

## **Message from the Parsha**

*Rabbi Katriel (Kenneth) Brander*

### **Kohanim and Prophets; Continuity and Creativity**

The audience of the opening of Parshat Emor is not the Jewish people in its entirety, but rather the Kohanim - starting with and descending from Aharon, who were designated to serve first in the Mishkan, and eventually in the Beit HaMikdash. Their set of responsibilities entailed a strict set of rituals, performed while dressed in intricate symbolic vestments, following rules ensconced in the Oral Tradition passed down from one generation to the next through the kohanic chain. What's more, the Torah (D'varim 33:10) attributes to the Kohanim responsibility for teaching the Torah - thus ensuring the continuity of the traditions received from our forebears.

A markedly different role is assigned to the prophets, another set of leaders in the early history of the Jewish people. Prophets, unlike kohanim, require no particular lineage. A prophet, like David, could emerge from the controversial lineage of Ruth, a Moabite descending from the incestuous relationship between Lot and one of his daughters. A prophet/prophetess has no need to don special vestments, and there are no rituals of purification needed in order to prophesy.

In fact, there is no one script for what prophesying looks like, or the circumstances in which it might take place. In contrast to the highly traditional character of the kohanic worship, prophets would speak to the moment, formulating, through the vehicle of divine inspiration, contemporary messages that needed to be heard by that generation in that moment.

While the service in the Beit HaMikdash was fixed and consistent, the world of prophecy was by its very nature dynamic. The prophecies of Yishayahu bemoaned the fact that ritual had become robotic, heartless and devoid of any purposeful spiritual voice (Yishayahu 1:11). Later prophets introduced new messages that God wished to convey to the Jewish people, such as the establishment of the holiday of Purim, a prototype for rabbinic holidays that may be established to celebrate the redemption of Knesset Yisroel.

The kohanim and the prophets represent two symbiotic elements of our religious lives and leadership, reflecting the balance between continuity and creativity. Absent either of these ingredients, our religious lives would quickly deteriorate. A Judaism with no grounding in our history and tradition, without the anchor of our past to guide us forward, would be a Judaism that is lost in the world, so eager to reinvent itself that it would lose its core mission and identity. Yet on the other hand, a Judaism made up only of fixed rituals,

**with no ability within halacha to deal with new situations, new questions and possibilities, would cause Judaism to become but a dead replica of a tradition once so rich in purpose and idealism.**

**We are always in need of both models - yet acutely so in this particular moment of Jewish history. We must double down on our commitment to our Tradition, even as we continue to push ourselves to interact and respond to current challenges, for the sake of the future of the Jewish people.**