



Parashat Korach
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Maimonides on Priestly Gifts

We read in Parashat Korach of the *matenot kehuna*, or “priestly gifts” that *Benei Yisrael* were required to give the *kohanim*. The tribe of Levi, which was assigned the responsibilities of tending to the *Mikdash* and performing the daily Temple rituals, did not receive any agricultural lands in *Eretz Yisrael* as the other tribes did. The *kohanim* and *Leviyim* were to remain free from agricultural and other commercial obligations so they could focus their attention on their role as caretakers of the Temple and spiritual guides of the nation. They were supported by the mandatory gifts that the rest of the nation gave them from their produce, cattle and sacrificial offerings.

The Torah teaches in the context of the priestly gifts that these privileges were assigned for the *kohanim* for the purpose of “*le-moshcha*” (18:8). The Gemara in *Masekhet Chulin* (132b) interprets this term as a reference to royalty, and thus establishes on this basis that the *kohanim* must partake of their *matenot kehuna* in a regal, dignified fashion – “in the manner in which kings eat.” Specifically, the Torah requires that meat portions of *matenot kehuna* must be eaten roasted and with condiments, as ancient aristocrats would eat meat. Maimonides codifies this *halakha* in *Hilkhot Bikkurim* (9:22).

A number of later writers noted that earlier in that same chapter in *Hilkhot Bikkurim* (20), Maimonides issues a ruling that appears to contradict this principle of “*le-moshcha*,” namely, that a *kohen* may feed *matenot kehuna* to his animals. So long as the food in question is neither sacrificial meat nor *teruma* (a donation of produce from one’s crop), and thus does not have a formal status of *kedusha* (sanctity), a *kohen* may use the food as fodder. Seemingly, there is no less dignified a fashion to use the priestly gifts than as fodder for one’s cattle. How can this ruling be reconciled with the provision of “*le-moshcha*”? How could Maimonides permit feeding food from *matenot kehuna* to one’s animals, if the food must be used in a regal, dignified manner?

One answer, suggested by the Maharshal (Rabbi Shlomo Luria of Lublin, 1510-1573) in his *Yam Shel Shelomo* (*Chulin* 10:11), is that Maimonides refers only to spoiled food. Once *matenot kehuna* food becomes unfit for human consumption, then it may, according to Maimonides, be used as fodder. Whereas sacrificial meat or *teruma* that becomes inedible must be burned, spoiled *matenot kehuna* food may be fed to one’s animals.

The Radbaz (Rabbi David ben Zimra, Egypt, 1480-1574), in his commentary to *Mishneh Torah*, disagrees, and claims that Maimonides would allow feeding even edible *matenot kehuna* food to one’s animals. He explains that the law of “*le-moshcha*” applies only when a *kohen* chooses the option of eating the food personally. In such a case, he

must eat the food in a manner reflecting a kind of royal stature. However, the *kohen* reserves the right to use the food for other purposes, such as feeding his animals.

Underlying this debate, it would seem, is the question as to whether or not the rule of “*le-moshcha*” relates to the intrinsic status of the *matenot kehuna*. The Maharshah likely viewed the *halakha* of “*le-moshcha*” as a reflection of the *matenot kehuna* food’s status, which resembles somewhat the status of sacrifices and *teruma*. The food is endowed with a certain level of sanctity which requires that it be treated with dignity. Hence, only if it became unsuitable for human consumption may it be relegated to the level of animal fodder.

The Radbaz, by contrast, seems to have held that *matenot kehuna* food is not endowed with any special status. The law of “*le-moshcha*” stems not from the intrinsic stature of the food, but rather from the intrinsic stature of the *kohen*, who must conduct himself in a “regal” manner. Indeed, the Radbaz explicitly writes that if the *kohen* sells *matenot kehuna* food to an ordinary Jew, the buyer is not required to eat the food in a manner of “*le-moshcha*.” Since this *halakha* does not reflect any special quality of the food, but rather relates to the stature of the *kohanim*, it does not affect the manner in which non-*kohanim* partake of *matenot kehuna* food. According to the Radbaz, it seems, “*le-moshcha*” is intended to remind the *kohanim* of their exalted stature by requiring them to conduct even their ordinary activities in a special manner. Since the *matenot kehuna* constituted, at least in principle, the *kohanim*’s primary source of sustenance, the *kohanim* were required to eat this food in a manner befitting God’s chosen tribe, in a dignified and even royal fashion. Their status as God’s servants not only obligated them to serve in the Temple, but also demanded a higher standard of conduct in all areas of life, which was to reflect their “royal” stature.