

ONE TORAH FOR ALL

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Understanding Torah Society

Part 16 – Levites: their place and function in Torah society

B'midbar (Numbers) 8:14-15

14 "Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the children of Israel; and the Levites shall be mine.

15 And after that shall the Levites go in to do the service of the tent of meeting; and you shall cleanse them, and offer them for a wave-offering."

Part of understanding the duties of the Levites is also understanding who they are. As a result of the incident with the golden calf, YHWH set apart the tribe of Levi to minister to Him in the tent of meeting. Before this, it seems clear, at least to this writer, that those who ministered to YHWH as priests were all the first-born of Israel.

Shemot (Exodus) 30:30

"And you shall anoint Aharon and his sons, and sanctify them, that they may minister unto Me in the priest's office."

Please note the similarity between the passage directly above with the passage directly below. Notice that both are "sanctified" unto YHWH. The main difference is that, in the passage above Aharon and his sons are specified ministering in the office of priests. This is because they are replacing the rightful priest within each home, the head of the home, and in particular, the first-born. This replacement was the direct result of the first-born priests taking part in the golden calf incident.¹

Shemot (Exodus) 13:2

"Sanctify unto Me all the first-born, whatsoever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and of beast; it is Mine."

¹ Some may point to Aharon and wonder why he maintained the office of high priest when his part in the incident of the golden calf was so great. Please consider that Aharon from that day forward carried the sins of the whole nation. As the high priest of Israel, all the sins of the people, including his own, were placed upon him. He carried this sin, it was not simply dismissed. (See B'midbar 18:23)

The first-born were rejected as priests before YHWH as a result of their part in the golden calf incident. Instead, YHWH commanded that the tribe of Levi be set-apart unto Him to do certain duties in Israel. However, because of the Diaspora and its length, as well as many other things, the individual members of Israel have lost their identities as to which tribe they belong, and in many cases, that they even belong to Israel at all. Even those who know they are a part of the southern house, the house of Yehudah (Judah), do not really know to which tribe they belong. Certainly, YHWH knows, but man at this point does not. Please note what YHWH says concerning the matter of Levites in the latter days.

Yeshayah (Isaiah) 66:21

20 "And they shall bring all your brethren out of all the nations for an oblation unto YHWH, upon horses, and in chariots, and in litters, and upon mules, and upon dromedaries, to My holy mountain Jerusalem," says YHWH, "as the children of Israel bring their oblation in a clean vessel into the house of YHWH."

21 "And of them also will I take for priests and for Levites," says YHWH.

In the returning process, YHWH will select for Himself priests and Levites. But how will He do this? By what process will He select the priests and Levites in the future restored kingdom of Israel?

Yechezqel (Ezekiel) 20:37

"And I will cause you to pass under the rod, and I will bring you into the bond of the covenant;"

This seems to be more of a figure of speech than an actual description of an event, but it could be literal; we just don't know at this point. Whichever way it is, YHWH shall cause His people to pass under His rod. We noted the following passage in the previous study, in part 15.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 27:32

"And all the tithe of the herd or the flock, whatsoever passes under the rod, the tenth shall be set-apart to YHWH."

YHWH commands us to pass our newborn flocks and herds under the rod, and every tenth animal is to be set apart unto Him. Likewise, it seems that when He restores Israel, He is going to do the very same thing; that is, He shall pass His people under His rod and every tenth person shall be set apart as a priest or Levite. He is certainly capable of doing this without our knowledge. However He does it, He shall do it. Please note in the passage above from Yeshayah, that these people are coming out from every nation in the world. Truly, Israel is a mixed multitude and the new Levites shall reflect this reality!

Not only are the people of Israel a mixed multitude, but the tribe of Levi, including the kohenim, also reflect this reality. There is no such thing as "pure" Israelite blood. There have

always been people from other nations coming into Israel. This is good and right as well as how YHWH intends for it to be.

B'midbar (Numbers) 18:21

“And to the children of Levi, behold, I have given all the tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service which they serve, even the service of the tent of meeting.”

As we examined in the previous study, YHWH has given the tithe of Israel to the tribe of Levi for their service in the tent of meeting. The question then becomes: what does their service in the tent of meeting entail?

Most people would certainly understand that the service of the tribe of Levi (including the kohanim) would consist of their part in the sacrifices and offerings brought to YHWH by the people of Israel. This reality will not be dealt with here, as most would already have a cursory understanding of this important duty. What this study will examine, then, is the other duties YHWH has given them, of which many may not be completely aware. However, let us consider one aspect of sacrifices that may have escaped our attention.

Divre Hayamim (2nd Chronicles) 30:17

For there were many in the assembly that had not sanctified themselves; therefore the Levites had the charge of killing the Passover for every one that was not clean, to sanctify them unto YHWH.

It is commanded by YHWH that each man kill his own Pesach (Shemot 12:6). However, it seems that if a man was not clean, then the Levites did it for that man, so that he and his family could partake of this important feast as well. Let us consider one aspect of the sacrifices and offerings that is not commonly understood.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 1:5

“And he shall kill the bullock before YHWH; and Aharon's sons, the priests, shall present the blood, and sprinkle the blood round about upon the altar that is at the door of the tent of meeting.”

In many cases, the person who brings the sacrifice or offering is the one who is to kill the animal, not the priests or Levites. They, in turn, are to bring the blood inside and sprinkle it around the altar. Please read the above passage in its context to see this even more clearly. Furthermore, many of the sacrifices commanded in the opening chapters of Vayyiqra also specify this, as well.

Now let us consider some of the other duties of the Levites and kohanim.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 13:2

“When a man shall have in the skin of his flesh a rising, or a scab, or a bright spot, and it becomes in the skin of his flesh the plague of leprosy, then he shall be brought unto Aharon the priest, or unto one of his sons the priests.”

One of the things that the tribe of Levi and kohenim are to provide Israel is free medical services. There are many detailed instructions concerning how the צרעת - tzara'at (leprosy) is to be dealt with in a person, article, or even a house. The priests and Levites are not to charge for these services, but they are provided to the people of Israel as part of their service in the tent of meeting.

Vayyiqra (Leviticus) 10:11

“and that you may teach the children of Israel all the statutes which YHWH has spoken unto them by Moshe.”

The “you” in this passage is the kohenim. YHWH commands that the kohenim (priests) teach Israel all of the statutes which YHWH has commanded Moshe. Like the medical services, the priests are not to charge Israel as they teach them.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 6:7

“and you shall teach them diligently unto your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up.”

The responsibility for the education of the children of Israel is shared between the parents and the tribe of Levi. The tribe of Levi provides the educational material, free of charge to the people of Israel as overseers of YHWH's statutes, ordinances, and commandments. The Levites and the kohenim are servants to Israel, not her masters!

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 16:18

“Judges and officers shall you make in all your gates, which YHWH your Elohim gives you, according to your tribes; and they shall judge the people with righteous judgment.”

These judges and officers are from their respective tribes. Along with these judges and officers, there are also the Levites and kohenim.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 17:9

“And you shall come unto the priests the Levites, and unto the judge that shall be in those days; and you shall inquire; and they shall show you the sentence of judgment.”

Both work together to render the decisions between brethren who cannot settle their own differences. This should be the exception rather than the rule. These men who sit as judges within their respective tribes are just regular men who have shown that they have the wisdom of YHWH and are impartial in rendering a righteous ruling. They are regular people with land and cattle like everyone else. They are not paid to be judges.

When questions of a legal (Torah) nature come up, the teachers of the Torah are consulted. The Levites are to give assistance to all who need counsel in such matters, but it is without cost to those who need their counsel in such matters.

The Levites provide three services in Israel: 1) medical, 2) legal, and 3) educational. These services which YHWH has commanded for them to provide as part of the service of the tent of meeting are done without cost to those who need these services. In this manner, each and every person has equal access to whatever he needs in regards to medical care, legal counsel, and education of themselves and their children. It is important to understand the place of the tribe of Levi in Torah society in order to see that each and every person is cared for regardless of how rich or how poor he may be.

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zerubbabel@onetorahforall.com

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