka, and Leah, it is incumbent upon us to bring spiritual illumination to mankind and be an *ohr l’goyim* (“light unto nations,” *Sefer Yeshayahu* 42:6 and 49:6). As the moral compass of the world, it is our responsibility to live lives that reflect the highest standards of ethical behavior, and thereby help “*l’takane ha’olam b’malchut Shakai*” (“to perfect the universe through the proclamation of G-d’s sovereignty”). Moreover, as the spiritual educators to the world’s nations, our role is enlighten humanity regarding the existence and Divine providence of our Creator, and thereby pave the way for all people to recognize His greatness and glory. This, after all, is one of the underlying rationales for our having been chosen as G-d’s holy and exalted nation, and, for the Seforno, the manner whereby we can all be *kohanim*.

Rabbeinu Shimson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) adopted a complementary approach to that of the Seforno. 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 our fellow man:

Each and every one of you will be a “*kohan*” in the sense that they will accept upon themselves My hegemony [My power to rule] in every action that they will do. In doing so, they will take upon themselves the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven in its overall and holistic 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 actions. (Translation my own)

The above presentations serve as a powerful description of our role as G-d’s servants. Beyond a doubt, however, it was the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) who gave this concept its most powerful voice. In addition, and almost startlingly so, Maimonides

underscores the notion that anyone, Jew or gentile, can be sanctified to the point that they can emulate the Levites and the *kohanim*. As such, everyone can potentially be 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 G-d to serve Him and minister to Him and to know G-d, proceeding justly as G-d made him...is sanctified as holy of holies. G-d will be His portion and heritage forever and will provide what is sufficient for him in this world like He provides for the priests and the Levites. And thus David declared: "G-d 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, as the Rambam states, develop spiritually infused and wise understanding, so that we may become a kingdom of priests. Then, with the help of Hashem, and as truly just and righteous individuals, may we dedicate ourselves to the holy work of "*l'takane ha'olam b'malchut Shakai.*" *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on YUTorah.org using the search criteria of Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

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 <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Megillat Esther* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.