



The Kohen Gadol's Mandatory Residence in Jerusalem
by David Silverberg

The second half of Parashat Tzav tells of the seven-day *milu'im* ceremony, which marked the formal consecration of Aharon and his sons as the kohanim ("priests") who would officiate in the Mishkan (Tabernacle). God had outlined this procedure several parshiyot earlier, in Parashat Tetzaveh; here, in Parashat Tzav, we read of the faithful execution of these instructions. Towards the end of this section, Moshe instructs the newly appointed kohanim to spend the entire seven-day period near the Mishkan:

You shall not go outside the entrance of the Tent of Meeting for seven days, until the day that your period of ordination is completed. For your ordination will require seven days... You shall remain at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting day and night for seven days...for so I have been commanded.
(8:33,35)

What is meaning behind this command? Why did God instruct Aharon and his sons to remain in the courtyard of the Mishkan for the entire seven days of the *milu'im* process?

Nachmanides, in his commentary, explains this instruction as requiring the kohanim to complete their ritual responsibilities before engaging in other affairs:

The meaning of this verse is that they shall not go outside the entrance of the Tent of Meeting day or night during the time of the sacrificial service, that is, until they have completed all the service charged upon them at that time. And this is a command that applies for all generations – that a kohen may not leave the service and depart.

According to this interpretation, God does not actually require that Aharon and his sons remain in the grounds of the Tabernacle throughout their week of consecration. Rather, on each of the seven days, they were to first complete their ritual responsibilities before tending to any other needs. Nachmanides adds that this establishes a law that applies for all time, forbidding a kohen from leaving the sacrificial service in the Temple until he completes his duties.

The difficulty with this interpretation, of course, is that the verses make no mention of the completion of the kohanim's responsibilities. Moshe here emphasizes that the kohanim must remain near the Mishkan "until the day that your period of ordination is completed." This formulation would suggest that they must remain there until the final day of their consecration, even after they have completed their formal duties.

Explanation Based on Maimonides

Rabbi Meir Simcha Ha-kohen of Dvinsk (Lithuania, early 20th century), in his famous Biblical commentary, *Meshekh Chokhma*, suggested a novel approach to these verses in light of an enigmatic ruling of Maimonides that has baffled many Talmudic scholars over the years. In explicating the halakhot concerning the conduct and lifestyle required of the kohen gadol ("high priest"), Maimonides writes:

He should have a designated room in the Temple, and this [room] is what is called, 'the kohen gadol's chamber.' It is glorious and honorable for him to remain in the Temple the entire day; he should leave only to his home, at night or one or two hours during the day. His home should be in Jerusalem, and he never budes from there.

(Code, Hilkhhot Kelei Ha-mikdash 5:7)

Maimonides allows the kohen gadol to leave the Temple and return home, but requires that he never leave Jerusalem. This requirement has no explicit source in Talmudic literature, and, as mentioned, scholars have struggled to find a basis for Maimonides' ruling.

Rav Meir Simcha suggested that Maimonides perhaps extracted this position from the aforementioned instructions to Aharon and his sons during the *milu'im* ceremony. The requirement that the kohanim remain in the area in front of the Tabernacle during these seven days, Rav Meir Simcha contended, established the model to be followed by the kohen gadol in every generation henceforth: he must remain in Jerusalem at all times. Rav Meir Simcha arrives at this conclusion by demonstrating two parallels between this context and the situation of a kohen gadol in the Temple in Jerusalem. First, he argues that Aharon and his sons during this week had, in some sense, the formal status of high priests, and, secondly, that the area in front of the Mishkan during the Israelites' sojourn in the wilderness corresponds to the city of Jerusalem during the time of the Temple. These two parallels naturally yield the conclusion that the kohen gadol must remain within the walls of Jerusalem.

The first of these assumptions emerges from the tragic incident recorded two chapters later, in Parashat Shemini. Two of Aharon's sons, Nadav and Avihu, bring an unauthorized offering on the day following the seven days of *milu'im*, a transgression for which they were instantly killed. In response to their death, Moshe tells Aharon and his remaining two sons, "Do not dishevel your hair and do not rend your clothes, lest you die and anger strike the whole Israelite community" (10:6). Aharon and his sons were forbidden from observing mourning practices for their deceased relatives. Likewise, several verses earlier, Moshe summons two of Aharon's cousins for the purpose of removing the deceased brothers' remains from the Sanctuary; apparently, Aharon and his sons were barred from burying Nadav and Avihu due to their priestly stature, which forbids direct contact with the dead. As several commentators note (Rashbam, Nachmanides, Seforno), these commands appear to run counter to the guidelines established later in the Book of Vayikra (chapter 21), which distinguish between the kohen gadol and other kohanim with regard to bereavement for deceased relatives. A standard kohen may indeed tend to the burial needs of a relative and observe mourning practices; only a kohen gadol is enjoined to continue his priestly routine in spite of personal loss. Why, then, would Moshe prohibit even Aharon's sons – who were standard kohanim, rather than kohanim gedolim – from mourning their brothers' death?

The commentators explain that during this week of consecration, Aharon's sons shared his status, to one extent or another, of high priest. Although they would later assume the position of standard kohanim, their ordination ceremony required them to temporarily assume kohen gadol status.

Rav Meir Simcha's second assumption, that the area in front of the Mishkan corresponds to the city of Jerusalem, can be verified from an earlier verse here in Parashat Tzav. The formal significance of this domain, as indicated in this section, involves its suitability for the consumption of sacrificial meat. Moshe begins his instructions to the kohanim regarding the *milu'im* ceremony by commanding, "Boil the meat at the entrance of

the Tent of Meeting and eat it there with the bread that is in the basket of ordination" (8:31). He refers here to the meat of the special *milu'im* sacrifice, described earlier in the chapter, whose meat was shared by Moshe and the kohanim, following the model of the *shelamim* offering, which was similarly shared by the kohanim and the individual bringing the sacrifice. Rav Meir Simcha argues that if the kohanim were required to partake of the meat of the *milu'im* offering specifically near the entrance to the Mishkan, then this area naturally corresponds to the region within which *shelamim* meat may be eaten during the time of the Temple in Jerusalem. Sure enough, as the Mishna establishes (Zevachim 5:7), meat from the *shelamim* was to be eaten within the walls of Jerusalem. It emerges, then, that the area around the entrance to the Mishkan corresponds to the city of Jerusalem with respect to the laws governing the kohanim.

Thus, Rav Meir Simcha concludes, the requirement for the kohanim to remain in that area throughout the *milu'im* rituals forms the precedent on the basis of which Maimonides ruled that the kohen gadol must never leave the city of Jerusalem. The status of kohen gadol, which even Aharon's sons bore during this week, required that they remain in the area in front of the Mishkan, just as in future generations the kohen gadol was forbidden from leaving the city of Jerusalem.

Other Possible Sources

We find in halakhic literature other possible bases for Maimonides' ruling, as well. The famous 19th-century work *Minchat Chinukh*, among many others, explains the kohen gadol's mandatory residence in Jerusalem on the basis of a different obligation incumbent upon the high priest, known as the *minchat chavitin*. Earlier in Parashat Tzav (6:15; see Rashi to 6:13), the Torah mandates that the high priest must bring a special meal offering twice each day. Now a separate provision, codified by Maimonides in his *Code* (Hilkhot Bikurim 3:14), requires anyone who brings an offering to the Temple to stay in Jerusalem overnight. It stands to reason, then, that the kohen gadol, who must bring an offering each day of his tenure, must spend each day and night in Jerusalem. Quite possibly, this consideration led Maimonides to conclude that the kohen gadol was never to leave the city.

In a slightly different vein, Rabbi David Rappaport, a victim of the Holocaust who authored a monumental work on the laws regarding the sacrifices entitled *Mikdash David*, suggests that Maimonides considered the kohen gadol to be in a perpetual state of halakhic "festivity." The Talmud (Mo'ed Katan 14b) explains that a kohen gadol may not observe mourning practices for deceased relatives because with respect to the high priest, each day of the year as the halakhic status of a pilgrimage festival. Just as all mourning laws are suspended on the three pilgrimage festivals – Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot – due to the obligation to rejoice and celebrate on these occasions, so does the kohen gadol's constant state of festivity yield a prohibition against his bereavement. Rav Rappaport suggests that Maimonides perhaps extended this basic principle one step further, applying it to the pilgrimage obligation. If a kohen gadol must observe every day of the year as a pilgrimage festival, then, presumably, the laws concerning the obligation of *aliya le-regel* – the festival pilgrimage – apply. And as Rashi notes in his commentary to the Book of Devarim (16:7), based on the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 5a; Chagiga 16a-b), this obligation requires one to stay in Jerusalem overnight. Consequently, perhaps, Maimonides requires the kohen gadol to spend every day and night in Jerusalem by virtue of his *aliya le-regel* obligation, which applies with respect to the kohen gadol all year round.

The Priesthood and the Monarchy

Regardless of upon which source one bases Maimonides' ruling, the question arises as to the significance behind it. How might we understand this mandatory, permanent residence of the kohen gadol in the nation's capital city? What message or theme does this requirement reflect?

Rav Meir Simcha, in the aforementioned passage in *Meshekh Chokhma*, explains Maimonides' ruling as stemming from the desired, harmonious balance between the two basic institutions of Jewish leadership – the priesthood, and the monarchy. Jerusalem was the seat of both the religious leadership – represented by the kohanim serving in the Temple – as well as the political leadership – the monarch. We might add that the Torah itself alludes to the desired symbiosis, if you will, between these two institutions by juxtaposing the basic laws regarding the monarch with those concerning the tribe of Levi (Devarim 17:14-18:6). The ideal situation of the Jewish people as envisioned by the Torah is a stable, centralized government working in cooperation with the nation's spiritual leadership. According to Rav Meir Simcha, this concern for maintaining a healthy balance between the monarchal and religious leaderships underlies Maimonides' position requiring the kohen gadol to remain in Jerusalem. This will ensure that the city is viewed as not only the nation's political capital, but its spiritual capital, as well.

Interestingly enough, Rav Meir Simcha interprets in this vein the famous verse in Tehillim (133:1), "How good and how pleasant it is that brothers dwell together." These "brothers," he suggests, are none other than the kohen gadol and the Jewish king. The ultimate "goodness" for the Jewish people is realized when these two leaders work together in full cooperation and with mutual respect and support. The kohen gadol's residence in Jerusalem is intended to help develop and sustain this kind of relationship between himself and the monarch.

The Kohen Gadol as a Temple Fixture

We might suggest a different approach to the conceptual underpinnings of the kohen gadol's required residence in Jerusalem, one which relates to the kohen gadol's personal status and function, rather than to his relationship with the nation's king.

On several occasions in his commentary to the Mishna (Ma'aser Sheni 3:4; Shekalim 1:3; Rosh Hashanah 4:1), Maimonides famously advances a novel definition of the term "Mikdash," which is usually taken as a reference to the Temple. Maimonides claims that very often in the Mishna, "Mikdash" includes not only the actual precinct of the Temple itself, but also the entire city of Jerusalem. Thus, for example, when the Mishna in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (4:1) records that the shofar would be sounded in the "Mikdash" on Rosh Hashanah even on Shabbat, according to Maimonides, this refers to all of Jerusalem, as well. Throughout the city, the shofar was sounded when Rosh Hashanah occurred on Shabbat, and not only in the Temple itself.

Why would Maimonides include the entire city of Jerusalem under the term "Mikdash"? It stands to reason that this definition evolves naturally from the provision mentioned earlier, permitting the consumption of *shelamim* meat throughout the city. Maimonides perhaps felt that if certain forms of sacrificial meat may be partaken of outside the Temple grounds within the city of Jerusalem, then the entire city must, in some sense, be

seen as an extension of the Temple itself. Therefore, when the Mishna speaks of a domain called "Mikdash," it includes the entire city of Jerusalem.

We might reassess Maimonides' ruling regarding the kohen gadol's residence in Jerusalem in light of his perspective on Jerusalem, as an extension of the Temple. By requiring the kohen gadol to remain in Jerusalem, Maimonides in effect requires that he never leave the "Mikdash." The kohen gadol's position and role extend beyond his practical responsibilities and the ritualistic functions he must perform. He is a fixture in the Temple. He not only works there; he is part of the building's essential composition. Just as the Temple requires furnishings such as the menorah and incense-altar, so does it require a kohen gadol. Of course, the Torah does not wish to deny the high priest a family and social life altogether, and he may therefore return to his home "at night or one or two hours during the day." But even his home and social circle must remain within the "Mikdash," in the broader domain of the Temple.

Support for this theory may be drawn from other passages in Maimonides' *Code*. In *Hilkhot Kelei Ha-mikdash* (8:5), Maimonides surprisingly rules that once the high priest's special garments become worn and unusable, they must be buried, and the material may not be used for any other purpose. In the very next paragraph, he explicitly distinguishes the garments of standard kohanim from those of the kohen gadol in this regard. The priestly vestments of regular kohanim may, indeed, be used for other, Temple-related purposes after they become unusable as priestly garments; only the kohen gadol's garments require immediate burial.

In explaining this distinction, Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik (20th century, Lithuania-Jerusalem), in *Kitvei Ha-griz* (Keritut, 5), suggests that the kohen gadol's vestments, as opposed to those of other kohanim, have the formal status of *kelei ha-Mikdash* – Temple accessories. The garments of standard kohanim merely facilitate the Temple service, given that the Torah forbids performing the service without the priestly vestments. These garments have no intrinsic status, beyond the functional purpose they serve of allowing the kohen to execute his ritual responsibilities. The kohen gadol's vestments, by contrast, are considered part of the Temple's equipage. They not only allow the kohen gadol to perform his service, but bear intrinsic value as sacred garments. Consequently, they, like the other furnishings of the Temple, must be buried once they become unusable. Just as the altar may not be used for any other purpose even once it is broken beyond repair, so must the high priest's garments be buried after becoming tattered.

Why do the kohen gadol's garments possess this unique status as an accessory of the Temple? Seemingly, this status stems from the role of the kohen gadol himself. His function is not limited to his ritual duties; it encompasses his entire being, as part of the Temple's furnishings. Indeed, Maimonides writes elsewhere (*Hilkhot Kelei Ha-mikdash* 5:7; *Sefer Hamitzvot*, asef 33) that whereas standard kohanim wore their priestly garments only while performing the Temple service, the kohen gadol wore his vestments whenever he was present in the Temple. For his presence itself fulfills his function, as a fixture in the Temple. Naturally, then, the vestments he wears share the same status of sanctity as the menorah and altar; they not merely facilitate ritual performance, but constitute an integral part of the Temple's composition.

"A Kingdom of Priests"



When Benei Yisrael encamp in Sinai for the purpose of receiving the divine law, God explains to Moshe the basic terms of the agreement they are about to reach with the Almighty. He declares that through their fulfillment of His laws, "you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Shemot 19:6). Yet, just several chapters later, in Parashat Tetzaveh, God designates specifically Aharon and his descendants to serve as "kohanim." If the entire nation has become a "kingdom of priests," for what purpose must God distinguish one tribe as the priestly sect?

The kohanim, and the kohen gadol in particular, establish an extreme model for the rest of the nation to follow, albeit in a more moderate fashion. The kohen gadol's permanent residence in the "Mikdash" represents the ideal of a life of complete sanctity and absolute devotion to the service of God. Clearly, God could not ordain that the entire nation work as kohanim gedolim, that every individual spend every day and night in the Temple. The Torah envisions a nation engaged in agriculture and industry, and, when necessary, military conflict. But the Torah's laws, which encompass and govern every aspect of personal and communal life, are intended to transform an otherwise normal kingdom into a "kingdom of priests," into a nation whose every member, like the kohen gadol, lives a life of sanctity and absolute devotion to God.

Thus, the kohen gadol must spend both day and night in the "Mikdash" in order to represent to ideal towards which the rest of the nation must strive. The commoners, too, are to aspire to a "priestly" life of constant holiness. Whereas the kohen gadol is selected to achieve this goal in the most extreme fashion, the rest of the nation work towards this objective by living otherwise ordinary lives in strict compliance with God's commands, thereby infusing them with a dimension of sanctity and Godliness.