**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT EMOR**

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**Korach’s Fingerprints in the Book of Vayikra**

**Rav Gad Eldad**

The style of the beginning of *Parashat Emor* is unique and striking in its cumbersome formulation, which contains a two-fold appeal to the priests:[[1]](#footnote-1)

And the Lord said to Moshe: **Say to the priests,** the sons of Aharon, **and say to them**: None shall defile himself for the dead among his people; except for his kin, that is near to him, for his mother, and for his father, and for his son, and for his daughter, and for his brother; and for his sister a virgin, that is near to him, that has had no husband, for her may he defile himself. He shall not defile himself, being a master among his people, to desecrate himself. They shall not make baldness upon their head, neither shall they shave off the corners of their beard, nor make any cuttings in their flesh. They shall be holy to their God, and not desecrate the name of their God; for the offerings of the Lord made by fire, the bread of their God, they do offer; therefore they shall be holy.

They shall not take a woman that is a harlot, or desecrated; neither shall they take a woman sent away from her husband; for he is holy to his God. You shall sanctify him therefore; for he offers the bread of your God; he shall be holy to you; for I the Lord, who sanctify you, am holy. And the daughter of any priest, if she desecrate herself by playing the harlot, she desecrates her father: she shall be burnt with fire. (*Vayikra* 21:1-9)

The difficulty deepens as we continue to read. A simple reading suggests that the section is directed toward the priests, for it starts with the words: "And say to them," and it specifies the various prohibitions that are unique to the priesthood. However, if this were the case, we would expect the Torah to shift into the second person, as we find in several places in the book:[[2]](#footnote-2)

1. And the Lord called to Moshe, and spoke to him out of the tent of meeting, saying: Speak to the Israelites, and say to them: When any man of you brings an offering to the Lord, **you shall bring** your offering of the cattle, even of the herd or of the flock. (*Vayikra* 1:1-2)

2. And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to the Israelites, and say to them: I am the Lord **your God**. After the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, **shall you not do**; and after the doings of the land of Canaan, where I bring you, **shall you not do**; neither shall you walk in their statutes. (*Vayikra* 18:1-2)

3. And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the Israelites, and say to them: **You shall be** holy; for I the Lord **your God** am holy. **You shall fear** every man his mother and his father, **and you shall keep** My sabbaths: I am the Lord **your God**. (*Vayikra* 19:1-3)[[3]](#footnote-3)

In our *parasha*, on the other hand, despite the opening, "And say to them," the Torah continues to address the priests in third person: "None shall defile **himself** for the dead among **his** people," when we would have expected it to command: **You** shall not defile **yourselves** for the dead among your people. Only toward the end of the passage are we witness to a sudden change to the second-person form, and to our surprise it turns out that the addressees are the rest of the people, specifically those who are not priests:

**You shall sanctify him** therefore; for he offers the bread of your God; he shall be **holy to you**; for I the Lord, **who sanctify you**, am holy.

To summarize, the reader remains perplexed regarding the addressee, the party to whom the section is directed. The beginning of the section seems to be directed toward the priests, whereas the end of the section appears to be directed toward the rest of the people.

**“Say to the Priests”**

I would like to suggest another reading of the opening verse. To that end, we will consider some other verses (emphasis mine):

And Avraham journeyed from there toward the land of the South, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar. **And Avraham said *el* Sara his wife:** She is my sister. And Avimelekh, king of Gerar, sent and took Sara. (*Bereishit* 20:1-2)

Rashi explains (ad loc. as do ibn Ezra and others):

"*El* Sara his wife" — **in reference to Sara his wife.** And similarly: "In reference to (*el*) the ark of God being taken and in reference to (*el*) her father-in-law" (*I Shemuel* 4:19), where the word *el*, in both cases, has the same meaning as *al*.

Thus, even though *el* (spelled *alef-lamed*) usually means “to,” it may also be a synonym for “*al*” (spelled *ayin-lamed*) — upon, regarding, about. We find this meaning elsewhere as well:

And Moshe said to the Lord: When the Egyptians shall hear — for You brought up this people in Your might from among them — **they will say *el* the inhabitants of this land,** who have heard that You Lord are in the midst of this people; inasmuch as You, Lord, are seen face to face, and Your cloud stands over them, and You go before them, in a pillar of cloud by day, and in a pillar of fire by night; now if You shall kill this people as one man, then will say the nations which have heard the fame of You, saying: Because the Lord was unable to bring this people into the land which He swore to them, therefore He has slain them in the wilderness. (*Bamidbar* 14:13-16)

Rashi explains (v. 14):

"They will say *el* the inhabitants of this land" – which is the same as **"concerning (*al*) the inhabitants of this land."** What will they say concerning them? That which is stated at the end of the paragraph: "Because the Lord was unable."

We see then that the word *el* sometimes bears the meaning of: in reference to, concerning.[[4]](#footnote-4) I would like to adopt this understanding in our verse. God's formulation in his words to Moshe, "**Say *el* the priests,** the sons of Aharon, **and say to [the Israelites]:** None shall defile himself for the dead among his people," is not a redundancy. Rather it is a command to speak concerning the priests. What this means is that Moshe should speak to Israel about the priests and tell them their law, beginning with: "None shall defile himself for the dead among his people."

Having solved the first difficulty, let us move on to the next one. Why is the command to the priests not formulated in the second person, as we find in other places?

As was already noted, at the end of the passage we do indeed find direct speech in the second person:

**You shall sanctify him** therefore; for he offers the bread of your God; he shall be holy to you; for I the Lord, **who sanctify you,** am holy.

In retrospect, it turns out that the entire passage is in fact directed to the people, and the details of the laws pertaining to the priests are only an introduction and an offering of a rationale for the command that closes the passage, namely, the obligation to sanctify the priests which falls on the people. Now, this might be the reason that the statement "and say to them" does not introduce a command in the second person, because here Moshe reveals to the people the command that he will in the future give to the priests, whereas at this point these verses are directed toward the people, and not toward the priests.

However, we must still try to understand why the whole passage is formulated in such a complex and abstruse manner. Why are the priests and the people mixed up together in deliberate obscurity?

**“You Shall Be Holy, For I the Lord Your God Am Holy”**

Let us now look at the structure of the Book of *Vayikra* from a bird's-eye view. The book opens with a detailed description of the laws governing the sacrifices and an account of the dedication of the Tabernacleand those who serve in it. From Chapter 12 and on, it deals with the laws of purity and impurity that apply to the people, and with those who must purify themselves in the Tabernacle by way of the priests who serve in it. Then in Chapter 15, it returns to the sacrificial service, this time to the rites that must be performed when the high priest enters the Holy of Holies. Then the Torah directs its attention to the people with a series of commandments under the following heading:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to all the congregation of the Israelites, and say to them: **You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy.** (*Vayikra* 19:1-2)

Over the course of the presentation of the laws, emphasis continues to be placed on the motif of the holiness that is implanted in the people:

**Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be you holy;** for I am the Lord your God. And keep you My statutes, and do them: **I am the Lord Who sanctifies you.** (*Vayikra* 20:7-8)

The series of commandments concludes in a manner similar to the way it begins, pointing to the motif of the sanctity of the people:

You shall therefore separate between the pure beast and the impure, and between the impure fowl and the pure; and you shall not make your souls detestable by beast, or by fowl, or by anything wherewith the ground teems, which I have set apart for you to hold impure. **And you shall be holy to Me; for I the Lord am holy,** and have set you apart from the peoples, that you should be Mine. (*Vayikra* 20:25-26)

Immediately after these verses comes our *parasha*:

And the Lord said to Moshe: Say about the priests, the sons of Aharon, and say to [the Israelites]: None shall defile himself for the dead among his people… **They shall be holy to their God,** and not desecrate the name of their God; for the offerings of the Lord made by fire, the bread of their God, they do offer; **therefore they shall be holy.** (*Vayikra* 21:1-6)

The reader who has followed the book from the beginning might now be troubled by a question, which will later reverberate in the voice of Korach and his company:

You take too much upon you, **seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them;** why then do you lift yourselves up above the assembly of the Lord? (*Bamidbar* 16:3)

After the Torah, in the chapters dealing with the sacrifices, implants within its readers the idea of the priesthood and their service, it continues with commandments the purpose of which is to instill within the people the notion that they are holy, because "I am the Lord Who sanctifies you." Still, in light of this, what appears later contradicts what is stated earlier, and Korach's argument is liable to arise by itself. If indeed the people are holy, a doubt arises as to the need for the sanctity of the priests, which now appears superfluous. What is the relationship between "And you shall be holy to Me" which is now stated to the people, and "They shall be holy to their God," which relates exclusively to the priests? Is it possible that Korach alone notes this difficulty? Does the Torah itself not deal with this question?

**“For I the Lord, Who Sanctify You, Am Holy.”**

Let us try once again to read the beginning of our *parasha* from the perspective that we have proposed:

And the Lord said to Moshe: Say about the priests, the sons of Aharon, and say to [the Israelites]: None shall defile himself for the dead among his people; except for his kin, that is near to him, for his mother, and for his father, and for his son, and for his daughter, and for his brother… **They shall be holy to their God,** and not desecrate the name of their God; for the offerings of the Lord made by fire, the bread of their God, they do offer; **therefore they shall be holy.**

They shall not take a woman that is a harlot, or desecrated; neither shall they take a woman put away from her husband; **for he is holy to his God.**

Moshe turns to the people of Israel and updates them about the laws governing the priests that stem from their holiness. All this, however, is merely a preamble which is meant to lay the groundwork for what he says to the people at the end of the passage:

**You** **shall sanctify him therefore;** for he offers the bread of your God; **he shall be holy to you; for I the Lord, who sanctify you, am holy.**

The conclusion of the passage is surprising. The priests must conduct themselves with holiness, because they are supposed to be holy, but how do they become holy to their God?

In contrast to the high priest in the following passage, where the Torah (*Vayikra* 21:15) asserts that his holiness comes straight from God —

And he shall not desecrate his seed among his people; **for I am the Lord Who sanctifies him** —

the holiness of the priests in general has a completely different configuration:

**You** **shall sanctify him therefore;** for he offers the bread of your God; **he shall be holy to you; for I the Lord, who sanctify you, am holy.**

The sanctification of the priests is attributed not to God, but to the people, whereas God identifies Himself as He who sanctifies the people. Furthermore, the Torah justifies its command to sanctify the priest with precisely the same rationale that it uses earlier to describe his holiness, using the identical formulation in verses 6 and 8:

They shall be holy to their God, and not desecrate the name of their God; **for the offerings of the Lord made by fire, the bread of their God, they do offer;** therefore they shall be holy.

You shall sanctify him therefore; **for he offers the bread of your God;** he shall be holy to you; for I the Lord, who sanctify you, am holy.

In this way, the Torah seeks to catch the eyes of the readers so that they put the two things together, and, according to our suggestion, what we have here is a relationship of cause and effect. The priest merits holiness because he offers the bread of God, but he is sanctified by the people who recognize this.

It turns out that Moshe is addressing the people and clarifying to them: You "Israel" are the source of the priest's sanctity, in that it is you who sanctify him. As it were, were it not for the people who sanctify the priests, their sanctity would be defective. The basis for the holiness of the priest is their being sanctified by the people.

This is the Torah's between-the-lines answer to the arguments the likes of which are raised by Korach and his company. The priests do not lift themselves up, and they cannot lift themselves up, as it is the people who lift them up, since the priests’ sanctity derives from the people. The question of who is more holy now becomes superfluous, as we discover that we are dealing with a closed circle. The priests do indeed bear roles that require more sacred conduct, but their meriting sanctity is possible only because of the people who back them and nurture their holiness.

**“I Am the Lord Who Sanctifies You”**

The concluding verses of the next sections end with the identical words, even though they relate to different maters. Immediately after presenting the laws governing the high priest, the Torah turns to Aharon and commands him that no man with a blemish be permitted to approach the altar. The rationale at the end of the section is that God sanctifies the sanctuary, and therefore its holiness must be preserved:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to Aharon, saying: Whoever he be of your seed throughout their generations that has a blemish, let him not approach to offer the bread of his God…

He may eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy, and of the holy. Only he shall not go in to the veil, nor come near to the altar, because he has a blemish; **that he desecrate not My holy places; for I am the Lord Who sanctifies them.** (*Vayikra* 21:16-23)**.**

The phrase repeats itself two more times in consecutive passages in Chapter 22:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to Aharon and to his sons, that they separate themselves from the holy things of the Israelites, which they sanctify to Me, and that they desecrate not My holy name: I am the Lord. Say to them: Whoever he be of all your seed throughout your generations, that approaches to the holy things, which the Israelites sanctify to the Lord, having his impurity upon him, that soul shall be cut off from before Me…

They shall therefore keep My charge, lest they bear sin for it, and die therein, if they desecrate it: **I am the Lord Who sanctifies them.**

No stranger shall eat of the holy thing; a tenant of a priest, or a hired servant, shall not eat of the holy thing. But if a priest buys any soul, the purchase of his money, he may eat of it; and such as are born in his house, they may eat of his bread. And if a priest's daughter be married to a stranger, she shall not eat of that which is set apart from the holy things…

And if a man eats of the holy thing through error, then he shall put the fifth part thereof to it, and shall give to the priest the holy thing. And they shall not desecrate the holy things of the Israelites, which they set apart to the Lord; and so cause them to bear the iniquity that brings guilt, when they eat their holy things; **for I am the Lord Who sanctifies them.** (*Vayikra* 22:1-16)

According to the plain meaning of the text, the second instance of the phrase relates to the holy things of the people of Israel, whom God sanctifies. The previous instance of the phrase can be understood as referring to the priests, whom God sanctifies. Such an interpretation calls into question everything we have tried to build.

However, we find commentators who do not explain this as referring to the priests:

"For I am the Lord Who sanctifies them" — **I sanctified those holy things,** because Israel sanctified them, and the priests deserve to be punished for defiling them. (*Seforno*, v. 9)

Another reason for preferring this understanding is precisely the fact that this phrase appears in the continuation, where it clearly relates to the holy things of Israel. This is also the understanding of the *Meshekh Chokhma* (v. 9), who in passing confirms the conclusions of our study (emphasis mine):

"And die therein, if they desecrate it: I am the Lord Who sanctifies them." This means: Who sanctifies the holy things, as is written below in v. 16: "And so cause them to bear the iniquity that brings guilt, when they eat their holy things; for I am the Lord Who sanctifies them"; and above: "That he desecrate not My holy places; for I am the Lord Who sanctifies them" (*Vayikra* 21:23), where it relates to the holy things.

Rav, however, maintains (BT *Sanhedrin* 83b) that it relates to the priests, that God sanctifies the priests. Therefore, owing to the magnitude of their sanctity, their sin is severe, for he eats *teruma* in a state of ritual impurity and is liable for death. But a non-priest who eats of the holy, namely *teruma*, only violates a negative commandment. This is the opinion of Rav.

However, we hold not in accordance with him, **because we do not find that [God] sanctifies the priests; it only says that Israel should sanctify them and that God sanctifies Israel. This is what is stated: "You shall sanctify him therefore; for he offers the bread of our God; he shall be holy to you, for I the Lord Who sanctifies you am holy" (*Vayikra* 21:8). Only regarding the high priest, who substitutes for Aharon, is it written: "For I am the Lord Who sanctifies him" (*Vayikra* 21:15).**

Therefore the bullock of the anointed priest (*Vayikra* 4:3-12) and the bullock of the congregation (*Vayikra* 4:13-21) are equal for atonement, for regarding both of them it is mentioned that God sanctifies them, and both are brought for an inadvertent misruling.

Thus we see regarding Yom Kippur, about which it is written: "For on this day He shall atone for you" (*Vayikra* 16:30), which is just God, and it is written: "And no man shall be in the tent of meeting" (*Vayikra* 16:17), even those [angels] about whom it is written: "Their faces, they had the face of a man" (*Yechezkel* 1:10). Therefore the anointed priest goes into the Holy of Holies, and the entire Yom Kippur service is performed by Aharon. For it is written: "And the holy of the Lord" regarding Yom Kippur, as it is taught “‘And the holy of the Lord honorable’ (*Yeshayahu* 55:17) — this is Yom Kippur (*Shabbat* 119a).” Similarly, we find: "And of Aharon the holy one of the Lord" (*Tehillim* 106:17).

However, this is not the forum in which to expand upon the matter.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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1. Rashi cites the halakhic interpretation. See also the Ramban, who discusses several explanations. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We do, however, find in other places that the Torah continues in the third-person:

1. And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to Aharon, and to his sons, and to all the Israelites, and say to them: This is the thing which the Lord has commanded, saying: Whatever man there be of the house of Israel, **that kills** an ox, or lamb, or goat, in the camp, or **that kills** it outside the camp. (*Vayikra* 17:1-3)

2. And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to Aharon, and to his sons, and to all the Israelites, and say to them: Whatever man there be of the house of Israel, or of the sojourners in Israel, **that brings** his offering, whether it be any of their vows, or any of their free-will-offerings, which **they bring** to the Lord for a burnt-offering. (*Vayikra* 22:17-18; the next verse, however, returns to the second person.)

There, however, the subject is "whatever man there be of the house of Israel," and therefore the formulation is in the third person. The only place where we find an exception is in the section dealing with *tzitzit*:

And the Lord said to Moshe, saying: Speak to the Israelites, that **they make** them throughout their generations fringes (*tzitzit*) in the corners of their garments, and that **they put** with the fringe of each corner a thread of blue. (*Bamidbar* 15:37-38) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Additional examples include the following:

Speak to the Israelites, and say to them: The appointed seasons of the Lord, **which you shall proclaim** to be holy convocations, even these are My appointed seasons. (*Vayikra* 23:2)

Speak to the Israelites, and say to them: **When you are come** into the land which I give to you, and shall reap the harvest thereof, then you shall bring the sheaf of the first-fruits of your harvest to the priest. (*Vayikra* 23:10)

We find the same thing at the beginnings of Chapters 25 and 27, as well as in many other places in the Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Elsewhere (“‘*Arba'im Shana Akut be-Dor’: Le-fesher Telunot Benei Yisrael Ba-midbar,”* *Megadim* 33, pp. 43-52), I offered a similar suggestion to explain the sin at Mei Meriva. I argued that Moshe is not commanded to talk to the rock, but to talk about the rock:

Take the rod, and assemble the congregation, you, and Aharon your brother, and speak you *el* (in reference to) the rock before their eyes, that it give forth its water; and you shall bring forth to them water out of the rock; so you shall give the congregation and their cattle drink. (*Bamidbar* 20:8)

However, Moshe does not say the things that should have been said. See also *Bereishit* 37:35, and Rashi, ad loc. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)