

THE ROLE OF THE PRIESTS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God told Moshe, "Tell the kohanim that the descendants of Aharon may not become defiled by the dead . . . (Vayikra 21:1)

Since this week's parsha deals so much with kohanim, it is worth taking some time to understand who they are and what they mean to the Jewish people. They are more than just priests.

A good starting point is the word kohen itself, spelled, in Hebrew, Chof-Heh-Nun. Breaking the three letters into two groups, the first two spell the word koh—so—the opening of many of the prophets as in, "So says God . . ." This is a reason for this.

The gematria of koh is 25, one of the most significant numbers in Judaism. To begin with, it is the gematria of the word yehi, used in the verse with which God made light:

And God said, "Let there be light!" and yehi ohr—there was light. (Bereishis 1:3)

This, of course, was not the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars, which did not start working until Day Four of Creation. Besides, as Rashi explains in the next verse, the light that God made on Day One was quickly hidden by God shortly after, for the righteous in the future time.

Why? Because God knew that evil people would come along in history and abuse this light, so therefore, He hid it from them before they could even know about it. Evil people and righteous people alike make use of the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars.

Furthermore, the Talmud writes, with this light, appropriately called the Ohr HaGanuz—the Hidden Light—Adam HaRishon could see from one end of the world until the other end. The light with which we are familiar doesn't even allow us to look around the corner without the aid of some kind of technological device.

Hence, the Shema has 25 letters, because it is the creed of the Jewish people, the nation charged with being a light unto nations. Thus, when the prophets began their words of criticism to awaken the Jewish people to their Divine mission, it was only fitting that they begin with the word koh, and the gematria of 25, as if to say, "Hey! Remember the mandate of 25 and your commitment to live up to it?"

What exactly does that mean, and what does it have to do with the kohanim, especially if the light is hidden from mankind until a future time, assumedly Yemos HaMoshiach?

The Leshem explains:

He made a separation in the illumination of the light, that it should not flow or give off light except for the righteous, whose actions draw it down and make it shine. However, the actions of the evil block it, leaving them in darkness, and this itself was the hiding of the Light. (Sefer HaKlallim, Klal 18, Anaf 8, Os 4)

This short insight is perhaps one of the most important in all of Torah, at least in terms of helping the Jewish people understand their mission in life. It says, simply, that when God set aside the Hidden Light for righteous people in the future time, it meant from that time onward. It became hidden only to evil people, whose actions cause the light to repel them.

This is very important, because this light is as crucial for seeing the truth about life as eyes are for seeing the world around us. Without this Ohr HaGanuz, a person remains blind to the reality of God and truth, and can willingly and happily stumble down the wrong path in life. He may have a blast, but in the end, the blast will have him.

We read:

All of the Jewish people have a portion in the World-to-Come, as it says, "All of Your people are righteous and will forever inherit the land; the branch of My planting, the work of My hands." (Yeshayahu 60:21)

This is less a compliment than it is a reminder of what the Jewish people are supposed to be. For, to not be righteous means that one is denied access to the Ohr HaGanuz, to a clear vision of the purpose of life, and how best to achieve it.

In fact, since one's access to the Ohr HaGanuz is primarily through the words of Torah, one's level of righteousness determines one's access to the levels of Torah. Anyone can pick up and read a Chumash, and today, even the Talmud. But, only the righteous can draw down through Torah the Ohr HaGanuz, and benefit from it.

This is why non-righteous people, in spite of the fact that they read such sources of Torah knowledge from cover-to-cover, are never impacted by its words. Their physical eyes may be wide open, but their mind's eye, being blind to higher levels of reality, sees only darkness, even though they are convinced they are seeing what the righteous see, and that it is the latter who are deluded.

However, even for Jews who wish to be righteous, it is not an easy feat, especially in so distracting a world. People have to work and to earn salaries, which often necessitates that they work in environments that are not all that spiritually conducive. Even Jews with the best of intentions can end up with the worst of attentions.

To solve this problem, we have kohanim. Kohanim, at least in Temple times, were spared the need to be involved in the outside, in the world of spiritual distraction. They were supported by the

community, and allowed to remain in a holy environment most of the time. (The Kohen Gadol himself never left the Bais HaMikdosh while he functioned in this role.)

This is why the kohanim had to live up to a higher standard than the rest of the Jewish people. As the koh indicates at the beginning of the word kohen, they didn't have the luxury of being a little less righteous. It was their role to remain in the position of conduits for the Divine light for the rest of the people, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year, so that the Jewish people could strive to be such conduits for the rest of the world.

Eretz Yisroel functions in a similar way, as the following reveals:

Rabbi Moshe Cordovero wrote: "Anyone who lives in Eretz Yisroel is considered a righteous person even if it doesn't appear that way. For, if he wasn't, then the land would spit him out, as it says, 'And the land shall spit out its inhabitants' (Vayikra 18:25). Therefore, regarding even those who act in evil ways, if the land does not reject them then God calls him "righteous." This is what is meant by the verse, 'This is the gate of God; the righteous shall enter through it' (Tehillim 118:20). The 'gate of God' refers to Eretz Yisroel, as we see Ya'akov Avinu calling it 'the gate of Heaven' (Bereishis 28:17). The first letters of tzadikim yavo'u vo—the righteous shall enter through it—are Tzaddi -Yud-Bais and can be arranged to spell tzvi—deer—implying that Eretz HaTzvi—the Land of the Deer—is the gateway to God, and that all those that enter it are called "righteous," for once they enter they do not leave." (Tuv HaAretz, The Advantage of Living in Eretz Yisroel . . .)

In other words, Eretz Yisroel mystically maintains the spiritual status of Jews living on the land, as long as they fulfill the mitzvos dependent upon the land, like taking tithes and observing the Shmittah year. Hence, it takes less spiritual accomplishment to access the Hidden Light in Eretz Yisroel as it does in the rest of the world, which is why the Talmud says:

Even the air of Eretz Yisroel makes a person wise. (Bava Basra 158b)

Hence, one of the borders of Eretz Yisroel, the one the Jews were made to cross on their initial entry into the land, is the Yarden, or the Jordan River. In English the name may mean very little, by the Hebrew name can be broken into two parts: yarad Nun—the Nun descended. Which Nun? The Nun of the Nun Sha'arei Binah —the Fifty Gates of Understanding, with which God made Creation (Rosh Hashanah 21b).

Kabbalah explains that it is the Nun Sha'arei Binah that the Ohr HaGanuz passes through on its way down into our world. It is the Fifty Gates of Understanding that filter the light, allowing it to result in every aspect of Creation as we know, and don't know it, above and below.

It is also the light of Torah, for those who merit it, which is why the Midrash also says that there is no Torah like the Torah of Eretz Yisroel. For, even in times when the Temple does not exist, and the kohanim cannot function in the role as they once did, Eretz Yisroel does, making access to the Hidden Light that much easier. Hence, another names for the Jewish people is Mamleches

Kohanim—a kingdom of Kohanim— since with the help of Eretz Yisroel, we can also function in the level of kohanim to some degree.

Not only is the Nun Sha'arei Binah the source of the light of the Torah, it is also the source of our souls, which we access on more profound levels by learning Torah, and, of course, by living in Eretz Yisroel. Sometimes we forget this, and it takes our enemies to remind us of who we really are. This is why Haman can also be read: Heh-Mem, Nun, or "they are 50," referring to the Jewish people that Haman arouses by his attempt at genocide.

This is also why he planned to hang Mordechai on a gallows that was 50 amos high: Haman sensed that there was about to be an influx of the light of the Nun Sha'arei Binah, and wanted to thwart it. It is with the light of the Fifty Gates of Understanding that we use to fully rectify Creation. This is the death note for Amalek.

Therefore, explains the Nesivos Shalom, Amalek attacked the Jewish people during their 50 day ascension to Mt. Sinai and the acceptance of Torah. He didn't stop it from happening, but he was able to lessen its impact, and hold off the Final Redemption.

The next time Amalek tries to block such an opportunity for complete redemption, is just as the Jewish people are entering the land. This time Amalek attacks through Balak and Bilaam, who, the Zohar explains, were rooted in Amalek. The name Amalek is even built into their names. Once again, he didn't stop the event, but he lessened it enough to hold off the Final Redemption for a while longer, once they caused Gad, Reuven, and Menashe to choose to live in the Diaspora instead of Eretz HaKodesh.

The next potential for a complete redemption was in Mordechai's and Esther's time, which, as the Talmud says, was really the completion of what began at Har Sinai over a millennium before. Once again, Amalek showed up, not preventing redemption, but lessening its impact and its ability to eradicate evil from Creation.

After that, there were battles with Amalek, but mostly started by the Jewish people, especially in Shaul HaMelech's time. The next war an Amaleki seems to go out of his way to fight against the Jewish people was in World War II, which, as Hitler, y"s, himself admitted, was really a war against the Jews. And, in pure Amaleki style, he sacrificed the war effort, put himself at risk, just to harm and murder more Jews. He may not have physically descended from Amalek, but he certainly did spiritually.

His arrival on the scene would imply that, at that time, there was a potential for the complete tikun, and he came to stop it. The Holocaust, according to Torah hashkofah, was Amalek's attempt to prevent the Final Redemption, so that he, and other evil people like him, can remain in history a little longer.

However, as always, Amalek is never able to completely prevent the aspect of redemption that was

destined for that time, but he was able to limit its impact, and push off the full tikun a little longer. This is why the formation of the State of Israel has been so confusing for some, and misread by so many, some who see too much in it, and many who see too little in it.

Nevertheless, aside from many other reasons, which are mentioned in my new book, Drowning In Pshat: A Deeper Look At The Final Redemption, the very fact that Amalek showed up when he did makes it clear that what happened in 1948 was certainly part of the Final Redemption. Just how much remains to be seen, but an important part of it, it is hard to say otherwise.

Why should anyone be surprised if they understand the lands connection to the Nun Sha'arei Binah? Like the Jewish people themselves, it is a lens through which the light of Torah is able to shine on the rest of the world:

From Tzion will come Torah. (Yeshayahu 2:3)

From Tzion, the light of the Nun Sha'arei Binah fill go forth to the rest of the world, just as it goes from the kohanim to the Jewish people. Hence, the last letter of the word kohen is, in fact, a Nun, to indicate that which they are supposed to radiate to the rest of the nation, by using the light of 25. They were the microcosm; the Jewish nation, as a whole, is the macrocosm.

Thus, the Kohen Gadol wore the letters of the 12 Tribes on his shoulders, 25 letters on one side, and 25 letters on the other side. How convenient it was that all the names of tribes, the fathers of the entire nation, should total 50. It was an ongoing reminder of the role of the kohanim.

Today, the kohanim do not function much in their historic role, especially in the Diaspora. At least in Eretz Yisroel, the kohanim go up to duchar everyday; in Chutz L'Aretz, only on the Chagim. They go up first for an aliyah to the Torah, usually lead Birchas Hamazon, and it is no so simple to air glorious position amongst the Jewish people, and the Jewish people, in theirs amongst the nations of the world.

Text

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