

Parashat Pinchas

Parashat Pinchas tells of the formal designation of Yehoshua, Moshe's closest disciple, as his successor to the mantle of leadership of *Benei Yisrael*. God instructs Moshe in this context, "He [Yehoshua] shall stand before Elazar the *kohen* and inquire of him regarding the decision of the *Urim* before God..." (27:21). In other words, when questions of national policy and the like arose, Yehoshua would consult with God through the medium of the *Urim Ve-tumim*, a device worn by the *kohen gadol* that served as an oracle of sorts conveying God's response to the *kohen gadol*'s queries. Unlike Moshe, who would consult with God directly when faced with questions of this nature, Yehoshua was required to employ the medium of the *Urim Ve-tumim*.

Commenting on the opening clause of this verse – "He shall stand before Elazar the *kohen*" – the Midrashic work *Sifrei Zuta* writes, "The Almighty afforded honor to Elazar, that even the king stands before him." According to the *Sifrei Zuta*, God's instruction that Yehoshua should "stand before" the high priest stands separate and apart from the subsequent clause, concerning the *Urim Ve-tumim* inquiry. God here establishes the law that a Jewish king – like Yehoshua – must stand in the presence of the *kohen gadol*.

Several writers have suggested that this passage in the *Sifrei Zuta* is the source for Maimonides' ruling in *Hilkhot Melakhim* (2:5):

Everybody comes before him [the Jewish king] when he so wishes, and they stand before him and bow to the ground. Even a prophet of Israel stands before the king and bows to the ground... But the *kohen gadol* does not come before the king unless he [the *kohen gadol*] so desires, and he does not stand before him; rather, the king stands before the *kohen gadol*, as it says, "He shall stand before Elazar the *kohen*..." Nevertheless, it is a *mitzva* for the *kohen gadol* to honor the king and allow him to sit and to stand in his presence when he comes to him...

Based on this verse in Parashat Pinchas, Maimonides rules that the *kohen gadol* – unlike every other Jew, including prophets – bears no obligation to stand in the king's presence. To the contrary, as God demands of Yehoshua, the king must, strictly speaking, stand before the *kohen gadol* to accord him honor.

How might we explain the unique stature of the *kohen gadol* in this regard? Why would a prophet be required to show respect to a king, whereas the *kohen gadol* would not? In several places Maimonides describes the intensive "spiritual training" required to acquire prophecy; the high priesthood, by contrast, is earned through succession. Intuitively, then, we might have concluded that to the contrary, the prophet's stature exceeds that of the prophet. Why, then, does Maimonides require the prophet to bow to a king, but not the *kohen gadol*?

The answer, perhaps, lies in the distinction between the *kohen gadol*'s individual stature, and his role as representative of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. As an individual, one could argue that he deserves no more honor and distinction than a prophet, and should therefore be required to display honor to the king. But the *kohen gadol*, as the "highest-ranking official" in the Temple, represents the *Mikdash*; he is the figurehead, so-to-speak,

of the Almighty's representative earthly abode. The Torah could not require the *kohen gadol* to bow before the king, because the king's stature and authority must be subordinate to that of God's. The king – and the entire nation – was to understand that the true "king" of Israel was God, and the true "seat of government" was not the royal palace, but the Temple.

Thus, it is not due to the *kohen gadol*'s personal credentials that he is not strictly required to show honor to the king. Rather, his role as representative of the Temple demands the king's subordination to him, to underscore the king's subjugation to divine authority, and the fact that any honor and power he possesses has been granted to him by, and is dependent upon, the Almighty – the true King of Israel.