

## Message from the Haftara

*Rabbi Katriel (Kenneth) Brander  
President and Rosh HaYeshiva  
Ohr Torah Stone Institutions*

# A Kehuna Still Becoming

## EMOR

The connection between Parshat Emor and its haftara is immediately apparent. Both texts center on the life of the kohen – his marriage, his conduct, his vestments, his relationship to ritual impurity and to Temple service. Yechezkel’s vision of the Third Temple (Yechezkel 44) in the haftara mirrors the legislation of this parsha, especially Vayikra 21, in striking ways. Yet for the attentive reader, that mirror also distorts, as there are several discrepancies between the two texts. And surprisingly, it is that distortion that carries one of the haftara’s most important messages for our own time.

The textual discrepancies are numerous. The Torah in Parshat Emor prohibits a kohen from marrying a divorcee (Vayikra 21:7). Yechezkel extends that prohibition to widows as well, permitting only the widow of another kohen as an exception (Yechezkel 44:22). Regarding ritual impurity, Vayikra 21:2 permits a kohen to become impure through attending burial services for his wife

and all first-degree relatives. Yet the corresponding passage in the haftara (Yechezkel 44:25) only lists a parent, a child, a brother, and an unmarried sister, and is silent about a wife. The implication is difficult to avoid: In the world of the Third Temple, a kohen would not be permitted to contract ritual impurity even for a married sister, and perhaps not even for his wife.

The differences continue. The Torah’s kohanic vestments incorporate a weave of wool and linen – shaatnez – a prohibition waived only for the kohanim (Rambam, Mishneh Torah, K’lei HaMikdash 8:11). This exception has long drawn the attention of commentators. Yet Yechezkel describes kohanic vestments made only of linen (Yechezkel 44:17).

Across kohanic life – marriage, impurity, dress, and conduct – Yechezkel’s Third Temple is simply more demanding than the Torah’s own provisions. How are we to understand this?

The Talmud itself grapples with these apparent contradictions between Yechezkel’s vision and the Torah’s commandments. In more than one place (Shabbat 13b; Menachot 45a; Chagiga 13a), it records that the Sages considered removing Yechezkel from the Tanach – due to these tensions. What ultimately preserved it was the extraordinary effort of a single scholar: Chananya ben

Chizkiya, who secluded himself in his attic and labored by lamplight – sustained, the Gemara tells us, by three hundred jugs of oil – to reconcile the prophetic text with the Torah’s commandments. Yet the Gemara never reveals how he resolved these contradictions, including those found in our haftara.

Several major commentators propose a compelling and illuminating approach: What Yechezkel describes is not a revision of the Torah, but a vision of its elevation. R' David Kimchi, (Radak, Yechezkel 44:21–22), identifies a heightened standard of kedusha that will characterize the Third Temple period. This is not abrogation; it is development, a deepening of holiness appropriate to a world that has itself grown spiritually.

R. Meir Leibush ben Yehiel Michel Wisser, (Malbim, verse 17), frames the same idea in broader terms: As human beings deepen their capacity for spiritual engagement, the kohanim who serve as their representatives must rise accordingly. The external expressions of the kohen’s role – whom he may marry, how he dresses, how he presents himself to the world – reflect the inner spiritual reality he is meant to embody. As the people ascend, so too must those who stand at their spiritual vanguard.

This is not a model of imposition from above, but of organic growth from

within. A society that rises spiritually will naturally demand more of those who lead it.

And here is where the haftara speaks beyond the kohanim to every one of us. In Jewish tradition, the kohen is not merely a Temple functionary; he is a representative of the nation’s deepest aspirations. The Torah defined that calling at Sinai: MAMLECHET KOHANIM V'GOI KADOSH – “a kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation” (Sh'mot 19:6). If the kohanim of the Third Temple are held to a higher standard, it is because the people they represent have themselves grown. The kohen’s elevated kedusha becomes a mirror of the nation’s spiritual journey, and an invitation to us all.

We live in a moment when the temptation is often to manage expectations downward – to ask less of ourselves and our communities in the name of pragmatism or accommodation. Yechezkel’s vision, and the commentators who illuminate it, point in a different direction. The trajectory of Jewish life, as imagined by the prophets, is not toward diminishment but toward ascent. We are a people still becoming a kingdom of kohanim, and each generation is called to carry that becoming further forward. 