IDEAS OF SHABUOT # 2: My Kingdom of Priests

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This coming Saturday night we will celebrate Shabu'ot , one of the major holidays of the Jewish calendar. In Shabu'ot we commemorate our covenant with HaShem. God distinguished us from all peoples by giving us His Tora. HaShem said to Israel (Shemot 19: 5-6) *"And now, if you will listen to My commands and keep My covenant , you will become a treasure to Me (*segula*) among all peoples … and you will be to Me a kingdom of priests (*mamlekhet *kohanim) and a holy nation (goy* qadosh*).*

Yesterday we explained the concept of "segula". Today we will explain the second concept, mamlekhet Kohanim, which means a kingdom (= a nation) of priests.

As we all know, the Jews are divided into Cohanim (priests), Levi-im (Levites) and Israelites. The Cohanim / priests used to devote themselves exclusively to the service of God. When we had our Bet haMiqdash, the Cohanim had several specific functions.

1. They were the teachers of the Jewish people. Before the destruction of the Second Temple,(68 CE), there was no institution of "rabbi" as we know it today. The people responsible for preserving and teaching Tora to the rest of Israel were the Cohanim. As the prophet Malakhi (2: 7) said □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□□□ □□□ □□□□□ □□□ □□□□ □□ "The lips of the Cohen would preserve the [religious] instruction, and from his mouth you will demand the [teaching of] Tora." The Cohanim were the teachers of Am Israel.

2. The Cohanim were also in charge of the major operations of the Bet haMiqdash. They were divided into 24 guards (mishmarot) and took care of all tasks concerning the sacrifices and offerings (qorbanot) and many other rituals. The Cohanim still retain some of these religious functions. For example, every day (or in the Ashkenazi tradition: every Yom Tov) the Cohanim recite □□□□□ □□□□ the priestly blessing. The Cohanim were the closest servants of God in the fields of education and religious services.

3. Serving God so closely implies more responsibilities and more restrictions than regular Jews. For example, there are a number of marriage restrictions or rituals related to mourning which apply, even today, only to the Cohanim. The privilege of serving God involves a higher degree of duties ("noblesse oblige").

Now we understand better why the people of Israel were designated as a nation of "Cohanim". In a sense, the Jewish people were chosen to be to the rest of the world, what the Cohanim are to the rest of the Jewish people.

Let us begin from the end

1. The Jewish people have more obligations and restrictions than gentiles. While the Tora indicates that a Yehudi must observe 613 precepts, a gentile has only 7 commandments to fulfill.

2. The Jewish people were designated to dedicate their life to the service of God, permanently and closely. We are so close to God, that in our Tefilot (prayers) we address him in the second person: We address Him as "You" (Blessed are You, HaShem ….).

3. Our "global" mission as a chosen people is to become the "educators" of the world. Not with words, speeches or proselytism, but exclusively by example. Each Yehudi should be a role model, an inspiration (or lagoyim) for the rest of the

world. When this occurs and the gentiles perceive that Jews proceed with integrity and decency; are devoted to fulfilling God's commandments and do not betray their religious principles, then we are fulfilling our global mission at the highest level. This level is known as "Qiddush haShem", the sanctification of the name of God, i.e., when a gentile gets inspired by seeing our righteous behavior and our example leads him or her to recognize the Presence and will of God in this world.

HALAKHOT FOR SHABBAT AND SHABUOT

B'H Shabu'ot will begin this Saturday night. Keep in mind that the se'uda shelishit should be done, like any other Shabbat, before the sheqi'a (sunset). In this specific case, because at the end of Shabbat we will have Shabu'ot dinner, for which we must be with appetite, this se'uda shelishit should be lighter than usual. In our congregation, for example, we will do this se'uda shelishit with fruits. Each congregation has its own customs regarding how to make this se'uda lighter, in honor of Yom Tob dinner.