

## What Would a Kohen be Doing in a Cemetery?

One of the issues that the Midrash deals with in the context of the Exodus from Egypt, is the presence of the Divine Presence or the revelation of Gd in the land of Egypt, a place of impurity and idolatry, when it is well known that the Divine Presence rests only in a place of purity (see Vayikra Rabbah 36:3, the requirement for a leper to leave the encampment, the story of Yonah, as we will see later on, and more). We have already alluded to this issue previously in essays entitled [“The Redemption is for both you and me”](#) and [“On whose behalf did Gd reveal Himself in Egypt,”](#) both on this parasha, as well as in an essay on Parashat Ki Tetze entitled [“And Disregard Them, Sometimes You Disregard Them.”](#) But we will now return to this subject, which is very dear to us, and with the help of Gd, we hope to be able to offer something new, for Sages have assured us: "it can never be that a novel idea will not be found in the Bet Midrash" (Hagiga 3a).

**The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you (Shemot 12:1-2).<sup>1</sup>**

### Shemot Rabba 5:14 – Who has seen a kohen in a cemetery?

...He said to them: Who are you? They said to him: We are representatives of the Holy One, blessed be He...<sup>2</sup> He said to them: Wait so that I can search in my book. Immediately he entered his palace and looked for every nation and its gods...He said to them: I searched for his name throughout my archives and I did not find him.

R. Levi said: To what can this be compared? To a kohen who has a foolish servant. The kohen went traveling and servant went searching for his master in the cemetery. He began shouting to those around him: Have you seen my master here? They said to him: Is your master not a kohen? He said: Yes, he is. They said to him: You fool! Who could have seen a kohen in a cemetery!<sup>3</sup> Similarly Moshe and Aharon said to Pharaoh: Fool! You might search for the dead among the living, but will the living

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<sup>1</sup> In the past we have discussed the verse: [This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months](#) on the occasion of Parashat HaHodesh. Here we will be focusing on the first verse: *The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt*, which the midrash seems to view as significant.

<sup>2</sup> See the source that describes how Moshe and Aharon appear before Pharaoh on the day that all the kings came to honor him: “Two elders standing at the entrance,” together with the full dialogue between the characters: Who are you? Who sent you? I do not know him. Did he not know to send me a tribute? What letters did you bring with you, and so forth. We are focusing on the section that relates to our issue.

<sup>3</sup> A slave who sees his master careful about matters of ritual purity on a daily basis in order to partake in Terumah according to the law (even though the slave is not obligated in these laws, as he is a Canaanite slave and not a Jewish slave), should know that he should not search for his master in the cemetery. The only possibility is that he is a foolish slave. See the language used in later midrashim using this motif, like Pesikta Zutrata (Lekah Tov) and Sekhel Tov (Buber) Shemot 5:2: “Moshe said to them: What would a kohen be doing in a cemetery? Why would the king be in a slaughterhouse?” It appears that this is the source of the expression, and we have taken it as the title of this essay.

be found amongst the dead? Our Gd lives. Those who you mention are all dead.<sup>4</sup> For our Gd is alive and He is king over the universe.<sup>5</sup>

### **Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishma'el Bo -Massekhta d'Pis'ha 1 – Outside the City**

...in the land of Egypt – outside the city. But perhaps in the city itself? The verse states: *Moshe said to him, "As I go out of the city, I shall spread out my hands to the LORD"* (Shemot 9:29). Now is this not a *kal va-homer*: If prayer, the lesser, Moshe would only do outside the city, then speech, the greater, how much more so that it could only be spoken outside the city! And why did He not speak with him in the city? For it was full of abominations and idolatry. And before the land of Israel was chosen, all the lands were appropriate for speech.<sup>6</sup> Once it was chosen, all other lands were excluded<sup>7</sup> ... Know that the Shechinah is not revealed outside the land, for it is written: *And Yonah rose to flee to Tarshish, from before Gd* (Yonah 1:3). Now can one flee from Gd? Is it not written: *Where can I flee from Your presence ... If I ascend to heaven, You are there, etc. If I take wing with the dawn, there, too, Your hand will lead me...* (Tehillin 139:7-10). Rather, Yonah's intention was: I will go outside the land, where the Shechinah does not repose and reveal itself. For the gentiles are close to repentance — so that they not make Israel liable. An analogy: The slave of a kohen flees from his master, saying: I will go to the cemetery, a place where my master cannot come after me. His master

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<sup>4</sup> How does Pharaoh expect to find Gd in his palace or to find his name in his library next to the gods of all the nations listed there? For what is the kohen (Gd) doing in the land of Egypt which is full of impurity and idolatry, like a cemetery?! Note the expression: "You might search for the dead amongst the living, but will the living be found amongst the dead?" The dead are surely found amongst the living as they are cared for from the moment they die until they are brought to burial - death is part of life. But the live cannot be in the world of the dead. Why look for them there? In fact, however, living people do go to cemeteries to visit the graves. The first half of the sentence also demands explanation, as it is stated as if it is normal to search for the dead among the living. This indicates that there are situations of confusion between living and dead (not to mention cases of people who actually died remaining in the daily life of others). This may leave open the possibility of another opinion regarding the place of a kohen in the cemetery that will be discussed below.

<sup>5</sup> See Vayikra Rabbah 6:6, not only regarding Pharaoh and the Exodus, but also as an explanation of the verse in Yeshayahu 8:19: *Now, should people say to you, "Inquire of the ghosts and familiar spirits that chirp and moan; for a people may inquire of its divine beings—of the dead on behalf of the living. See the language of the midrash there: For a people may inquire of its divine beings - Every single nation turns to its own gods... of the dead on behalf of the living* – R. Levi says: This can be compared to someone who lost his son and went to search for him in the cemetery. A certain wise individual saw him and said: Your son who is lost – is he alive or is he dead? He said to him: He is alive. He said to him: You fool! You might search for the dead among the living, but will the living be found amongst the dead? The living care for the needs of the dead. Do the dead care for the needs of the living? Similarly our God lives and exists for eternity, as it says: *But the LORD is truly God* (Yirmiyahu 10:10). What is the meaning of "truly"? R. Abin says: For He is the living Gd and King of the universe.

All of this is based on the verse in Yirmiyahu that reads: *But the LORD is truly God: He is a living God, The everlasting King. At His wrath, the earth quakes, And nations cannot endure His rage.* The word "truly" in this context is defined as something that exists and is alive (Yerushalmi Berakhot 1:5) and this verse serves as the source for concluding Keriyat Shema with the words: "The Lord your God is true" (Bavli Berakhot 14b).

<sup>6</sup> For the word of Gd – Prophecy. See the context of "speech" that appears above. See also Mekhilta of R. Shimon bar Yohai 12:1: "Comparing the speech of Aharon to the speech of Moshe. Just as Moshe spoke outside the city, so Aharon spoke outside the city."

<sup>7</sup> In this excerpt we left out the discussion in the midrash of how prophets of Israel, like Yehezkel, received prophecy outside the Land of Israel. Answers include the suggestion that it was in the merit of the Patriarchs, that it took place only "in the place of pure waters," that he received the word of God both in Israel and outside of it, or, as taught by R. Elazar ben Tzadok: "He is told *Rise up and go to the valley* (Yehezkel 3:22), teaching you that the valley is an appropriate venue for prophecy." In this context, see also Mo'ed Katan 25a regarding eulogies given for Rav Huna.

says to him: I have many helpers like you.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Yonah said: I will go outside the land, a place where the Shechinah is not revealed. For the gentiles are close to repentance. The Holy One blessed be He responds: I have many messengers like you, as it says: *Then Gd cast a great wind on the sea* (Yonah 1:4).<sup>9</sup>

### **Shemot Rabbah 15:5 – Better I Should Make Myself Ritually Impure Than Lose My Terumah**

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt – Why does it not say “in Egypt”? R. Hanina says: The Holy One blessed be He said: It is written in the Torah: You must remain outside, while the man to whom you made the loan brings the pledge out to you (Devarim 24:11). I will do the same – “in the land of Egypt” and not “in Egypt,” rather outside. Moshe said the same: As I go out of the city, I shall spread out my hands to the LORD (Shemot 9:29).<sup>10</sup>

R. Shimon ben Lakish says: See how great was the love of Israel that the Holy One blessed be He revealed Himself in a place of idolatry, a place of filth, a place of impurity in order to redeem them. This can be compared to a kohen whose terumah fell into a cemetery. He said: What should I do? I cannot defile myself, nor can I leave my terumah there. Better I should become ritually impure a single time and then return to a state of purity so that I will not lose my terumah.<sup>11</sup> The nation of Israel

<sup>8</sup> The meaning of the Hebrew word is unclear. In the Horowitz-Rabin edition it is emended to read “helpers.” In his article “Lashon Hakhamim” pp. 476-477, Prof. Shaul Lieberman discusses the terminology used, and following the path of Hanokh Yellin suggests “helpers” meaning “servants.” (My thanks to Aviad HaKohen who directed me to this source). Later on, the midrash uses the term “messengers.”

<sup>9</sup> In the end, the “messengers like you” were Yonah himself, who was unable to escape from his responsibility to prophesize. Regarding our study, we find that the roles of the master and the slave become reversed here. Now it is the “slave” running to the cemetery in the hope that his “master” will be unable to catch him. Indeed, the Master does not enter the cemetery, rather He finds other means to bring the slave to Him. You may ask, even after all these parables, still we find that Gd reveals Himself to Moshe and Aharon in the Land of Egypt, not only to inform them of the plagues and the Exodus, but also for the commandment to establish the calendar months, a commandment for all generations that can be performed only in the Land of Israel (Berakhot 63a, although there are exceptions). Based on this, the kohen did enter the cemetery! This is why the midrash emphasizes that the command took place in “the Land of Egypt” and not in “Egypt” itself.

<sup>10</sup> This midrash follows the same line of thinking that we saw in the Mekhilta above. Gd stands outside like a lender coming to receive the guarantee from the borrower, recognizing that he cannot enter his house (a parable that requires explanation). But the surprise of Resh Lakish’s teaching is soon to come.

<sup>11</sup> A person can always return to a state of purity, but once food becomes ritually defiled, it cannot be fixed. The meaning of this parable is as follows. The nation of Israel is the terumah which will become permanently defiled if it is not removed from the cemetery, while the kohen is Gd who can choose to remain pure or who can purify himself. This is a nice idea, but it is difficult because this goes against the law prohibiting the kohen from becoming ritually defiled. How could this be presented in a public forum? The answer according to Jewish law is that we are discussing rabbinic defilement, as we brought in our essay on [Giving Honor to the King](#) in Parashat Va’era: “We would jump over coffins of the deceased,” or according to the law that allows one to blow on the dust when walking through an area where there is uncertainty with regard to the location of a grave or a corpse [*beit haperas*] to check for human remains. See Avodah Zara 13a: “One may go to a fair of gentiles and buy from the gentiles animals, and slaves, and maidservants...because it is as though he is rescuing his property from their hands. And if he is a priest, he may become ritually impure by going outside Eretz Yisrael in order to litigate with them and to contest their claims. And just as a priest may become ritually impure by going outside Eretz Yisrael, so may he become ritually impure for this purpose by entering a cemetery. Can it enter your mind to say that a priest may become impure by entering a cemetery?! Rather, the *baraita* is referring to an area where there is uncertainty with regard to the location of a grave or a corpse [*beit haperas*] that imparts ritual impurity by rabbinic law.” We find a similar argument in Bava Metzia 114a regarding Eliyahu who was found in a cemetery, who explained that gentile graves do not impart ritual impurity (although according to that explanation, the point of our parable is moot). But all of this is for scholars of Jewish law to discuss. For our purposes what is important is the connection to the opening verse and the commandment regarding establishing the months: *The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt*. How could Gd appear in Egypt, a place of ritual defilement, to command a law that is applicable only in the Land of Israel? The author of midrash explains: On behalf of the nation

are Gd's terumah, as it says: Israel was holy to the LORD, The first fruits of His harvest (Yirmiyahu 2:3), which was found amongst the graves... The Holy One blessed be He said: How can I redeem them? I cannot leave them there. Better I should go down and save them, as it says: I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians (Shemot 3:8). And after He removed them, He called to Aharon and He purified him, as it says: Thus he shall purge the Shrine of the uncleanness and transgression of the Israelites (Vayikra 16:16).<sup>12</sup>

### Shemot Rabbah 15:19 – The Kohen Goes to His Orchard

On whose behalf did the Holy One, blessed be He appear in Egypt? On behalf of Moshe. R. Nisim says: This can be compared to a kohen who had an orchard of figs, and in that orchard was a *beit haperas*.<sup>13</sup> He desired to eat his figs. He said to someone: Tell the sharecropper that the owner of the field says to bring him two figs. He went and did so. The sharecropper said: Who is the owner? Go back to your work!<sup>14</sup> The kohen said: I will go to the orchard. They said to him: You will enter a place of impurity? He said to them: Even if there are 100 impurities I will go, so that my messenger should not be humiliated. Similarly, when Israel was in Egypt, the Holy One blessed be He said to Moshe: *Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh* (Shemot 3:10).<sup>15</sup> He went, but Pharaoh said to Moshe: *Who is the LORD that I should heed Him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go* (Shemot 5:2). The Holy One blessed be He said: I will go to Egypt...The

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of Israel the kohen will enter a cemetery. In order to make this point he is willing to present a parable that appears to negate Jewish law. See our essay [This month shall mark for you](#) on Parashat HaHodesh.

<sup>12</sup> There are significant textual variants in the closing line of this midrash. According to the version brought here, first God purifies Aharon, mirroring the service of Yom Kippur where Aharon first atones for himself and his family, and only afterwards the people of Israel. According to the parable, the kohen (Gd) first goes down to save the flesh-and-blood kohen (who is His messenger), who is the one who saves the terumah (Israel). Other manuscripts read: "And after He removed them He called to Aharon and said to him: Purify Me, as it says: *He shall purge the innermost Shrine* (Vayikra 16:33), *Thus he shall purge the Shrine of the uncleanness and transgression of the Israelites* (Vayikra 16:16). It is Aharon who is purifying Gd! In this way, the circle of ritual defilement of food that cannot be fixed is closed, in contrast with the ritual defilement of the kohen, who can become purified (see the beginning of the previous note). Gd goes down to save Israel an instant before its impurity will become permanent defilement in the midst of Egyptian impurity (see our essay on [Go, pick out lambs for your families](#) in this parasha). In turn, Israel, as represented by the kohen gadol serving in the Temple, is asked to purify Gd. This purification takes place not only at the moment of the Exodus from Egypt and in the mishkan in the desert, but, in fact, every year in the Temple. *Once a year* (Vayikra 16:34) the atonement ceremony takes place in the Temple, which is purified *from the uncleanness and transgression of the Israelites*. It is as if *He abides with them in the midst of their uncleanness*. The ways of the midrash are amazing!

<sup>13</sup> A *beit haperas* is a field that contained a grave that was plowed over, so that now the entire field is viewed as possibly impure. The level of ritual defilement in such a field is rabbinic. In this parable it symbolizes the ritual defilement of Egypt that is described in biblical verses and subsequently in midrashim. See, for example, Tanhuma Shemot 23 regarding the symbolism of the sign of leprosy performed by Moshe. He said to him: *Put your hand into your bosom... his hand was leprous as snow*. Just as leprosy is impure, so Egypt is impure and defiles the Israelites. *He put his hand back into his bosom... it was restored like the rest of his flesh* – so I will purify Israel from the ritual defilement of Egypt.

<sup>14</sup> The sharecropper – who is Pharaoh – denies the existence of the owner, the kohen – who is Gd – and refuses to give him the figs – the Israelites. The first messenger is, of course, Moshe.

<sup>15</sup> See the derasha of R. Elazar (Shemot Rabbah 3:3) on the uniqueness of the way the word "go" is written, with the letter *heh* appended at its end. "*Lekha* – with certainty – that is the meaning of the additional *heh* at the end of the word, teaching that if you do not redeem them, there is no other to redeem them." Once Moshe received this mission, there was no one else who could do it, and the messenger became responsible for his mission.

ministering angels said to Him: You will go to Egypt, a place of ritual defilement? He said to them: I will go so that Moshe, my messenger, should not be humiliated.<sup>16</sup>

### **Shemot Rabbah 15:16 – The Holy One, Blessed be He was in Exile With Them**

*The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt* – What is the Holy One, blessed be He doing in Egypt? On behalf of Israel. R. Yitzhak Napha says: This can be compared to the case of a matron who was always complaining to the king, so he placed her in prison and left her. The king then joined her in prison.<sup>17</sup> They said to him: What concern is it of yours? He said to them: As long as I am with her, no one will speak poorly of her. Similarly, when Israel became enslaved in Egypt, it is as though the Holy One blessed be He joined them in exile, as it says: *I Myself will go down with you to Egypt* (Bereishit 46:4). Similarly in Babylonia...in Media...in Greece, the Holy One blessed be He was with them. They said to Him: Why all this? He said to them: As long as I am with them, no one will speak poorly of them.<sup>18</sup>

### **Shemot Rabbah 18:1 – The Holy One, Blessed be He Hastens into Pharaoh's Palace<sup>19</sup>**

Pharaoh said to him: Until when will you enter here? Go away from me; guard yourself, do not see my face again! (Shemot 10:28). Moshe said to him: You have spoken well; I will not see your face again. The Holy One, blessed be He, said, What? I still require that Pharaoh be informed of one more plague!<sup>20</sup> Immediately, He hastened to enter the palace of Pharaoh on behalf of Moshe - who said to

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<sup>16</sup> Here we find a clear repetition of the motif of the kohen who defiles himself knowingly – this time on behalf of the messenger, rather than for terumah or figs, and again we ask the question: What Would a Kohen be Doing in a Cemetery? Granted that we are discussing a situation of rabbinic defilement (*beit haperas*), but is there no concern that the listeners will misinterpret the message?

<sup>17</sup> The Greek word that appears here means a prison or place of detention. Note that in the parable, the king first places her in prison and leaves her, but then – with no explanation – returns to join her. Does this have significance for the lesson? See our essay [Fear not to go down to Egypt](#) where we discussed whether the verse: *I Myself will go down with you to Egypt* is a personal promise to Yaakov or a promise made to all of Yaakov's family. Perhaps this transition from personal to national can explain the change in the king's behavior toward the matron.

<sup>18</sup> In contrast with the two approaches that we have seen above – the approach of the Mekhilta that Gd remains “outside” in the land of Egypt rather than in Egypt itself and the approach of Shemot Rabbah of the kohen who enters the cemetery to save his terumah or to eat his figs – here we find a third approach that suggests that Gd never abandoned His people, and that He was always with them in exile and in slavery. This midrash belongs to a motif of the Divine Presence in exile wherever the nation of Israel finds itself, one that appears in many midrashim and is based on a combination of a verse in Tehillim (91:15): *I will be with him in his affliction*, and a verse in Yeshayahu (63:9): *In all their afflictions He was afflicted*. Nevertheless, as noted above, in the parable the king first abandons the matron and only later rejoins her. Thus, the midrash appears closer to the kohen who enters the cemetery, and similarly the king enters the prison even though it is below his dignity. Perhaps it is from here that the Pesikta Zutrata and the Sekhel Tov (Buber) that we brought above in n. 3 took the idea: “What would a kohen be doing in a cemetery? Why would the king be in a slaughterhouse?”

<sup>19</sup> With this source we complete the list from Shemot Rabbah that contains the main motif of the kohen in a cemetery in connection with the Exodus.

<sup>20</sup> To understand this midrash it would be useful to review the verses at the end of Chapter 10 and the beginning of Chapter 11 that are viewed by the midrash as a single story, even though they are divided both by the traditional chapter divisions and by the Torah reading tradition of the Land of Israel. Following the plague of Darkness, Pharaoh rejects Moshe's demand to free the entire nation and chases him out of the palace, saying: *Do not see my face again!* Perhaps in the excitement of the moment, Moshe agrees: *You have spoken well; I will not see your face again.* But Gd hastens to say: *But I have one more plague to bring against Pharaoh, and he must be informed of it in advance so that he recognizes who it is that is bringing the plagues against him. How can this problem be solved?*

him: I will not see your face again - so that he would not be found to be a fabricator.<sup>21</sup> And you find that the Holy One, blessed be He, did not speak with Moshe in the house of Pharaoh except for that time. From where do we know this? As it is stated: When I leave the city, I will raise my hands to the Lord (Shemot 9:29), and now the Holy One, blessed be He, hastened and spoke with Moshe,<sup>22</sup> as it is stated: Still one plague will I bring upon Pharaoh (Shemot 11:1). Once Moshe heard this, he rejoiced and became great, as it is stated: Also the man, Moshe, was very great in the Land of Egypt (Shemot 11:3), and he began to cry out in public: Thus says the LORD: Toward midnight I will go forth among the Egyptians (Shemot 11:4). You have spoken well, saying: I will not see your face again. I, myself, will not come again to you, but rather you will come to me.<sup>23</sup>

### **Bavli Bava Metzia 30a – And Disregard Them, Sometimes You Disregard Them**

If a person found a sack or a basket or any other item that it is not his typical manner to take and carry because it is beneath his dignity, he shall not take it. The Gemara asks: From where are these matters derived? It is as the Sages taught in a *baraita*: *You shall not see your brother's ox or his sheep wandering and disregard them* (Devarim 22:1), there are occasions in which you may disregard lost items and there are occasions in which you may not disregard them. How so? In a case of a priest and the lost item is in the graveyard, or where he was an elderly person and it is not in keeping with his dignity to tend to the item, or where the value of his labor was greater than the value of the lost item of the other person, therefore, it is stated: *And disregard them*. The Gemara asks: For what case was a verse necessary to derive that one may disregard a lost item? If we say that the verse is necessary for the case of a priest and the lost item in the graveyard, it is obvious, as the obligation to return the lost item is a positive mitzva, while entry of a priest into a graveyard is prohibited by both a prohibition and a positive mitzva, and there is a principle that a positive mitzva does not override a prohibition and a positive mitzva.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> If Gd informs Moshe of the Plague of the First-Born (of which Moshe was already aware from the time he was given this mission – see Shemot 4:23 – even though he did not know when it would occur), he will be obligated to return to Pharaoh to inform him about it after he had already said: *I will not see your face again*.

<sup>22</sup> In Pharaoh's home, rather than outside the city. See the Mekhilta brought on the first page.

<sup>23</sup> The midrash continues, saying that not only Pharaoh, but also: "your general that is standing with you - and he is your head officer - and all of these in your palace retinue will come to me with you and request of me - and bow down to me - that we should leave from here" but the Torah, concerned with Pharaoh's honor, says: *And all of your servants will come down to me and bow down to me* – in the plural rather than in the singular, because of the honor of the king. See our essay [To give honor to the king](#) on Parashat Va'era. Regarding our topic, we again find the motif of the kohen who goes into the cemetery, this time on Moshe's behalf, that he should not be considered a fabricator, similar to the sentence we saw earlier "that my messenger should not be humiliated." This time, almost spontaneously, Gd realizes that Moshe has entered into a debate with Pharaoh over who will or will not see the other one, and He hastens to Pharaoh's palace – the very one where earlier Pharaoh had searched for "the Gd of the Hebrews" in his archives – to honor his messenger and allow him to go out with the proclamation: *Thus says the LORD: Toward midnight I will go forth among the Egyptians*. Again, note how the midrash is offering a simple commentary on the last verses in Chapter 10 and the first verses in Chapter 11.

<sup>24</sup> It is obvious that it is prohibited for a kohen to become ritually defiled or to eat impure terumah (except for case where someone's life is at stake), and from all of the sources that deal with this question we chose the one that deals with issues of returning lost objects, which is connected with our topic. The importance of this commandment, which appears in Ki Tetze (Devarim 22:1-3), notwithstanding – see our essay [Sometimes You Disregard Them](#) – there are occasions when this mitzvah may not be fulfilled. One of the cases is when the lost object is situated in a cemetery, and the finder is a kohen. According to the conclusion of the Gemara, this is obvious and there is no need for the verse and the homiletical derivation of "sometimes you disregard them," because the positive commandment to return a lost object cannot supersede the laws – both positive and negative – of ritual purity incumbent on the kohen. With this background, the previous midrashim that we saw regarding the kohen (Gd) entering the cemetery (Egypt) to save the lost object

**Vayikra Rabbah 23:2 – To Take for Himself One Nation From the Midst of Another**

*Like a lily among thorns* – R. Eliezer interpreted this verse regarding the Exodus from Egypt. Just as it is difficult to pick the lily from amongst the thorns, so the redemption of Israel was difficult for the Holy One, blessed be He. This is the meaning of the verse: *Or has any god ventured to go and take for himself one nation from the midst of another* (Devarim 4:34) – these are uncircumcised and these are uncircumcised, these style their hair in a forelock and these style their hair in a forelock, these wear mixed fabrics and these wore mixed fabrics. From the measure of justice, Israel should never have been redeemed! R. Shmuel bar Nakhmani said: If the Holy One, blessed be He, had not bound himself with an oath, Israel would never have been redeemed.<sup>25</sup>

**Shemot Rabbah 32:8 – I am Sending an Angel Before You**

Moshe said to Him: You are sending an angel with me? But that was not the arrangement! Did You not say: *I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land* (Shemot 3:8)? And now You say: *I am Sending an Angel Before You! Unless You go in the lead, do not make us leave this place.*<sup>26</sup>

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(Israel) stands out even more. It is as though they are repeating this law with a different emphasis: “*and disregard them* – there are occasions in which you may not disregard them.” There are times when the lost object must be returned at all costs. *It is a time to act for the LORD* (Tehillim 119:126).

<sup>25</sup> We discussed this midrash at some length in our essay [Go, pick out lambs](#) on this parasha, and elsewhere. This time we would like to connect it with our current discussion and argue that Gd’s difficulty with redeeming Israel stemmed from the need of the kohen to enter the cemetery. The terumah had become so defiled that it was difficult to discern it. The cemetery was not only Egypt and its environs, rather the nation of Israel, which had practiced idolatry in Egypt, and were, themselves, impure. Upon entering the cemetery, it was difficult for the kohen to recognize the terumah, which had become so similar to everything else that was there. “These are uncircumcised and these are uncircumcised...” It was only the oath made to the Patriarchs that forced the kohen to break the law, and, perhaps, that is what helped him identify the terumah in the midst of the defiled detritus. Now both the terumah and the kohen need to undergo a process of purification. The midrash aggadah evades the concerns of the midrash halakhah – all on behalf of the redemption of Israel (and the honor of the messenger, Moshe).

<sup>26</sup> Although the expression “a kohen in the cemetery” does not appear here, we believe that it, too, is connected to our theme, because of a midrash that appears in Vayikra Rabbah (26:5) on Parashat Emor: “This can be compared to a kohen and an ordinary Jew who both became ill. The expert doctor who was called to treat them gave instructions to the ordinary Jew but left the kohen alone. The kohen said to him: Why are you treating him and not me? He said to him: He is an ordinary Jew who walks between graves, but you are a kohen who does not frequent cemeteries. That he why I treat him and not you.” Another midrash that supports this connection appears in Vayikra Rabbah (24:7) on Parashat Kedoshim: “This is like once when the kohen gadol was traveling. An ordinary Jew approached him and said: I will accompany you. He said to him: My son. I am a kohen and I only travel on pure paths and I do not walk among the graves. If you want to accompany me, fine. But if not, be aware that at some point I will leave you and go my own way.” The kohen (Gd), went to the cemetery to save the terumah (Israel). But then He returns to His status as a kohen and accompanying Him requires walking only on paths that are pure – *let your camp be holy* – something that is difficult for the nation of Israel. After they sin with the Golden Calf, Gd plans to appoint an angel to accompany them, since He can no longer do so as had done since the Exodus. Moshe is upset about this, and he demands that the entrance of the kohen into the cemetery – the accompaniment of the Divine Presence with the Israelites even when they sin and become ritually defiled – must continue on an ongoing basis. His argument is that of a *kal va-homer*: If Gd was willing to defile Himself by going down to Egypt, now that He has redeemed the terumah from the cemetery, should He not be willing to accompany their encampment even if they sinned and became ritually defiled? (Of course, Gd’s response could have been that Egypt was a one-time exception to the rule). Perhaps we can also add an additional midrash from Bamidbar Rabbah (9:16): “This is similar to a kohen who entered the cemetery whose slave waited for him outside, lest he become ritually defiled – should he not enter and be like his master?” See the midrash there to understand the parallel to the Sotah being placed before Gd and before the kohen. We saw above the midrash describing how the foolish slave went searching for his master in the cemetery, as well as the midrash that described the escaping slave hiding from his master there. This third case describes the master who first enters the cemetery and expects that his slave will follow him in, based on a *kal va-homer*. Moshe went to Egypt after Gd informed him that He was going there. The slave (Moshe) could not stay behind and had no choice but to follow his master there. The slave defiled himself in the wake of his master. Now the master says: I will go no further with you. The slave (Moshe) now complains to his master (Gd) saying: It is because of you that I went down and defiled myself with you. Now you want to send me on my own? *Do not make*

**Midrash Mishlei (Buber) Parasha 9**

It once happened that R. Akiva was imprisoned in jail and R. Yehoshua ha-Garsi, his student, was serving him. On the eve of the holiday, he left him and went to his house. Eliyahu came and stood at the entrance of his house. He said to him: Peace be unto you, my teacher. He said to him: Peace be unto you, my teacher and master. He said to him, "Is there anything that you require? He said to him: I am a priest and I have come to tell you that R. Akiva has died in jail. Immediately they both went to the jail and found the opening of the gate of the jail open and the minister of the jail was sleeping and all the people who were in the jail were also sleeping. And they lay R. Akiva on the bed and went out with him. Immediately Eliyahu (may he be remembered for the good) attended to him and took him on his shoulders. And when R. Yehoshua ha-Garsi saw this, he said to Eliyahu: My teacher, did you not say to me: I am Eliyahu the priest, and a priest is forbidden to become impure through contact with a dead body! He said to him: It is enough for you, R. Yehoshua, my son, God forbid - there is no impurity from the righteous, and also not from their students.<sup>27</sup>

**Closing thoughts:** Regarding the kohen who becomes ritually defiled in order to save the terumah, which appears to negate the halakhah (see note 11), see Massekhet Semahot 4:14: "A kohen is permitted to become ritually impure and leave the Land of Israel for matters of monetary law and capital law, sanctification of the month and intercalating a leap year, to save his field from a gentile, to study Torah and to get married. R. Yehudah says: If he has no one from whom to learn he may become ritually impure, but otherwise he should not become ritually impure. R. Yosi says: Even if he has from whom to learn he may become ritually impure, for he may not be able to learn from any person. And the story is told of Yosef ha-Bavli who became ritually impure when he left to study with R. Yosi in Sidon." It would appear that the ritual impurity of the lands of the gentiles and of leaving the Land of Israel (see the story of the kohen who desired to leave Israel in Tanhuma Tazria 6) is not as severe as the impurity of a cemetery. But this still needs further study.

One additional example is found in Midrash Tanhuma Parasht Terumah 1: "You find that there are two terumot chosen by Gd – one for the mishkan and one for the kohanim. The terumah for the kohanim is dependent on their being Benei Torah. R. Yannai says: Any kohen who is not a Ben Torah, it would be permissible to eat terumah on his grave." R. Yannai was so upset with a kohen who was not a Ben Torah that he was willing to offer rebuke that goes against Jewish law.

**Shabbat Shalom!****Mehalkei Hamayim**


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*us leave this place* stands in contrast with *I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians*. Moshe's demand is that Gd fulfill the entire verse: *I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land to a good and spacious land*. The kohen's responsibility to the terumah that had become ritually defiled is not a one-time affair, rather it is ongoing – at least until they enter the Land of Israel. See our essay [I am Sending an Angel Before You](#).

<sup>27</sup> Perhaps this contains another answer. If there is no impurity from the righteous – and not only the righteous like R. Akiva, but also from their students (like R. Yehoshua ha-Garsi himself) – perhaps we can suggest a *kal va-homer* that there is no impurity in the nation of Israel. The terumah never really became defiled. It is also possible to include the idea that "ritual impurity is overridden in cases involving the public" that is applied to the korban Pesach, which serves as the central remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt.