

MAMLEKHET KOHANIM V'GOY KADOSH: A KOHANIC KINGDOM?

by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

I THE PRE-REVELATION COMMITMENT

Our Parashah is composed of two distinct sections:

- 1) The "Yitro" chapter (#18) which details Yitro's advice to Mosheh regarding the establishment of circuit courts, and
- 2) The first part of the "Ma'amad Har Sinai" (Stand at Sinai - i.e. Revelation) narrative, which continues through ch. 31.

The section of our Parashah dealing with Ma'amad Har Sinai is itself "neatly" divisible into three sections:

- a) Preparations and formulation of the B'rit (Covenant) - all in Chapter 19; b) The Decalogue (20:1-14), and c) The post-Revelation responses of the people and G-d. (20:15-23)

At the onset of the formulation of the B'rit, the Almighty uses three phrases to describe the special relationship He intends for His people (see V'shinantam 2/15 & 16 for literary analyses of this relationship as expressed in the "keyword" *Li*):

...Thus shall you say to the house of Ya'akov, and tell the people of Yisra'el: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I carried you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself.

Now therefore, if you will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then you shall be (1) My own treasure among all peoples (*viH'yitem Li S'gulah miKol ha'Amim*); for all the earth is Mine; And you shall be to Me a (2) kingdom of priests (*Mamlekheth Kohanim*), and (3) a holy nation (*Goy Kadosh*)... (Sh'mot 19:3-6)

I would like to examine the import of these three terms: *S'gulah* (treasure), *Mamlekheth Kohanim* (kingdom of priests) and *Goy Kadosh* (holy nation), with an eye to understanding why the first and

last of these have a decidedly different fate from their neighbor. Both *Am S'gulah* and *Goy Kadosh*, in various formulations, continue to appear in later books of the Torah as descriptive, exhortative or quasi-eschatological terms for the B'nei Yisra'el. , *Mamlekheth Kohanim*, on the other hand, disappears without a trace from the Toraic ideal.

Was the Divine promise of making us into a Mamlekheth Kohanim ever realized?

Clearly, a proper response to this question depends on how we interpret the phrase. If we accept the interpretation of Rashi (and Rashbam) that Kohanim is *Sarim* (noblemen), then the response is definitive "yes" - countless times after Sinai we are described in "regal" terms. The difficulty in this approach is, again, the disappearance of the term after this Divine charge.

S'forno's interpretation, that Kohanim should be understood literally (the approach we will adopt for purposes of this analysis), begs another question. which will be the focus of the shiur.

Why wasn't the promise fulfilled immediately, at the foot of Sinai? Why was it relegated to the Messianic future, as S'forno proposes?

Beyond this question, S'forno's approach is vulnerable to the same question asked above - since S'forno reads all three terms as promises which will not be fulfilled until the Messianic era, why do *S'gulah* and *Goy Kadosh* appear in sections of the Torah, while *Mamlekheth Kohanim* disappears?

Why was it not at least preserved as an ideal, evocative of the great moment when our relationship with G-d was at its most intense? (see, e.g. Yirmiyah 2:1-2, Hoshea 2:16-17).

In order to understand the nature of this "first charge" to the B'nei Yisra'el, we'll need to look to the opposite end of the Biblical spectrum - to the last of the N'vi'im, Malakhi.

II

THE DIALOGUE OF MALAKHI: AGAINST THE KOHANIM

Malakhi (which may or may not be his name - see BT Megillah 15a. See also the Septuagint, which renders it "angeloi mou" [My angel/messenger]) operated as a Navi in Yerushalayim during the 5th century BCE, subsequent to the re-establishment of the Beit haMikdash and the sacrificial order. Although he is frequently grouped with Haggai and Zekharyah (as the "last of the prophets"), his prophecy was addressed to a different political and spiritual reality among the residents of Yehudah and Yerushalayim. Whereas Haggai and Zekharyah (whose N'vu'ot all took place during the years 520-515 BCE, at the beginning of the rule of Darius) were sent by G-d to bolster the people's resolve

to complete the reconstruction of the Beit haMikdash (see Ezra 5:2), Malakhi's task was to address the degrading attitude held among the people toward that selfsame Sanctuary. The first two chapters of Malakhi (there are only three) are devoted to a severe chastisement of the people's perverted attitude with the Mikdash and the sancta. The most powerful expression of this diatribe is found in the following passage:

You offer polluted bread upon My altar; and you say, How have we polluted You? In that you say, The table of Hashem is contemptible. And if you offer the blind for sacrifice, is this not evil? And if you offer the lame and the sick, is this not evil? Offer it now to your governor, will he be pleased with you, or accept your person? says Hashem Tz'vakot. And now, I beg you, beseech G-d that he will be gracious to us; this has been your doing. Will he show favor to any of you? says Hashem Tz'vakot. O, that were one among you who would shut the doors that you might not kindle fire on My altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, said Hashem Tz'vakot, nor will I accept an offering from your hand.. For, from the rising of the sun until it goes down, My name is great among the nations; and in every place incense is offered to My name, and a pure offering; for My name is great among the nations, says Hashem Tz'vakot. But you have profaned it, in that you say, The table of Hashem is polluted; and his fruit, his food, is contemptible. And you said, Behold, what a weariness it is! And you snuffed at it, says Hashem Tz'vakot; and you brought that which was torn, and the lame, and the sick; thus you brought an offering. Should I accept this from your hand? says Hashem. Let the deceiver be cursed, who has in his flock a male, and yet vows, and sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished; for I am a great king, says Hashem Tz'vakot, and My name is feared among the nations.

And now, O you Kohanim, this commandment is for you. If you will not hear, and if you will not lay it to heart, to give glory to My name, says Hashem Tz'vakot, I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Indeed I have cursed them already, because you do not lay it to heart. Behold, I will rebuke your seed, and spread dung upon your faces, the dung of your solemn feasts; and you will be taken away with it. And you shall know that I have sent this commandment to you, that My covenant might be with Levi, says Hashem Tz'vakot. My covenant was with him for life and peace; and I gave them to him for the fear with which he feared Me, and was afraid before My name. The Torah of truth was in his mouth, and iniquity was not found in his lips; he walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many away from iniquity. For the Kohen's lips should guard knowledge, and they should seek the Torah from his mouth; for he is a messenger of Hashem Tz'vakot. But you have turned aside from the way; you have caused many to stumble in the Torah; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says Hashem Tz'vakot. Therefore I have also made you contemptible and base before all the people, because you have not kept My ways, but have shown partiality in regard to the Torah. (Malakhi 1:7- 2:9)

III

A BRIEF METHODOLOGICAL INTERLUDE: DIALOGUE-FORM IN THE N'VI'IM

Although the T'nakh is considered, both traditionally and Halakhically, to be a cohesive unit, it is a mistake to automatically apply the methodology of study utilized in one section to another. Even within the Humash, for instance, we approach different types of text with different tools. Note how the Rishonim interpret the great visions of Mosheh (Devarim 32) and Bil'am (Bamidbar 23-24) - as opposed to their "more technical" approach to the legalistic texts of Vayyikra.

In order to understand the hermeneutic and exegetical distinctions between Torah and N'vi'im (notably the section known as "N'vi'im Aharonim", i.e. Yeshayah, Yirmiyah, Yehezqe'el and T'rei Asar), we have to remember that the original function of each of these is markedly different.

Whereas the Torah is chiefly a written text, meant for timeless instruction, replete with the basic Halakhic texts (or, more accurately, the texts which form the basis of Halakhah), the words of Yeshayah and his colleagues were first and foremost intended for their "original" target audience. In other words, whereas Torah is a written tradition, N'vuah is essentially an oratorical art, wherein the Navi is charged to address the people (or, often, the court and aristocracy) and to affect the prevailing attitude and sentiment. Sometimes this involves severe chastisement (e.g. Yeshayah 3), sometimes exhortation (e.g. Haggai 2), oftentimes consolation (e.g. Yeshayah 40, Yirmiyah 33) and even inspiration to envision a glorious future (e.g. Zekharyah 7-8). As the Rabbis teach us (BT Megillah 14a), there were many more N'vi'im who operated in Israel throughout history (chiefly during the first Commonwealth) - but only those prophecies whose message has import for future generations were committed to writing (and included in the canon).

That being the case, we need to read the N'vi'im not only with our eyes but also with our ears. To wit, our understanding of the message of a given Navi will be enhanced if we try to place ourselves among his direct audience, listening to his words and doing our best to estimate the impact of his rhetoric on the assemblage. As such, we do well to note those tools of rhetoric and oratory which are utilized by the Navi and to see how they might enhance and underscore his message - and heighten its impact on those listening.

For instance, a Navi will often use phrases that were used by earlier N'vi'im - and are surely in the forefront of the "literary consciousness" of the people - to strengthen their own message. Sometimes this is accomplished in a surprising and ironic fashion; for instance, Yirmiyah (31:3) turns Amos's "maiden of Yisra'el" (5:2) from a fallen woman to a dancing girl. (Yirmiyah lived over a century after Amos; it stands to reason that Amos' dire use of "B'tulat Yisra'el" was well-known to Yirmiyah's audience).

Among the rhetorical devices used by N'vi'im is the "dialogue" or "disputation", where the Navi

quotes G-d against the people, then pre-empt's the people's objection (or defense) by quoting it himself - and answering it on the spot. An exquisite example of this form is found at the end of Malakhi:

"Your words have been strong against Me", says Hashem. Yet you say, "How have we spoken against You?" You have said: "It is vain to serve G-d; and what profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before Hashem Tz'vakot?" (3:13-14)

Malakhi begins by quoting G-d's chastisement of the people: Your words have been strong against Me...

he then anticipates/quotes the people's response/defense: "How have we spoken against You?...

and delivers the coup-de-grace, affirming that G-d's chastisement is indeed true: You have said: "It is vain to serve G-d; and what profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before Hashem Tz'vakot?"

This "disputation" form (which is so prevalent in Malakhi [see 1:2, 4, 6, 7, 13; 2:14, 17 (twice!); 3:7, 8, 13, 14] that one contemporary writer was prompted to refer to Malakhi as "the Hebrew Socrates") has the effect of "leav[ing] the opposition devoid of further argumentation and resigned to the Divine decision" (Patterson, "A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible", p. 303).

SUMMARY

A few methodological points were introduced in this section which bear recapping: 1) A proper appreciation of the "literary" N'vi'im demands a different approach from that used when studying other parts of T'nakh;

2) The primary concern of these N'vi'im was to effect a "change of heart" among their primary/contemporary audience - and those N'vu'ot which were included in the canon were those that Hazal understood to have eternal messages;

3) Since the N'vi'im were, first and foremost, orators, it is critical to understand the rhetorical tools they used and to adjudge the impact of their spoken words on their audience;

4) One of the most common tools used by Malakhi is the "disputation" form, where he represents both the Divine charge and the people's defense - only to respond to that defense, rendering the people (literally) "speechless".

If we go back to the selection from Malakhi quoted in section II above, we can see that this entire

text is presented as a disputation, pitting G-d against the people in a judgment about their relationship with the altar and the Mikdash and, ultimately, with the honor due His Name.

IV

WHO IS MALAKHI'S AUDIENCE?

With this "methodological interlude" to help us, we can now address a fundamental problem in understanding the selected text from Malakhi, quoted in section II. It seems that the second half of the disputation (beginning with "And now, O you Kohanim..." [2:1]), is directed exclusively to the Kohanim (although there seems to be an overlap of the Kohanim and the Levi'im here) who are supposed to be the guardians and promoters of the sanctity of the Mikdash and of the altar. Nevertheless, the first half of this disputation is almost assuredly targeted at the "Yisra'elim" (i.e. non-Levi'im), who are the ones bringing the degrading offerings mentioned in 1:7-8, 13-14.

It is hard to decipher who Malakhi's audience is here - is it the Kohanim, guardians of the Mikdash? Or the Yisra'elim, who should be bringing their best and finest as offerings to the altar?

Unraveling this puzzle will help us understand the disappearance of the Sinaitic charge/promise to be a *Mamlekhet Kohanim*.

V

THE PLACEMENT OF MALAKHI WITHIN THE CANON

One further note about Malakhi. There are four books of the "literary" N'vi'im (commonly called *N'vi'im Aharonim*) - Yeshayah, Yirmiyah, Yehezqe'el and T'rei Asar. The 12 "members" of the T'rei Asar range, chronologically, from the earliest of the literary prophets (Hoshea) to the latest (Malakhi). (The one obvious unifying factor among all twelve is their diminutive size (as alluded to in the selection from Bava Batra, below). If we were to regard size as the critical factor in arranging the canon (regarding these four books), then arguably T'rei Asar would belong at the end (as it is). Hazal, however, considered another factor to be more critical - chronological integrity:

Our Rabbis taught: The order of the Prophets is, Yehoshua, Shof'tim, Sh'mu'el, M'lakhim, Yirmiyah, Yehezqe'el, Yeshayah, and the Twelve Minor Prophets (*T'rei Asar*). Let us examine this. Hoshea came first, as it is written, "G-d spake first to Hoshea." But did G-d speak first to Hoshea? Were there

not many prophets between Mosheh and Hoshea? R. Yohanan, however, has explained that [what it means is that] he was the first of the four prophets who prophesied at that period, namely, Hoshea, Yeshayah, Amos and Mikhah. Should not then Hoshea come first? Since his prophecy is written along with those of Haggai, Zekharyah and Malakhi, and Haggai, Zekharyah and Malakhi came at the end of the prophets, he is reckoned with them. But why should he not be written separately and placed first? Since his book is so small, it might be lost [if copied separately]. (Bava Batra 14b)

The conclusion of the Gemara - that *T'rei Asar* belongs at the end of the N'vi'im on account of the presence of Haggai, Zekharyah and Malakhi (who are identified as "the last of the prophets") is a bit puzzling. Since we must keep all twelve together (as per the concern of *Eidi d'Zutar Mirkhas* - Since his book is so small, it might be lost), we could put all twelve at the beginning of the N'vi'im, thus "predating" Haggai, Zekharyah and Malakhi - or we could put them at the end, thus "postdating" Hoshea, Amos, Michah and Yonah (and, arguably, Yoel and Ovadiah - see Avrabanel's fascinating approach to the sequence within T'rei Asar, found at the beginning of his commentary to Sefer Yo'el). Why did Hazal immediately assume that we prefer to "postdate" the earlier N'vi'im and ensure that Haggai, Zekharyah and Malakhi are in the proper position within the sequence?

In line with the Rabbinic dictum (mentioned above) that any prophecy whose message has ongoing import (*N'vu'ah sheHutz'r'khah l'Dorot*) was included in the canon, I would like to suggest that the prophecies of these last three N'vi'im have particularly significant messages for the Messianic era (note particularly chapters 7-8 of Zekharyah, along with the last six chapters of that Sefer, the very end of Haggai and the last section in Malakhi: "Behold I am sending Eliyah the prophet to you before the great and terrible day of Hashem...").

Whereas nearly every Sefer of N'vi'im has eschatological visions (or, at least, allusions), significant portions of each of Haggai, Zekharyah and Malakhi are devoted to that era. As such, Haggai, Zekharyah and Malakhi were not placed at the end ("dragging" Hoshea et alii with them) not solely due to the actual time of their prophecy - rather because of the target time of their prophecies (some of which we have seen fulfilled, Barukh Hashem, with our own eyes, e.g. Zekharyah 8:4-5).

Understanding that Malakhi's prophecies were intended to be read with an eschatological eye may help us clarify his curious disputation with the Kohanim.

VI

GOY KADOSH, *SEGULAH* & *MAMLEKHET KOHANIM*

At the beginning of the shiur, I noted that both S'gulah and Goy Kadosh show up in numerous places

in the Torah, both as exhortative texts (and, perhaps, as normative dicta - see the famous dispute between Rashi and Ramban at Vayyikra 19:2) - and as teleological statements relating to the ideal station of Am Yisra'el. Space prevents elaborate annotation of the occurrences; the interested reader is directed to Devarim 7:6, 14:2 and 26:18 (*S'gulah*) and Sh'mot 22:30, Vayyikra 11:44, 19:2, D'varim 26:19, 28:9 (variations on Goy Kadosh).

Essentially, the attribute of Kedushah shows up when the nation, as a nation, behaves in exemplary and dignified fashion, particularly in areas of moral perfection. Segulah is a relative term - defining our positive uniqueness among the nations. The Gemara in Berakhot (7a) records that Mosheh Rabbeinu requested not only that G-d's Shekhinah continue to rest among the people in the aftermath of the sin of the golden calf (defining us as a Goy Kadosh), but also that His Shekhinah not rest among the pagans (*S'gulah*).

As noted, however, Mamlekhet Kohanim is never repeated - in any form - after the pre-Sinaitic charge.

In order to understand this development, we have to take a step back and review the task of the children of Avraham: To be a blessing for all the families of the earth (B'reshet 12:3). In other words, we are to be the teachers of the world, those who bring G-d's word to the nations and who "represent" them to the Almighty.

In order for us to be able to fulfill this task, we need to more than "just" an extraordinary nation (*S'gulah*) which lives by a Divine code of holiness (*Goy Kadosh*); we also need to be in direct communion with haKadosh Barukh Hu. The Divine plan which was to begin at Sinai, was that the entire nation would be prophets, facing G-d Himself and experiencing a direct revelation of His Will. As pointed out in last year's two-part shiur (V'shinantam 1/17-18), it was only the people's fear of the intensity of this direct revelation which interrupted the revelation and "changed the rules" such that Mosheh would receive the rest of the revelation alone and transmit it to the people:

When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Mosheh , "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let G-d speak to us, or we will die." Mosheh said to the people, "Do not be afraid; for G-d has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin." Then the people stood at a distance, while Mosheh drew near to the thick darkness where G-d was. (Sh'mot 20:15-18)

Is it any wonder then, that even though G-d approved of this reticence on the part of the B'nei Yisra'el and the subsequent alteration of the *modus relevati* (see D'varim 5:25), they were never again called to be a *Mamlekhet Kohanim*? By refusing to encounter the Shekhinah directly, they

forfeited the opportunity to completely fulfill the Avrahamic mission - at best, the nation could elevate itself to the standard of a holy, distinct nation - but could never fully impart G-d's word upon the rest of the world.

VII

BEHOLD, DAYS ARE COMING...

Regarding the days of Mashiach, a time when the nations will yearn to come to Yerushalayim to learn G-d's word (Yeshayah 2), the Navi says:

But you shall be named the Kohanim of Hashem; men shall call you the Ministers of our G-d; you shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. (Yeshayah 61:6)

We now understand why Malakhi, whose prophecies are not only directed at the indolent Yisra'elim and spiritless Kohanim of his time, but are aimed at the future which was the hope of that era of Shivat Tziyyon (but was never realized; see BT Berakhot 4a), deliberately blurs the distinction between Kohein and Yisra'el. If we are truly to be a Mamlekheth Kohanim, capable of inspiring and teaching all the nations of the world, then those characteristics of zeal, scrupulousness and spiritual ardor which are the Kohanic standards need to be adopted by all of Am Yisra'el.

POSTSCRIPT

[Regarding the promise of *Mamlekheth Kohanim*] Our Rabbis said: Is it possible that HaKadosh Barukh promised and changed His Mind? Rather, they explain that when the Kehunah was taken from Mosheh and granted to Aharon, haKadosh Barukh Hu ordained twelve gems in the Ephod atop Aharon's garments, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Yisra'el - so that when Aharon would serve, it would be considered as if all of Yisra'el were standing and serving with him, as it says: *Avnei Zikkaron* (gems of commemoration) - a commemoration of that Statement at Sinai: *V'Atem Tih'yu Li Mamlekheth Kohanim* - "and you will be unto Me a kingdom of Kohanim". (Midrash haBi'ur- cited in Torah Shelemah 15:70)

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