

Spotlight on...Mamlechet Kohanim

Background:

This week we read Parashat Yitro, which includes the Ten Commandments. Before the Israelites prepare for Matan Torah, God speaks to Moshe and instructs him to say to the Israelites (Exodus 19:4-6):

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| <p>4 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me.</p> <p>5 Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine,</p> <p>6 but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel."</p> | <p>אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתִי לְמִצְרַיִם וְאֲשָׂא אֶתְכֶם עַל-כְּנָפֵי נְשָׁרִים וְאָבֵא אֶתְכֶם אֵלַי: וְעַתָּה אִם-שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹלִי וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת- בְּרִיתִי וְהָיִיתֶם לִי סֻגְלָה מִכָּל-הָעַמִּים כִּי-לִי כָל-הָאָרֶץ: וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ-לִי מִמְלַכֶת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ אֵלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:</p> |
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Each of these pesukim contains mysterious language. Why does God use the imagery of eagles' wings? What does God mean when God refers to the Israelites as an "segulah", or a "treasured possession"? And why does God say that we will be a "mamlechet kohanim," or "kingdom of priests?" There is a lot to say about each of these phrases and what they could mean.

This week we will focus on mamlechet kohanim. Before we look at the mefarshim let's focus on the pasuk itself. God refers to the Israelites with two terms - mamlechet kohanim, and goy kadosh (holy nation). Calling us a goy kadosh makes sense because God commands us many times to be kadosh. But mamlechet kohanim seems strange. Why does God describe us a kingdom? And why kohanim? We know that only a small fraction of Jews are kohanim, so why does God refer to us all as kohanim?

The mefarshim struggle with these same questions. Rashi defines kohanim here as שָׂרִים, or princes. Ramban defines kohanim as משרתי, or God's servants - the opposite of princes! Shadal takes a subjective perspective. He explains that at that time, the nations of the world believed that priests were beloved by their gods, and that their gods therefore did whatever the priests desired. Therefore, by calling the entire nation kohanim, God was conveying to the Israelites that God would be close to **all** of them, as though they were all kohanim.

Questions:

1. According to Rashi's explanation, what message is God trying to convey to the people? What relationship should they strive to have with God?
2. According to the Ramban's explanation, what message is God trying to convey to the people? What relationship should they strive to have with God?
3. According to the Shadal's explanation, what message is God trying to convey to the people? Does this message actually affect their relationship?

BONUS QUESTION: Name at least two people in the Torah who are not Jewish and referred to as kohanim. Email your answer to MaharatRuth@ostns.org to win free ice cream!