

## Message from the Haftara

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## Living as a Holy Nation

### VAYIKRa

This coming Shabbat, we find ourselves beginning the book of Vayikra, or, as Chazal referred to it, “Torat Kohanim”, ‘the law of the kohanim.’ At first glance, this is a fitting title for Vayikra, whose opening parshiyot focus almost exclusively on the rules governing the sacrificial rites performed in the Mishkan, under the auspices of the Kohanim. The Torah first presents the guidelines for offering the various types of sacrifices, then relates the story of the consecration of the Mishkan, and, finally, lays out the rules governing ritual purity, a criterion for entering the Temple premises.

But as we move further through Vayikra, we begin to see a broader range of rules that affect the entire Jewish people. These include laws governing the norms and mores of interacting with other members of society, the laws for holiday observance, Sh'mita, and more. Even the book’s later Temple-focused portions are not directed exclusively to the Kohanim; the Torah offers

instructions regarding sacrificial and purification norms governing non-kohen Jews as well. Why, then, is the book nonetheless referred to as TORAT KOHANIM?

Perhaps the answer lies in a broader understanding of the term ‘kohanim’. While the Torah generally reserves the term for the priestly caste descended from Aharon, in truth the entire Jewish people is a MAMLECHET KOHANIM, ‘a kingdom of kohanim’ (Sh'mot 19:6). The book of Vayikra, with its focus on law rather than on narrative, offers a blueprint of what it means for the Jewish people to function as a sacred society, as a community of kohanim.

All the elements of Sefer Vayikra – from the Temple offerings to the prohibitions of incest, from holiday observance to loving our neighbor – contribute to the tapestry of sacred living the Torah demands of the Jewish people. Yet it is so easy to mistake the trees for the forest. Our capacity to be a kingdom of kohanim, to live out the vision of Torat Kohanim, is predicated not just on following a long list of rules, but on maintaining deep faith, ensuring that the many rules and regulations serve as a pathway towards, not away from, closeness with God.

This idea is emphasized in the haftara that accompanies the opening parsha of Vayikra. Like so many passages in

the books of the prophets, this week's haftara warns against the sacrificial rite becoming a pathway towards idolatry, with the offerings directed towards foreign deities. Yeshayahu rails against the Jews' idolatry, offering worship and gifts to the work of their own hands. For the prophet, this behavior is not merely treasonous; it's downright foolish. "Who would fashion a god or cast a statue that can do no good?" (44:10). In fact, to do so seems so ludicrous that it's hard to imagine how so many ancient Israelites could have fallen prey to idolatry.

Yet, with more reflection it is possible to understand how they veered so far off the path. It is not so different from the challenges we face today, including the temptation to fall into the habits of following mitzvot as a rote process rather than living out their true spiritual nature empowering our journey with God. When mitzvot are just performed through habitual repetition or a desire to please others with the strictness of our observance, they become disconnected from the divine and we also become disconnected from the divine. This undermines the very purpose of the Torah's commandments set out in the Torah, and can lead us astray on our spiritual paths.

As we prepare for Pesach, a time of national renewal and redemption, we

should reflect on what it means to be a MAMLECHET KOHANIM. Just as we rid our homes of chametz, we must also clear our hearts of mechanical mitzva observance and embrace the deeper spiritual essence of our divine service.

We should remember that each of us has the ability, both in the private and all the more so in the public sphere, to sanctify God's name through meaningful Torah observance. If we succeed, we will truly merit to fulfill our calling as a MAMLECHET KOHANIM and a holy nation, V'GOI KADOSH. 🌍