

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT BAMIDBAR

The Status of the Tribe of Levi

By Rav Amnon Bazak

I. Why are the *Levi'im* not counted amongst *Bnei Yisrael*?

Our *parasha* begins with a description of the census taken throughout the tribes of Israel. God commands Moshe and Aharon to count all the men eligible to serve in the army, aged 20 and up. Twelve princes, "a man of each tribe," are named to assist in conducting the census (1:4-16). This list of princes omits any representative of the tribe of Levi, and it therefore comes as no surprise that the census does not include the tribe of Levi,¹ as indeed we are told explicitly at the conclusion:

But the Levites, by the tribe of their fathers, were not counted among them. (1:47)

This is followed, right at the end of the chapter, by a surprising command:

God spoke to Moshe saying: "Only the tribe of Levi you shall not count, nor shall you number them among *Bnei Yisrael*. (1:48-49)

Immediately thereafter, in chapter 2, the text describes the camp of Israel, and at its conclusion, the same message is emphasized once again:

But the Levites were not counted amongst *Bnei Yisrael*, as God had commanded Moshe. (2:32)

The reason for this verse's appearance here is understandable: since God had commanded not to count the *Levi'im*, it makes sense for the text to note that this command had been fulfilled. The verses at the end of Chapter 1, however, are puzzling from two angles: on the one hand, why is the command not to count the *Levi'im* recorded after the census rather than prior to it, which would seem to make more sense? On the other hand, if Moshe and Aharon understood on their own that the *Levi'im* should not be counted because no prince of the tribe had been appointed to count them, then why is there any need for an explicit command – since they had already been left out of the census in any case?

Ramban notes this problem and explains that Moshe had indeed understood on his own that the *Levi'im* should not be counted, since no prince of the tribe had been appointed for this purpose, but he remained "in doubt concerning the *Levi'im*, and did not know what to do in their regard." Therefore, when the census was complete, "God stipulated that he should not count them amongst *Bnei Yisrael*, but should count them separately." However, this answer fails to answer the question: if Moshe understood, correctly, that the *Levi'im* should not be counted as part of the census, then what is the meaning of his "doubt

¹ To preserve a count of twelve tribes, Ephraim and Menashe are counted as two separate tribes.

concerning the *Levi'im*"? Why was another command required, stating that they were not to be counted along with the other tribes?

It seems that the answer to our question lies in a different direction. Chapters 1 and 2 would appear to express two different reasons for the non-inclusion of the tribe of Levi in the census. In Chapter 1, the emphasis is on counting "all in Israel who are able to go forth to war" (1:3).² For this reason, the names of the princes of the tribes are noted – with the exception of the prince of the tribe of Levi. From the perspective of this chapter, there was no need to count the *Levi'im* because they were not eligible to go out to war, while the whole point of this census was to determine the size of the fighting forces prior to the planned entry into the land. Since the issue here is essentially a technical matter, there is no need for a special command not to count the *Levi'im* – and had they been counted, this would not have transgressed any prohibition; at most, it would have been a pointless exercise that might introduce some confusion among the commanders of the army.

However, in the second description, we find that the *Levi'im* are left out of the census of *Bnei Yisrael* not only because of what this tribe does not do, but also because of what it *does* do:

Only the tribe of Levi you shall not count (*lo tifkod*), nor shall you number them among *Bnei Yisrael*. But you shall appoint (*hafked*) the *Levi'im* over the Sanctuary of Testimony, and over all of its vessels... (1:49-50)

The Torah uses this root – *p-k-d* – over and over again to emphasize the unique role of the *Levi'im*:

And you shall appoint (*tifkod*) Aharon and his sons, and they shall keep their priesthood (3:10)

... overseeing (*pekudat*) those who keep the charge of the Sanctuary (3:32)

And the oversight (*pekudat*) of the charge of the sons of Merari... (3:36)

In other words, the *Levi'im* are not counted (*nifkadim*) amongst *Bnei Yisrael* because they are charged (*mufkadim*) with the Sanctuary of the Testimony, and as Rashi states, "It is proper for the King's guard to be counted separately." This entails an actual prohibition on including the *Levi'im* in the census, for this would show a lack of respect for their special status and role.

Thus, the *Levi'im* are not included in the census for two reasons: because they do not go out to war and because of their special role.

There is another aspect to the uniqueness of the tribe of Levi. The census of *Bnei Yisrael* includes "every male from the age of 20 and up," while the census of the tribe of Levi includes "every male from the age of one month and up" (3:15). The reason for this difference is that the census of *Bnei Yisrael* is a

² For this reason, the text notes explicitly in the count of each and every tribe, "... according to the number of names, from twenty years and upwards – all who were able to go forth to war." The word "*tzava*" (host, army, war) appears 14 times in this chapter, in the usual manner of key words, which appear in multiples of 7.

functional one, aimed at ascertaining the size of the army, while the count of the *Levi'im* testifies to their unique essence, and therefore includes any infant who has survived the first month and is considered as having value.³

At the same time, the Torah emphasizes later on that the function of the *Levi'im* should also be regarded as a "host" or "army." In chapter 4, we find repeated mention of "all who enter the host (*tzava*), to perform work in the Tent of Meeting."⁴ We may therefore amend our prior conclusion and state that the *Levi'im* are not counted along with the other tribes because they are not part of their "host" or "army" (*tzava*); rather, they are a host in their own right – the host of the Sanctuary service.⁵

II. The special status of the tribe of Levi

From here we may proceed to another surprising duality in the special status of the *Levi'im*. Twice our *parasha* defines their special duties. Let us examine the two descriptions, alongside each other:

1:48-53	3:5-10
<p>God spoke to Moshe, saying: "Only the tribe of Levi you shall not count, nor shall you number them among <i>Bnei Yisrael</i>. But you shall appoint the <i>Levi'im</i> over the <i>Mishkan</i> of the Testimony, and over all its vessels, and over all that belongs to it; they shall carry the <i>Mishkan</i> and all its vessels, and they shall minister to it, and they shall encamp around the <i>Mishkan</i>. And when the <i>Mishkan</i> journeys on, the <i>Levi'im</i> shall take it down, and when the <i>Mishkan</i> is to be pitched, the <i>Levi'im</i> shall set it up, and the stranger who comes near shall be put to death. And <i>Bnei Yisrael</i> shall encamp by their respective camps, and each by their banner, according to their hosts. But the <i>Levi'im</i> shall encamp around the <i>Mishkan</i> of Testimony, so that there will be no wrath upon the congregation of <i>Bnei Yisrael</i>. And the <i>Levi'im</i> shall keep the charge of the <i>Mishkan</i> of Testimony."</p>	<p>God spoke to Moshe, saying: "Bring near the tribe of Levi, and present them before Aharon, the <i>Kohen</i>, that they may minister to him. And they shall keep his charge, and the charge of the whole congregation, before the Tent of Meeting, to perform the work of the <i>Mishkan</i>. And they shall keep all the vessels of the Tent of Meeting, and the charge of <i>Bnei Yisrael</i>, to perform the service of the <i>Mishkan</i>. And you shall give the <i>Levi'im</i> to Aharon and to his sons; they are wholly give to him from <i>Bnei Yisrael</i>. And you shall appoint Aharon and his sons, and they shall keep their priesthood, and the stranger who comes near shall be put to death."</p>

³ Recall that in the context of a vow dedicating the personal value of a human being to the Temple, this assessment can be made from the age of one month (*Vayikra* 27:6).

⁴ This phrase appears in the chapter (with slight changes) six times, but in one instance we find: "All who enter in to join the host (*itzvo tzava*), to perform the work in the Tent of Meeting" (verse 23), such that the root "tz-v-a" appears a total of 7 times.

⁵ It would seem that the Torah regards the host of the Levite service more highly than the host of Israel, since the latter are counted "from twenty years" with no upper limit, while the *Levi'im* are counted "from thirty years and up, until fifty years" (4:3), such that only men in their prime are included. (Further on, in 8:24, we find: "This is as pertains to the *Levi'im*, from twenty-five years and up they shall enter in to join the host in the work of the Tent of Meeting" – see the commentators there.)

Both commands note the role of the *Levi'im* in keeping the charge of the *Mishkan* (1:53; 3:7) and their responsibility for its vessels (1:50; 3:8). However, chapter 1 notes explicitly (verse 53) that their role is to encamp around the *Mishkan*, thereby preventing God's wrath from consuming *Bnei Yisrael*, while chapter 3 would seem to suggest that this role is meant for Aharon and his sons (verse 10). What is the meaning of these discrepancies?

Apparently, there are two different aspects to the selection of the *Levi'im*. Chapter 3 places the *kohanim* – and Aharon, specifically – at the center. The roles of the *Levi'im* are explained in this chapter right after a genealogical list of Aharon and his sons (3:1-4). Once God has dedicated the *Kohanim* to the priestly service, He takes the *Levi'im* and gives them to Aharon:

Bring near the tribe of Levi, and present them before Aharon, the *Kohen*, that they may minister to him... And you shall give the *Levi'im* to Aharon and to his sons; they are wholly give to him from *Bnei Yisrael*.

The *Levi'im* here serve only as assistants to the *Kohanim*; they have no special identity of their own. The giving of the *Levi'im* to Aharon and his sons, the *Kohanim*, raises a question as to the source of the sanctity of the *Levi'im*: what makes them worthy of serving in the *Mishkan*? Here, the Torah explains that their sanctity arises from their replacement of the firstborn, who were originally dedicated to God following the plague of the firstborn in Egypt:

God spoke to Moshe, saying, "And I – behold, I have taken the *Levi'im* from among *Bnei Yisrael*, instead of all the firstborn who open the womb of *Bnei Yisrael*, such that the *Levi'im* are Mine. For all the firstborn are Mine: on the day that I smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I dedicated to Me all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast; they shall be Mine, I am the Lord." (3:11-13)

The Torah does not elaborate as to why the firstborn were replaced by the *Levi'im*.⁶ From the context of the chapter, it would appear that the reason is that the *Levi'im* are related, by family ties, to the *Kohanim*. In any event, chapter 3 contains no expression of the idea that the *Levi'im* have any special status; on the contrary, in order to confer a special status upon them, it is necessary to "borrow" the special status of the firstborn, by redeeming them with the *Levi'im*.

In chapter 1, in contrast, no mention is made of the *Kohanim*, and the *Levi'im* are awarded an independent status, with no connection to the firstborn. This is especially apparent when we compare the following two verses:

But you shall appoint the *Levi'im* over the *Mishkan* of the Testimony, and over all its vessels, and over all that belongs to it; they shall carry the *Mishkan* and all its vessels, and they shall minister to it. (1:50)

Bring near the tribe of Levi, and present them before Aharon, the *Kohen*, that they may minister to him. (3:6)

⁶ Rashi explains, based on *Chazal*, that the *Levi'im* had no share in the sin of the golden calf, and were therefore chosen in place of the firstborn, who had sinned. We shall address the golden calf below, but as regards the exchange of the firstborn, the text itself does not offer the slightest hint that it had anything to do with that episode. Moreover, the very fact that the *Levi'im* require the redemption of the firstborn as the source of their sanctity indicates that the choice of the *Levi'im* did not arise from any special virtue on their part.

Both verses tell us that the role of the *Levi'im* is to minister, but in chapter 1 they minister to the *Mishkan*, while in chapter 3 they minister to Aharon, the *Kohen*, and help him with the charge of the *Mishkan*. For this reason, we read in chapter 1 that the *Levi'im* encamp "around the Mishkan" – i.e., they have a camp of their own. This idea appears again in chapter 2, as a direct continuation of what we have seen in chapter 1:

The Tent of Meeting shall journey forth, with the camp of the *Levi'im* in the midst of the camps; as they encamp, so shall they journey – each in his place, by their banners. (2:17)

However, from chapter 3 onwards, no further mention is made of the Levite camp.

Our *parasha* thus presents two different aspects of the selection of the *Levi'im*. In chapter 1, there is a direct selection of the *Levi'im* to minister in the *Mishkan*; in chapter 3, there is a selection of the *Levi'im* as replacements for the firstborn, and they minister to the *Kohanim* and help them in their service. This gives rise to a further question: Chapter 3 addresses at length the source of the Levite status – their replacement of the firstborn. In Chapter 1, on the other hand, there is no mention of any source for their special status. What, then, is the source for the selection of the *Levi'im* in chapter 1?

It seems that chapter 1 expresses a different angle of the selection of the *Levi'im* as recounted in *Sefer Shemot*, in circumstances that are altogether different – immediately after the description of the festivities held before the golden calf:

Moshe stood at the gate of the camp and he said, "Who is on God's side? Let him come to me." And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves to him. And he said to them, "So says the Lord God of Israel: Let every man place his sword at his side; go to and fro from gate to gate in the camp, and kill every man his brother, and every man his neighbor, and every man his friend." And the sons of Levi did according to Moshe's word, and there fell of the people on that day about three thousand men. And Moshe said, "Consecrate yourselves today to the Lord, every man against his son and against his brother, that He may bestow a blessing upon you today." (*Shemot* 32:26-29)

The readiness of the tribe of Levi to kill even members of their own families earned them a blessing and a special new role: "Consecrate yourselves today to the Lord." The term "consecration" (*milui yadayim*) is familiar to us from the priesthood; indeed, in every other instance, the term applies to the *Kohanim* commencing their duties. For example:

You shall dress them – Aharon, your brother, and his sons with him, and you shall anoint them and consecrate them (*u-mileita et yadam*) and sanctify them, that they may minister to Me. (28:41)

Thus, there was also a direct selection of the *Levi'im* for their role, by virtue of their devotion to God's service, as proven in their deeds after the sin of the golden calf.

We therefore conclude that our *parasha* reflects two different aspects of the selection of the *Levi'im*. The first selection, described in chapter 1, arises from the sanctity of the tribe of Levi as a whole, as it was sanctified for God's service in the wake of the sin of the golden calf. From this perspective, the *Levi'im* serve in the *Mishkan* with no connection to the *Kohanim*,

and they have a camp of their own, surrounding the *Mishkan*. According to the other perspective, as reflected in chapter 3, the source of the holiness of the *Levi'im* is actually the prior selection of the firstborn; the *Levi'im* are simply the replacement for the firstborn. This perspective diminishes the role and status of the *Levi'im*; they are considered merely as ministering to the *Kohanim* and aiding them in the service of the *Mishkan*.

In conclusion, let us briefly consider how this duality with regard to the Levite status is expressed in the description of their actual dedication for their role, in chapter 8. There, we again find two clearly defined parts. The first part reads:

You shall bring the *Levi'im* before the Tent of Meeting, and you shall gather the whole assembly of *Bnei Yisrael*. And you shall bring the *Levi'im* before the Lord, and *Bnei Yisrael* shall place their hands upon the *Levi'im*. And Aharon shall offer the *Levi'im* before the Lord for a wave offering of *Bnei Yisrael*, that they may carry out God's service. (8:9-11)

This emphasizes the selection of the *Levi'im* in their own right, to "carry out God's service." Aharon shows them as a wave offering before God, as befitting people who have been chosen directly for their role by virtue of their inherent sanctity.

The second part of chapter 8 returns to the second aspect in our *parasha*:

And afterwards the *Levi'im* shall go in to perform the service of the Tent of Meeting, and you shall purify them and show them for a wave offering. For they are wholly given to Me from among *Bnei Yisrael*; as replacement for those who open every womb, the firstborn of all of *Bnei Yisrael*, have I taken them for Me. For all the firstborn of *Bnei Yisrael* are Mine, both man and beast; on the day that I smote every firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified them for Myself. And I have taken the *Levi'im* instead of all the firstborn of *Bnei Yisrael*, and I have given the *Levi'im* as a gift to Aharon and to his sons, from among *Bnei Yisrael*, to perform the service of *Bnei Yisrael* in the Tent of Meeting and to make atonement for *Bnei Yisrael*, so that there will be no plague among *Bnei Yisrael* when *Bnei Yisrael* approach the Sanctuary. (8:15-19)

Here again, there is mention of the "wave offering" made of the *Levi'im*, but not "before the Lord." In this section, which emphasizes the sanctity of the *Levi'im* as arising from their replacement of the firstborn, their role is not "to perform God's service," as in the previous unit, but rather a more minor and modest role: "to perform the service of *Bnei Yisrael*."

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