

Elevating the Soul

The Designation of the *Leviim* Today

By Rabbi Yehoshua Binyamin Falk

The eternal Torah, whose every radiant word and letter is replete with profound meaning for our lives, elaborately transmits to us (in over 100 *pesukim* across *parshios Bamidbar, Naso, Behaalosecha* and *Korach*) the designation, separation, and elevation of Shevet Levi. “Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, ‘But you should not count Shevet Levi, and you shall not take a census of them among *Bnei Yisrael*. You shall appoint the *Leviim* over the Mishkan Ha’edus, over all its utensils and everything that belongs to it...’”

Rashi, our most illustrious commentator, tells us that the *Leviim* merited this elevated status because of their loyalty and courage at the incident of the Golden Calf. The entire Shevet Levi refused to participate in that sin, proving their unswerving dedication to the Creator of the Universe.

The Ramban further enlightens us: “The task of the *Leviim* was not so much to protect the Mishkan [and Beis Hamikdash] as a militia, but rather to serve as an honor guard, as befits the royal palace.”

The Jewish people’s task is to be an instrument of recognition of Hashem and His Will in this world. *Chazal* tell us that a true king only assumes status as a ruler if there exists a nation that acknowledges and follows his decrees. Thus, “*Leviim*” in all generations are those Jews who steadfastly keep their focus on proper, enthusiastic service of Hashem through His Torah.

The *Leviim*’s duty in the Mishkan/Beis Hamikdash was to assist the *Kohanim* — among other ways by singing and playing musical instruments as *korbanos* were brought. The Ibn Ezra informs us that the *Leviim* were to retain the duty of singing forever. Today, the sound of our voices and music is, if expressed sincerely, an inner expression of our souls yearning to come close to the Creator. Song also expresses the fact that the total harmony of the universe is under the absolute control and guidance of Hashem.

The Divine service of Levi represents the part of each of us that links us forever with our spiritual purpose in this world. Rashi (on the same *passuk*) tells us that “from this time on, the *Leviim* were to be separated from the rest of the nation and elevated to a new status.” The Seforno (also on this *passuk*) informs us that “because the *Leviim* would be performing their service on behalf of the nation, the rest of the people would have the obligation to support them by giving them tithes.”

An ArtScroll commentary explains it thus: “Those who serve the people by fulfilling their responsibilities in the Tabernacle, by teaching the Torah, or by performing any other spiritual tasks are not to be regarded as supplicants. It is a

national responsibility to provide for those who carry out the spiritual obligations of the rest of the people.”

The *Leviim* were counted from one month and upward, with no limit to age, indicating that their spiritual mission is not dependent on age or strength. The Rambam describes the mission of the *Leviim* in *Hilchos Shemitah veYovel* (13:12-13): “They are the legion of Hashem, whose task is to serve Him and to teach His Torah and way of life to others.” He adds that anyone who follows the example of the *Leviim* becomes sanctified as *kodesh kodashim*, and Hashem will be his portion and heritage for all eternity. In this world, he will merit what befits him, as the *Kohanim* and *Leviim* merited it.

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This status of “Levi” is conferred for life upon all who totally dedicate their lives to the service of Hashem, independent of age or strength.

A wonderful concept derived from the *Leviim*’s designation is brought to light by *Bamidbar Rabbah* (3:7): The infant *Leviim*, counted from one month old, surely did not participate in guarding the Mishkan, so they should have been

counted from when they began service. However, Hashem wished to reward them greatly for their loyal service, so when they reached thirty years of age and began to serve, He retroactively rewarded them as if they had indeed served from the age of one month.

This concept should be applied to our own lives. If we totally dedicate our time,

energy and potential from now on to the service of Hashem, we may merit to have our entire lives credited as Divine service, as the *Leviim* were blessed. How much hope and opportunity this teaching offers us! We can no longer say, “It’s too late,” or “I have already wasted so much of my life.” If we start today with absolute dedication, we can be credited with lifelong service.

Now let’s look at a few classical chasidic commentaries on the names and purposes of the three sons of Levi, who were each given a unique role in the carrying of the Mishkan. *Bamidbar* 3:17 states, “These were the sons of Levi, by their names: Gershon, Kehas and Merari.” But in 4:4 it states, “This is the work of the sons of Kehas in the Ohel Moed: the most holy...”

The commentators explain that Kehas was later listed *before* Gershon because he was designated to carry the holiest parts of the Mishkan, meaning that he had become elevated because of his assignment.

What can we learn and apply to our lives from this part of the Torah? The *Kedushas Levi* and the *Noam Elimelech* inform us that Gershon, Kehas and Merari represent three varying but proper approaches available to us, depending on our spiritual level, when we are confronted by challenging circumstances.

There is the level of the *tzaddik*, whose service is so unswerving that no temptation lures him away from his steadfast dedication to the Creator. This is symbolized by the sons of Kehas, who carried the Aron Hakodesh miraculously on their shoulders, like *tzaddikim* who don’t use the desires or objects of this world for their own personal pleasure but only for Divine service.

The next level of *avodah* is practiced by those who stay at a distance from the allurements of the *yetzer hara* by make spiritual fences, as alluded to in the name “Gershon” — separating or divorcing themselves from anything that will blemish their service.

Then there are those times when, for all of us, the righteousness of Kehas or the protective attributes of Gershon are not within our reach. At such times we must use the inner strengths represented by Merari. Literally, the name means “bitter”; and it is at those times, when life seems bleak, when one feels helpless and besieged, that the proper *avodah* is to cry out sincerely to our Creator.

Merari was assigned to carry the heaviest parts of the Mishkan, teaching us that the proper path of service during difficult times, as hinted to in his name, is to accept the yoke of Heaven with sincere repentance.

When the Jewish nation was asked, “*Mi laHashem...?*” the entire Shevet Levi stepped forward. May we all merit to “step forward” and bring closer the Final Redemption, soon in our days. ❏