YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Understanding the haftarot**

**By Harav Yaakov Medan**

**PARASHAT EMOR**

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Dedicated in memory of Rav Hanoch ben Aaron Eliyahu Singer *z"l*
whose *yahrzeit* is 12 Iyar,
by his granddaughter Vivian Singer

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In honor of the *yahrzeit* of Charna Reiter bas Morthe,
which falls on the 15th of Iyar, "from those who remember her"

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But the priests who are Levites descended from Tzadok, who protected the preciousness of My Sanctuary when the children of Israel strayed from Me, they are the ones who may draw near Me in order to serve Me, and they shall stand before Me to offer Me fat and blood: this is the word of the Lord God. They are the ones who will enter My Sanctuary, and they shall approach My table to serve Me; they shall dutifully protect My precious things. This is how it shall be when they approach the gates of the inner courtyard: they will wear linen garments, and no wool shall be upon them when they serve at the gates of the inner courtyard and within. There will be linen turbans on their heads and linen trousers on their loins; they shall not gird themselves in a way that causes perspiration. And when they leave to go to the outer courtyard – to the outer courtyard to the people – they shall remove the garments in which they serve, leaving them in the holy chambers, and put on other clothing, in order not to give the impression, by mingling with them wearing their holy garments, that the people are equal to them in sanctity. They shall not shave their heads nor grow their hair long in disarray; they shall keep their heads carefully trimmed. Nor shall any priest drink wine when they enter the inner courtyard. And they shall not take as a wife a widow or a divorcee. Rather, they shall take as wives only virgins of the seed of the House of Israel, or a widow who is the widow of a priest. And they shall teach My people the difference between the sacred and the profane and make known to them the difference between impure and pure. When there is controversy, they shall stand in judgment, adjudicating it according to My laws. And they shall keep My teachings and My statutes at all the times I have appointed, and sanctify My Sabbaths. The priest shall not approach a human corpse and become impure because of it, though for a father or a mother, for a son or a daughter, for a brother or for a sister who is unmarried, they may become impure. After a priest's purification process begins, seven days are counted for him. And on the day he comes to the Sanctuary, into the inner courtyard, to minister in the Sanctuary, he is to bring his purification offering – this is the word of the Lord God. And this shall be the priests' inheritance: I am their inheritance. Give them no territory to possess in the land of Israel; I am their possession. They shall eat the grain offering and the purification offering and the guilt offering, and everything consecrated by vow in Israel shall be theirs. The choicest of all first fruits of every kind and every gift offering out of all your various donations belongs to the priests. And your first kneading you shall give to the priest so that a blessing settles upon your home. Whether it be bird or beast, the priests may not eat any creature that died on its own or was torn to pieces as prey. (*Yechezkel* 44:15-31)

**I. The Connection Between the Parasha and the Haftara**

In this chapter, the prophet Yechezkel outlines the laws governing the priests in the Temple, building on those stated in our *parasha.* The main laws in our *haftara* that are identical to those in the *parasha* (or differ from them only very slightly) are the prohibition of letting the hair grow in disarray (which in our *parasha* was stated only with respect to the High Priest), the prohibition to marry a widow or a divorcee, the prohibition to defile oneself through contact with a corpse other than a first-degree relative, and the prohibition to defile oneself by eating a creature that died on its own or was torn to pieces as prey. There are also laws in the *haftara* that are found in other *parashot* in the Torah.

**II. The Uniqueness of the Priests of the Sons of Tzadok**

But the priests who are Levites descended from Tzadok, who protected the preciousness of My Sanctuary when the children of Israel strayed from Me, they are the ones who may draw near Me in order to serve Me, and they shall stand before Me to offer Me fat and blood: this is the word of the Lord God. They are the ones who will enter My Sanctuary, and they shall approach My table to serve Me; they shall dutifully protect My precious things. (15-16)[[1]](#footnote-1)

Tzadok was descended from Pinchas the son of Elazar the son of Aharon, and served as High Priest in the days of David alongside Evyatar the son of Ahimelekh, a descendant of Itamar. At a certain point – apparently from the time of Avshalom's rebellion – he served as the sole High Priest. At the end of David's life, Evyatar supported Adoniyahu as heir to the crown, while Tzadok supported Shlomo, whom David had designated for kingship. Shlomo deposed Evyatar completely; Tzadok continued in office, and the High Priests throughout the days of the First Temple came from his descendants:

The children of Amram: Aharon, Moshe, and Miriam. The sons of Aharon: Nadav, Avihu, Elazar, and Itamar. Elazar was the father of Pinchas, Pinchas was the father of Avishua, Avishua was the father of Buki, Buki was the father of Uzi, Uzi was the father of Zerachya, Zerachya was the father of Merayot, Merayot was the father of Amarya, Amarya was the father of Achituv, Achituv was the father of Tzadok, Tzadok was the father of Achimaatz, Achimaatz was the father of Azarya, Azarya was the father of Yochanan, and Yochanan was the father of Azarya – he was the one who served as priest in the House that Shlomo built in Jerusalem. Azarya fathered Amarya, Amarya was the father of Achituv, Achituv was the father of Tzadok, Tzadok was the father of Shalum, Shalum was the father of Chilkiya, Chilkiya was the father of Azarya, Azarya was the father of Seraya, and Seraya was the father of Yehotzadak. Yehotzadak went into exile with the Lord's exile of Yehuda and Jerusalem at the hand of Nevukhadnetzar. (I *Divrei ha-Yamim* 5:29-41)

At first, after the death of Aharon, Elazar and his son Pinchas served in his place. The High Priesthood then passed to the descendants of Itamar, until the fall of the house of Eli. Tzadok then restored the High Priesthood to the descendants of Elazar.

During the Babylonian exile, the priests of Tzadok’s line preserved the tradition of their ancestor Pinchas – who acted zealously for God, prevented intermarriage with the daughters of Midyan, and thus stopped the plague. The sons of Tzadok were meticulous about the purity of their marriages even in exile, as well as about their loyalty to God. To understand this, we must read the first verse of our *haftara* along with the verses that precede it:

And you shall say to the rebels, to the House of Israel: Thus says the Lord God: Enough with your disgusting activities, House of Israel, with your bringing of strangers, uncircumcised of heart and uncircumcised of flesh, into My Sanctuary to desecrate My House, offering up My bread, fat, and blood; with your breaking of My covenant with all your disgusting deeds! You did not dutifully protect My holy things. As guardians of My precious things in My Sanctuary, you turned them into your own property! Thus says the Lord God: No stranger uncircumcised of heart or uncircumcised of flesh shall enter My Sanctuary; this applies to any estranged person among the children of Israel. But the Levites who became distanced from Me when Israel went astray, who strayed from Me to follow their idols, they shall bear their sin. They may be ministers in My Sanctuary, in charge of the gates of the House and attending to the House; they shall slaughter burnt offerings and sacrifices for the people, and they shall stand before them to minister to them. But because they ministered to them in front of their idols and became a stumbling block of sin to the House of Israel, I have raised My hand against them; this is the word of the Lord God, and they shall bear their sin. Thus they shall not come near Me to serve Me as a priest, nor approach any of My holy offerings or the holy of holy offerings; let them bear their shame for the disgusting things they did. I appoint them custodians of the duties of the House, in charge of all its services and everything that is done within it. *But the priests who are Levites descended from Tzadok*, who protected the preciousness of My Sanctuary when the children of Israel strayed from Me, they are the ones who may draw near Me in order to serve Me, and they shall stand before Me to offer Me fat and blood: this is the word of the Lord God. (*Yechezkel* 44:6-15)

Yechezkel rebukes the people for the fact that their priests are "uncircumcised of heart and uncircumcised of flesh" – that is to say, not halakhically Jewish. It stands to reason that their fathers were priests but their mothers were non-Jews (perhaps they underwent a lenient, non-binding conversion process, and the prophet does not recognize them as Jews). Indeed, during the period of the return to Zion and afterwards, many priests married foreign women living in the land of Israel, and the prophet Malakhi castigated them for doing so. This phenomenon is also mentioned in the book of Nechemya:

My God, remember this against them – the defilement of the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. But I purified them of all foreign elements and established duty shifts for the priests and the Levites – each for his official tasks. (*Nechemya* 13:29-30)

The prophet Yechezkel asserts that these priests and their descendants will serve as Levites, as guards of the Temple and its courtyard, and also as slaughterers of the sacrifices, since the slaughtering need not be performed by a priest. But all of the sacrificial service, from the receiving of the blood onwards, and so too the rest of the priestly service, will be performed only by the sons of Tzadok, who were meticulous about their marriages and about their loyalty to the Torah.

Yechezkel also relates:

And [the man] spoke to me: "This chamber which faces southward is for the priests who are guardians in charge of the house. And the chamber which faces northward is for the priests who are guardians in charge of the altar. These are the sons of Tzadok, of the sons of Levi, who approach the Lord to serve Him." (*Yechezkel* 40:45-46)

The meticulousness of the sons of Tzadok about their lineage in the Babylonian exile brings to mind what the Rambam says about the practices of the tribe of Levi in the Egyptian exile:

When the Jews extended their stay in Egypt, however, they learned from the [Egyptians'] deeds and began worshiping the stars as they did, with the exception of the tribe of Levi, who clung to the *mitzvot* of the patriarchs – the tribe of Levi never served false gods. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Avoda Zara* 1:3)

Circumcision also expresses the preservation of the sanctity of the seed of Israel, and the Levites were meticulous about that as well:

For with the exception of the tribe of Levi, the entire [people] neglected the covenant of circumcision in Egypt. Regarding this, it is stated (*Devarim* 33:9): "[The Levites] upheld Your covenant." (Rambam, *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'a* 13:2)

The verses in the book of *Yechezkel* enable a new understanding of the covenant that God made with Pinchas:

The Lord spoke to Moshe: "Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the priest has allayed My rage against the Israelites. Because he was passionate on My behalf among you, I did not destroy the Israelites in My own passion. Therefore, say this: I grant him My covenant of peace. For him and for his descendants, it shall be a covenant of everlasting priesthood, because he was passionate for his God and made atonement on the part of the Israelites." (*Bamidbar* 25:10-13)

What did God do for Pinchas? Hadn’t eternal priesthood already been given to all the descendants of Aharon, including Pinchas?[[2]](#footnote-2) From Yechezkel's prophecy we see that the covenant was never actually made with Aharon, but rather with Pinhas – from whom emerged Tzadok, from whom the eternal priesthood continues.

It should be noted that it is possible that the virtue of the sons of Tzadok later became a disadvantage. The Sadducees, whose nucleus consisted of priests of distinguished lineage, saw themselves and the priesthood as occupying a more elevated position than the masses of the people. The sages of the Pharisees, whose disciples we consider ourselves to be, opposed this separatist approach and all its evils. This, however, is not the forum in which to expand upon the foundations of the polemic with the Sadducee priests.

**III. The Priestly Garments, Haircuts, and the Ban on Wine**

This is how it shall be when they approach the gates of the inner courtyard: they will wear linen garments, and no wool shall be upon them when they serve at the gates of the inner courtyard and within. There will be linen turbans on their heads and linen trousers on their loins; they shall not gird themselves in a way that causes perspiration. (17-18)

The ordinary priestly garments described in the Torah are indeed made exclusively of linen (*shesh*):

Quilt the tunic of fine linen. Make a miter out of fine linen, and an embroidered sash. Make tunics, sashes, and caps for Aharon's sons, for glory and for splendor. (*Shemot* 28:39-40)

However, the sash was "embroidered," and had wool in it. Thus, the Rambam rules:

An ordinary priest has four garments: a tunic, leggings, a hat, and a sash. They are all made from white linen with six-fold threads. The sash alone was embroidered with wool.(Rambam, *Hilkhot Klei ha-Mikdash* 8:1)

According to the plain meaning of Yechezkel's words, it would seem that even the sash is made exclusively from linen, and that priests are forbidden to wear *sha'atnez –* mixtures of wool and linen – which we know is permitted in the priestly garments. I am unable to explain this change.

Yechezkel also introduced another innovation regarding the priestly garments:

And when they leave to go to the outer courtyard – to the outer courtyard to the people – they shall remove the garments in which they serve, leaving them in the holy chambers, and put on other clothing, in order not to give the impression, by mingling with them wearing their holy garments, that the people are equal to them in sanctity. (19)

Leaving the priests' courtyard (the inner courtyard) for the Israelites' courtyard (the outer courtyard) obligates a change of clothing, because someone who touches the priestly garments becomes sanctified.[[3]](#footnote-3) This law, introduced here in the book of *Yechezkel*, is slightly reminiscent of what the Torah says about bringing ashes of burnt offerings outside the camp:

Then he shall take off his vestments, put on other garments, and take the ashes to a ritually pure place outside the camp. (*Vayikra* 6:4)

From the Torah, it seems that it is not in keeping with the dignity of the priestly garments that they should go outside the camp, to the place where the ashes are discarded; in our *haftara*,it seems the goal is to set the holy garments apart from the people.

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They shall not shave their heads nor grow their hair long in disarray; they shall keep their heads carefully trimmed. (20)

Here, the sons of Tzadok are given the same command as the priests in the Torah, to whom it was stated: "Do not dishevel your hair" (*Vayikra* 10:6). They have a special haircut, short and attractive, and according to the Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 22b), it was like the haircut of a High Priest.

Yechezkel is also strict with the priests about drinking wine:

Nor shall any priest drink wine when they enter the inner courtyard. (21)

In the Torah, priests who were intoxicated with wine were forbidden to enter the Tent of Meeting(see *Vayikra* 10:9). *Chazal* added that they are forbidden to enter the area between the *Ulam* and the altar (see *Keilim* 1:9). In the prophecy of Yechezkel, they were forbidden to enter the entire inner courtyard, which parallels the priestly courtyard.

**IV. The *Mitzvot* Related to Marriage**

And they shall not take as a wife a widow or a divorcée. Rather, they shall take as wives only virgins of the seed of the House of Israel, or a widow who is the widow of a priest. (22)

Yechezkel is stricter than the Torah with respect to the *mitzvot* of marriage, as well. The Torah permits an ordinary priest (i.e., not a High Priest) to marry a widow, but forbids him to marry a divorcee. Yechezkel forbids a priest to marry even a widow, unless she is the widow of a priest. Perhaps he added this prohibition because of concern that the current widows had been divorced from their first husbands and widowed from their second husbands, and the priests would marry such women in what was now the woman’s third marriage. But if she is the widow of a priest, she is presumed not to have been divorced from a previous husband.

Priests are certainly forbidden to marry women who fall into the category of *chalala* or *zona* (profaned because of illicit sexual relations), but Yechezkel does not mention this because the prohibitions are explicitly stated in the Torah.

**V. Teaching Torah, Judgment, and Shabbat**

And they shall teach My people the difference between the sacred and the profane and make known to them the difference between impure and pure. (23)

One of the important roles of the priests is to instruct the people in the Torah and to teach them the *mitzvot*:

They shall teach Your laws to Yaakov, and Your instruction to Israel. (*Devarim* 33:10)

This is how King Yehoshafat acted in practice:

In the third year of his reign he sent his officials… together with the Levites Shemayahu, Netanyahu… with the priests Elishama and Yehoram accompanying the Levites. They taught in Yehuda with the scroll of the Lord’s Torah, making their way around all the towns of Yehuda and teaching among the people. (II *Divrei ha-Yamim* 17:7-9)

Due to their responsibilities, the priests are also supposed to engage extensively in Torah study, and therefore the role of judgment is also assigned to them:

When there is controversy, they shall stand in judgment, adjudicating it according to My laws… (24)

The Torah also prefers that priests should serve as judges, though this preference is not absolute:

If a case is beyond your judgment, be it a conflict over bloodshed, over civil claims or over injury – any dispute in your town courts – then you shall go up to the place that the Lord your God will choose. There you shall approach the Levitical priests or the judge who is in office at that time. Inquire of them and they will give you the verdict. (*Devarim* 17:8-9)

The priests, the holy men of God and those who serve in His Temple, are responsible more than anyone else for observance of the laws of the festivals and the sanctity of Shabbat:

And they shall keep My teachings and My statutes at all the times I have appointed, and sanctify My Sabbaths. (24)

In this way, Yechezkel ties all aspects of God's service to the Temple service, which he sees as the central source for service of God in general. This trend continues below, with regard to the special prohibition against priests eating a creature that died on its own or was torn to pieces – even though these are prohibited to all of Israel.

**VI. The Laws of Impurity Contracted Through Contact With a Corpse**

The allowance granted to a priest to defile himself through contact with the corpse of a first-degree relative is similar to what is stated in the Torah (though Yechezkel does not mention the mitzvafor the priest to defile himself for his wife), but the prophet adds that even after the seven days of his purification, the priest must wait another seven days before he may resume Temple service. During that period, he has a status similar to one "lacking atonement,"[[4]](#footnote-4) and he is permitted to perform the service only after bringing a sin-offering for his days of impurity:

The priest shall not approach a human corpse and become impure because of it, though for a father or a mother, for a son or a daughter, for a brother or for a sister who is unmarried, they may become impure. After a priest's purification process begins, seven days are counted for him. And on the day he comes to the Sanctuary, into the inner courtyard, to minister in the Sanctuary, he is to bring his purification offering – this is the word of the Lord God. (25-27)

1. Unless otherwise noted, citations are to the text of the *haftara*, *Yechezkel* 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Gemara (*Zevachim* 101b) resolved this difficulty in one way; I will adopt a different approach here. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Editor’s note: Rav Medan’s explanation differs from the translation of the verse used above. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Like a woman who gives birth to a male child, who is impure for seven days, and after her purification remains for another thirty-three days in "her blood of purification." She is pure, but she is forbidden to enter the Temple and to bring a sacrifice yet. Parallel to her is a woman who gives birth to a female child, who is impure for twice as many days and whose days of "blood of purification" are also doubled. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)