

TORAH WEEKLY



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Parshas Kedoshim | May 10, 2024 | Volume 25 | Issue 29

National Priesttime

By: Rabbi Yaakov Zions (Originally Published 2016)

Many a time, a naturally-gifted orator and brilliant scholar has left his audience bewildered and confused due to his or her inability to keep focused on the topic at hand. Too much information unrelated to the general theme is enough to provide mental indigestion. What then, can we ask, is the wisdom behind the seemingly unrelated topics that we find in the Book of Vayikra? Our Sages refer to the Book of Vayikra as Toras Kohanim, Laws of Priests, but the laws of the Tabernacle, its kohanim (priests) and offerings are by no means the only topics discussed therein. Our parsha is a prime example of this phenomenon. We find many interpersonal laws, some sacrificial laws and the conclusion of the parsha that focuses on forbidden unions. The question begs to be asked: What's the connection?

The story is told about Rabbi Yerucham Levovitz (1873-1936), legendary mashgiach (spiritual overseer) of the yeshiva of pre-WWII Mir, Poland. Some of the students in the yeshiva returned for the new semester riding bicycles, which at the time were considered frivolous. Rabbi Levovitz asked them to return home! He then explained his demand, using Parshas Emor (next week's Torah reading) as his source. Parshas Emor begins with special laws regarding kohanim, proceeds to discuss laws of invalidating blemishes of animal offerings, continues on to kiddush Hashem (the general obligation to sanctify Hashem's Name) and then goes on to Jewish holidays. This parsha teaches us, said Rabbi Levovitz, that not all people, places and times are equal. Special emphasis is placed on the kohanim because of their special status in the Jewish Nation. Animals earmarked for offerings need to be blemish-free, and there are situations in our lives that oblige us to sanctify G-d's Name. Festivals are times that require extra measures of observance among every member of the Tribe. A yeshiva, as well, continued Rabbi Levovitz, requires a different attitude, and entering a yeshiva as one does on vacation is grossly improper.

Extending this concept slightly further, we can try to understand the basis of the entire Book of Vayikra. Our nation is referred to (in Shemos 19:6) as "mamleches kohanim" - a kingdom of priests. This means that we are all, to some extent, in a special category which requires special appreciation and care. Actual kohanim are even more unique, and have their own guidelines which accompany their special status. However, in a general sense, it may be that the Book of Vayikra is the one which sets the tone for a broader Toras Kohanim, the laws of the entire Jewish People, who are to be a mamleches kohanim in general - not just the actual kohanim who served in the Mishkan (Tabernacle). The diverse topics of our parsha, and that of the entire Book of Vayikra, are the necessary processes in the formation of our people into Hashem's special nation!

During these days, as we count toward the Holiday of the Giving of the Torah, Shavuot, I'd like to add a fascinating end-note to the aforementioned idea. The Gemara (Horayos 13a) rules that one must honor a mamzer talmid chacham, a Torah scholar whose birth was through an illegitimate union, even more than a Kohen Gadol (High Priest) who is an ignoramus! This is derived from the verse (Proverbs 3:15) which describes Torah as more valuable than "peninim" (literally: pearls). The Sages homiletically interpret peninim as referring to "He who goes in lifnai v'lifnim," into the innermost section of the Temple. This refers to the Holy of Holies, which was only entered by the Kohen Gadol as part of the Yom Kippur service. It has been noted that the Kohen Gadol's entrance into the Holy of Holies is the paradigm of the three measurements of holiness: person, place and time. Yet, the holiest human being in the holiest place in the world on the holiest day of the year pales in contrast to a person of less-than-ideal origins whose existence has been transformed into a spiritual one through Torah study. May we merit to continue gaining holiness with our study of Torah and performance of mitzvos.

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Rabbi Yaakov Zions

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