

PARSHAS EMOR: A SACRED RESPONSIBILITY - AND PRIVILEGE

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

"Vayomer Hashem el Moshe emor el hakohanim" (Vayikrah 21:1)

Parshas Emor lists some of the halochos (laws) pertaining to kohanim. One of the many halochos that are specific to a kohen is the fact that he needs to avoid becoming tamei (ritually impure) throughout his life.

This requires constant vigilance on the part of each kohen. In addition to the general difficulty of seeing to it that one does not become tamei, it becomes more challenging to a kohen whose close friend or relative r'l dies. As the Torah relates in the opening pesukim of this week's parsha, a kohen is never permitted to enter a home where there is a deceased person or to go in to a Beis Hakvaros (cemetery) - except for the funeral of an immediate relative. Even in such an instance, this is a one-time exemption, and the kohen could not visit the cemetery on the yahrtzeit or at any other time.

Kohanim have other halachos that are exclusive to them as well. A male kohen is not permitted to marry a divorcee, and, when the Bais Hamikdosh was standing, he needed to be very careful to avoid any form of tumah (ritual impurity) at all - since he would be eating Teruma and Kodoshim.

All in all, the Torah presents a listing of halachos that restrict and limit the activities of the kohanim - due to their elevated status as those who reside in the immediate presence to Hashem's Shechinah (Divine Presence)

AN INTERESTING QUESTION

Rav Moshe Feinstein z'tl, in his sefer Darash Moshe asks an interesting question.

Why does the Torah begin this parsha with the word Vayomer as opposed to Vayedabeir? Both words represent forms of speech. Generally speaking, however, the word vayomer represents a softer form of speech, and vayedaber represents a more firm verbal communication. Throughout the Torah, Reb Moshe points out, the term "Vayedabeir Hashem el Moshe" is used when halachic laws are being delivered. In this instance, Reb Moshe maintains, vayedabeir should surely be used - since Hashem is informing Moshe about halochos that are exceedingly difficult to keep.

Reb Moshe explains that the Kohanim were the teachers of Torah to Klal Yisroel, as it says, "Yoru mishpatecha l'Yakov - They (kohanim) should teach the halachos to Klal Yisroel" [Devorim 33:10].

A SACRED RESPONSIBILITY - AND PRIVILEGE

In order for anyone to properly transmit our mesorah, one needs to feel that the mitzvos and halachos are a privilege, not a restriction.

Hashem used the word "Vayomer" in this instance to teach us this important message. We, as the chosen people of Hashem have the privilege to observe the mitzvos of our Creator. We need to approach them with an overriding feeling of happiness, and not to view them as a voluminous listing of restrictions. In order to effectively transmit that feeling, the halachos pertaining to kohanim begin with the language of vayomer - a word that conveys simcha.

Rav Moshe points out that not only kohanim and leveyim were the teachers of Torah. According to the Rambam (Hilchos Shmitah v'Yovel 13:13), he explains, anyone can take the role of a teacher of Torah. Additionally, we teach Torah not only when learning it with others, but perhaps more importantly, by living elevated lives according to its mandates and interacting with others with a sense of Darchei Noam.

My great rebbi, Rav Avrohom Pam z'tl would often tell us during our teenage years that we all need to prepare ourselves for the sacred mission of becoming teachers of Torah. He shared with us that regardless of our professions later in life, we would need to become teachers of Torah - when Moshiach will come, bimeherah beyameinu (may he come speedily, in our times). At that time, he said, Klal Yisroel will need countless rebbeim to teach Torah to our brothers and sisters who did not have the privilege to study its halachos and lessons during their formative years.

This week's parsha teaches us how to do this - by doing the mitzvos with a sense of privilege and simcha. May we all be zoche to learn, live, and i'yh teach Torah - b'simcha u'vetuv levav.

Best wishes for a Gutten Shabbos.

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