

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



WHO IS THE PRIEST “WHO WILL BE IN THOSE DAYS”?

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Devarim 26:3 reads:

ובאת אל הכהן אשר יהיה בימים ההם

you will come to the priest who will be in those days

Leaving aside the possibility of time-travel, why does the Torah bother instructing us to bring bikkurim (first fruits of the Seven Species) to a kohen “who will be in those days”?

An almost identical expression occurs in Devarim 17:9 in the context of legal judgment:

ובאת אל הכהנים הלוים ולאל השופט אשר יהיה בימים ההם

you will come to the priests who are Levites and to the judge who will be in those days

The standard explanation of the phrase there is that it discourages nostalgia—the judge of your time is your legitimate Torah authority, even if you remember much greater leaders. Rosh HaShanah 26a states:

שקל הכתוב שלשה קליע עולם כשלשה חמורין עולם

ירובעל בדורו נמשה בדורו

בזן בדורו נאהרין בדורו

יפתח בדורו נשמעאל בדורו

Scripture equated three ultimate lightweights with three ultimate heavyweights:

Yeruba'al (Gid'on) in his generation as Moshe in his generation; B'Dan (Shimshon) in his generation as Aharon in his generation;

Yiftach in his generation as Shmuel in his generation

Perhaps “who will be in those days” has the same implication here. This fundamentally is the approach of Seforno. But while it is in some sense possible to hand legal decision-making over to the past—by binding present judges absolutely to precedent, or by deciding for oneself on the basis of precedent—a past kohen cannot lift a present basket

of grain. (Think of the distinction between giving a disembodied soul an aliyah, and giving the same disembodied soul hagbah)

Ramban also interprets “the kohen who will be in those days” as excluding a kohen who will be in other days, but applies it entirely differently. The entire group of kohanim was divided into 24 mishmarot (watches), with each serving a week and then waiting 24 weeks for their next turn. The verse tells us that it is illegitimate to time one's arrival in Yerushalayim so that a particular mishmar will be on duty.

Perhaps the most common Rabbinic interpretation of the phrase is purely halakhic. How do we know that if a kohen is in the process of bringing a sacrifice, and it is suddenly discovered that he is invalid to serve, that what he has done to this point is valid? “A kohen in those days”—even if in subsequent days if it is discovered that he was an invalid kohen throughout.

This interpretation has generated a fascinating and voluminous literature. Is this true about all priestly service, or only (specific elements) of the Temple Service? Is it true of all disqualifications, or only to those of lineage, those that apply only to kohanim, etc.? Discovered by whom—the kohen himself, the owner of the sacrifice, or a court with proper jurisdiction?

The Rogotchover Gaon, for example, thought that terumah (an agricultural tax given to a kohen) given to a kohen remains validly given even if that kohen is subsequently invalidated, but this is not so for items such as the **ראשית הגז** = the first shearing (which must be given to a kohen). His argument was that terumah is separated and acquires its legal

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identity before being given to the kohen, whereas the shearings acquire their legal identity at the very same moment that they are given to the kohen.

These legal conversations generally lack considerations of why a particular rule might or might not be a good idea. In a more pragmatic mode, G-d, Chazal, and we should all consider the consequences of allowing an error of fact about the status of a kohen to yield a reversal of law, and conversely the consequences of validating an action known to have been performed by an invalid kohen. One reason to validate sacrifices might be that sacrifices accomplish atonement, and one purpose of atonement is closure. Allowing for retroactive invalidation would mean that those people inclined to obsession would never be able to let go of their sins.

Chatam Sofer offers a possibly radical counterreading. “The kohen who will be in your day” is not contrasted with kohanim of past days, but rather with kohanim whose priestly status depends on their genealogy rather than on their character. The kohen of the verse is superior rather than inferior. This seems peculiar, as priesthood cannot be earned halakhically. Understanding Chatam Sofer requires putting this detail of his interpretation in its context.

נ"ל כי התורה מדבר עם צדיקים גמורים שאיןם אוכלים בזכות
אבות

כי הם עצם כדאים

והכהן הוא מעצמו ראוי בלי זכותו ויחוסו של אחרן

ע"כ: ובאת אל הכהן אשר יהיה ביוםיהם ההם

לא מיימים קדמוניהם מימי אהרן, אלא ביוםיהם ההם הוא ראוי להיות כהן

וכן עניין מקריא בכורדים שמספר חסדי ה

כי בהיותם במצרים בלי שום זכות ומצוות

ךק "ונצעק אך ה' אלקינו" ובזכות זה נגאלנו

ועתה... "זכית כי... הבהיר ראשית פרי הארץ אשר נתת לי ה"

בזכות עצמי בלי זכות אבותינו

"ושנהת בכל הטוב אשר נתן ה' לך" – ז"ק... א... א... א...

It appears to me that the Torah is speaking with completely righteous people who do not eat in the merit of their ancestors,

but rather they are themselves worthy,

and the kohen is himself worthy, without the merit and ancestry of

Abaron –

therefore "you will come to the kohen who will be in those days" -

not from previous days, the days of Abaron, but rather in those days

he is worthy of being a kohen,

and the bikkurim declaration means the same, that he is telling

Hashem's acts of grace

because when they were in Mitzrayim without any merit or mitzvot, only "and we cried out to Hashem the Gd of our fathers" and we were redeemed in that merit, but "now behold I have brought the first of the fruits of the land which You have given me Hashem" -

in my own merit, without the merit of our ancestors,

"and you will rejoice in all the good that Hashem your G-d has given to you and to your household" - read it with precision.

Chatam Sofer apparently read the entire passage non-normatively, as dealing with both a kohen and a farmer who are completely righteous. The purpose of the farmer's declaration is to contrast himself with the generation of the Exodus. They were redeemed solely because they called on the G-d of their fathers, who responded out of his love for their ancestors, but he has earned these fruits entirely on his own. This reading captures well the sense of spiritual self-assurance that pervades the bikkurim ritual, especially the narrator's constant reference to Hashem as the G-d of the farmer, and the farmer's reference to Him as the G-d of the specific kohen present. But I confess complete bafflement as to why it matters that the kohen as well be completely righteous, or why this is the true meaning of a ritual that is halakhically obligatory on every farmer regardless of their personal virtues and vices.

Rashi's interpretation is enigmatic and opaque - “The kohen who will be in those days - **כמוות שהוא** = as he is.” One possible understanding is found in the following story:

The Lubliner Rav (R. Meir Shapiro) once visited the Chofetz Chayim (R. Yisroel Meir HaKohen) for Shabbat. He naturally asked the Chofetz Chayim to say some words of Torah, but the latter declined, pleading that ill-health made him unfit. The Lubliner responded by quoting Rashi - "as he is." The Chofetz Chayim chuckled and began speaking words of Torah.

There is tremendous beauty in past glory, and the Rabbis say that Moshe placed the broken tablets in the Ark alongside the whole tablets to teach us that scholars whose capacities have waned must still be treated with respect. But it is nonetheless vital to distinguish the broken from the whole, and not grant authority even as we listen reverently to Torah pronouncements from great scholars whose lights have failed. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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