

# Haftarot Unrolled: Emor

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## Sanctity and Continuity

Parshat Emor and the Haftarah of Emor both discuss the commandments and restrictions that apply to Cohanim, the hereditary priesthood of the Jewish People.

The Haftarah of Emor describes in detail the role that the Cohanim will have at the time of the Final Redemption. It reviews their service in the Temple and the additional restrictions that the Torah places on them both during their service and in their personal life. It describes their responsibilities to the Jewish People outside the Temple, such as teaching Torah and adjudicating Halachic issues, and it lists some of the responsibilities of the Jewish People to them, such as the gifts of Challah (first bread) and Bikurim (first fruit).

According to Parshat Emor, the additional commandments are what imparts upon the Cohanim the additional level of sanctity required for service in the Mikdash (Sanctuary). Among the verses that are addressed to them, we find the following commandment addressed to the Jewish People as a whole:

וְקִדְשְׁתוּ כִּי אֶת לֶחֶם אֱלֹהֶיךָ הוּא מִקְרִיב קֹדֶשׁ יִהְיֶה לָּךְ כִּי קֹדֶשׁ אֲנִי ה' מִקְדָּשְׁכֶם:  
You will make him sacred, because he offers up the bread of your G-d; he shall be sacred to you, for sacred am I, Hashem, who makes you sacred. (VaYikra 21:8)

As we have learned in previous Parshot, such as Kedoshim, what makes someone sacred is that they act differently than the people around them. The Jewish People have a very long list of commandments; consequently, there is an expectation that the Jewish People will have a higher level of sanctity relative to other nations. Likewise, G-d gave the Cohanim additional commandments to differentiate them from the rest of Israel, with an even higher level of sanctity. But if it is G-d who makes them sacred, as per the end of the verse, what does it mean when the very same verse says, "you will make them sacred"? In what way are we, the Jewish People, able to make the Cohanim sacred?

Rashi, distilling several Midrashim into a handful of words, explains:

וְקִדְשְׁתוּ - על כרחו, שאם לא רצה לגרש, הלקהו ויסרהו עד שיגרש  
You make him sacred: by force. If he does not wish to divorce his (illegal) wife, punish him until he does so. (Rashi Vayikra 21:8)

One might think that if a Cohen married a divorcee, which is explicitly forbidden in the Torah, then he made a personal choice, and while he may have done something wrong, it does not affect Jewish society as a whole. However, the Torah says: "You must make him sacred": the responsibility to observe the laws that are unique to Cohanim is theirs, but the responsibility to enforce them is ours.

The verse continues and says: "he shall be sacred to you". That, too, is not a mere platitude, but is expressed through action. Rashi explains:

קדש יהיה לך - נהוג בו קדושה לפתוח ראשון בכל דבר ולברך ראשון בסעודה  
He shall be sacred to you: treat him as sacred, to speak first in every situation, and to be first to make the blessings at meals. (Rashi Vayikra 21:8)

Our responsibility to keep the Cohanim sacred is expressed through the preferred treatment that we show them. Therefore, the Cohen gets the first Aliya to the Torah, and he is the first to be asked to lead Birkat HaMazon after meals. This is not much to ask; we are not obligated to defer to them in politics or business or even Torah. But this little bit is enough to embed their special status in the culture and consciousness of the Jewish People.

One might have thought that once the Temple was destroyed and the primary role of the Cohanim, to bring the offerings to Hashem, was no longer a part of Jewish life, that the sanctity of the Cohanim would disappear as well. But this has not been the case. More than three thousand years after this commandment was given, the Cohanim are still distinct among the Jewish People. This remarkable persistence is due to the sanctity of the additional commandments that the Cohanim were given, and due to the deference that the Jewish People have continued to show them. As commanded, we have made them sacred.

Ultimately, we will reach the stage of redemption described in the Haftarah, where we once again have a Temple, and need Cohanim to serve there:

הִמָּה יָבֹאוּ אֶל מִקְדָּשִׁי וְהִמָּה יִקְרְבוּ אֵלַי שְׁלֹחֵנִי לְשִׁרְתִּנִּי וְשֹׁמְרֵי אֶת מִשְׁמֶרְתִּי:  
They will enter into My sanctuary, and they will come near My table to serve Me, and they will keep My charge. (Yechezkel 44:116)

At that time, there will still be Cohanim, distinct and sacred among the Jewish People.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l

לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל