

Levite Leverage: Parshat Behaalotcha

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Mrs. Shira Smiles
Summary by Channie Koplowitz Stein

The inauguration of the tribe of Levi to the service in the sanctuary the ritual contained elements of the purification of a *metzora* (leper), as well as rituals of sacrificial offerings. Like the *metzora*, the Levites are to shave their entire bodies. Like the grain offerings and the lulav, the Levites are to be waved in all directions. Like the animal offerings, first Bnei Yisroel would lay their hands upon the Levites and then the Levites would lay their hands on the sacrificial animals.

The Levites were chosen to serve because they had refrained from sinning with the golden calf. Why then must they undergo a process related to the *metzora*? Perhaps since they were taking the place of the firstborn in the Sanctuary, the Leviim would now, as Rashi explains, go through a purification process instead of the sinners themselves whom they were replacing. The *Metzora* is considered as dead, and those who worship idols worship lifeless, dead objects. Therefore, to atone for this sin, the Levites were given a purification process similar to the *metzora*.

Yet the *kohanim* who performed the primary service in the Sanctuary did not undergo this purification process. Rabbi Munk explains that Hashem created and administers the world through *chesed*-loving kindness, and *din*-justice. The *kohanim* represent the attribute of loving kindness. Through their

service therefore they served as appropriate vehicles to channel Hashem's benevolence to the world. The Levites on the other hand were the people who carried out God's justice and killed those who had worshiped the golden calf. In order to represent *Bnei Yisroel* in invoking Hashem's benevolence toward *Bnei Yisroel*, they would need to be stripped of the quality of harsh judgment. Therefore they shaved themselves, symbolically stripping themselves of that layer of their persona. Then they were waved around to shake up their inner character, and finally, *Bnei Yisroel* placed their hands on the Levites to complete the procedure of transformation from judgment to mercy and loving kindness.

Still, shaving the hair seems like a sign of degradation. It may be that the Levites would have experienced a sense of arrogance at taking the place of the sinning firstborns. Therefore, Hashem had them undergo a humbling experience associated with sinners. Similarly, in our own service to the Almighty, we must also act and pray with a sense of humility.

"*Ki nitunim nitunim heimah li*. For they are given given to me ... instead of every firstborn of *Bnei Yisroel*." The Levites are 'given' to Hashem twice, implying an extreme sense of devotion to God, a feeling that comes from deep within themselves, says the *Lashon Chasidim*. Hashem wants this feeling of connection and devotion from all of us. He

wants us to feel it in every *mitzva* we do.

The Leviim epitomized this emotional attachment to Hashem and they acted on it. They also felt an overriding sense of responsibility for their brethren. Because of this, they were destined to be teachers scattered throughout the land. This is the kind of responsibility teachers must feel for each of their students, says the *Einei Yisrael*. This was the connection Shimon and Levy felt to their sister and the responsibility to take action to uphold her honor when she was defiled by Shechem. A sense of connection is at the very essence of the name Levi, "*Hapa'am yiloveh ishi elai*. This time my husband will become attached to me," stated his mother Leah when she named him.

Halekach Vehalebuv explains that as a corollary to this concept, when one of us sins, the entire body of *Klal Yisroel* is affected. Similarly, when one of us does *teshuvah*, all are forgiven. If we bear this in mind, if we love each other as we love ourselves and take responsibility for each other, it will be easier for us to avoid sin. Within this rubric also lies the responsibility to pray for our fellow Jew when he finds himself in difficult circumstances. We especially pray for someone to find his connection to God. Through their service, the Leviim had the responsibility of praying for *Bnei Yisroel* and maintaining that connection with Hashem.



Honorable Mention: Cheerfulness

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rabbi Hanoach Teller

The Torah teaches us how essential it is to have the attribute of *hakarat hatov* (gratefulness) even to those who did not intend to do you a favor. The Midrash explains what motivated Reuven to save Yosef. When Yosef recounted his dreams to the brothers he described how the moon and the sun and the 11 stars bowed to him. Reuven always feared he had been disenfranchised by the incident with Leah and Bilha. He was grateful that Yosef had showed him with his dream that he was still equal with his brothers and that he would not be removed from the Jewish people. He knew that Yosef did not intend to do him this favor, but he still expressed gratitude.

In Parshat Vaeira Hashem says to Moshe, "Say to Aharon, take your arm and stretch it over the waters of Egypt... that they may become blood." Rashi quotes the Midrash that Moshe told Aharon to strike the water since he felt incapable of doing it. How could he strike the water which had saved him so many

years before? The Talmud derives from this, "If you drink water from a well do not throw stones into it." If an institution does you a favor, be grateful. We are even commanded to pray for the welfare of our country. Many shuls do this on *Shabbat*. Rav Moshe Feinstein would make it a point every day to thank the *yeshiva* cook personally for the tasty meal she prepared. In Parshat Matot we read that the Jewish people went out to fight the Midianites but Moshe did not join them. The Midrash explains that when Moshe fled Egypt to Midyan he lived among the Midianites. Therefore he felt an obligation to express gratitude to them in this way.

Many of us tend to express our gratitude to family members far less than we do to strangers. We take it for granted that family should be doing for us but that doesn't absolve us from appreciation. We should try to minimize the favors we have done for others while maximizing what others have done for us. Avot d'Rav Natan says, "If your friend did you a small favor, consider it in your eyes as a

big favor." If someone has done you a kindness, you should repay others with kindness too. This creates a dynamic. We learn this from Pirkei Avot, "*Mitzva gorret mitzvah*." One *mitzvah* brings another.

It says in Parshat Vayishlach, "When Yaakov came in peace to Shechem, which was in the land of Canaan, he encamped before the city." The Talmud derives from this that he instituted something for the welfare of the community. Shmuel says he established marketplaces, while Rabbi Yochanan says he established bathhouses. This teaches us that when you visit a place you should express gratitude by contributing something to its welfare. Rav Chaim Shmuelewitz pointed out that boys can do this as well. Even if they don't have the resources to give a donation to their *yeshiva* they can still contribute to its spiritual environment. Whether it's coming on time to *sefer* or *davening*, every effort makes a difference.

The Connecting Thread of Chumash Bamidbar

Based on a Naaleh.com shiur by Rebbetzin Leah Kohn

The term *midbar* (desert) brings to mind the famous prophecy of Yirmiyahu. "So says Hashem, I remember the kindness of your youth how you followed me into the desert." It was certainly remarkable that an entire nation left Egypt and braved the elements of the desert. But as horrible as life in Egypt was, as slaves, their immediate needs were provided for by their masters and they did not go hungry. If you have nothing, you're totally dependent on Hashem. Knowing that your relationship with Him defines what you will or won't get is not easy. It's not just living on a physical level but living a life in which you always have to be on your toes to make sure Hashem will want to give you what you need. The generation that had courage to do so was a generation that experienced many miracles. When they entered the desert they were heading towards Mt Sinai where they experienced the peak in terms of the human experience. Thirty days later they worshiped the golden calf. *Sefer Shemot* ends with the building of the *Mishkan* and the divine presence that dwelled within.

Ideally, if Adam would not have sinned with the Tree of Knowledge, the first *Shabbat*

would have ushered in the era of *Mashiach*. Unfortunately, it would take more time. There were further incidents of failure, but eventually the kernel of the Jewish nation that would bring the world to its purpose emerged. *Sefer Shemot* tells us how it all happened. The Jewish people were purified in the smelting pot of Egypt. Before the giving of the Torah, they reached the intended peak. Hashem created this world to be a dwelling place for His Divine Presence. We are meant to bring Hashem into our physical reality. The Torah tells us, "*Va'yered Hashem al hahar*." Hashem came down to dwell in the midst of the Jewish people. This reality continued for 40 days until the Jews sinned with the golden calf. This is similar to what happened to Adam after the sin. David Hamelech writes, "I said you are divine, you are elevated people, but you will be like first man, you will die."

They returned to the status of Adam before the sin at *Matan Torah*. They were supposed to live forever and after entering *Eretz Yisrael*, the era of *Mashiach* would begin. But *Cheit Ha'egel* changed the picture. It's not exactly like the story of Adam, though, because the Jewish people had already received the *Torah*

and the essence of a Jew would endure. Hashem gave the nation the opportunity to repent and together with Moshe's prayers, Hashem granted them atonement. The last few verses in *Shemot* tell that Hashem came down again, like a repetition of *Matan Torah*, to dwell in the midst of the Jewish people. *Chazal* say it was a joyous day for Hashem just as the day when He created heaven and earth, because it brought the world to perfection.

The Shem Mishmuel explains that after the building of the *mishkan* all of creation returned to its purpose. The Jewish people too, stood ready to fulfill what they needed to do. It started with a very close connection to Hashem at *Har Sinai* followed by *Cheit Ha'egel* and the building of the *Mishkan* when Hashem came again to dwell among them. We look at *Cheit Ha'egel* as a failure, and it definitely changed our essence and affects us till today. But we can see it from another perspective. In a way the connection between Hashem and *Klal Yisrael* became even stronger than it was at *Sinai*. For a relationship that can overcome challenges and times of distance is obviously a lasting relationship.