

Last week we completed the Book of Leviticus, whose primary focus was the service of the priesthood and the codification of civil and religious law. The latter includes matters of purity, i.e., suitability for religious service, as well as the laws of festivals and *shmitah* and *yovel* years, while the former outlines the ethical principles upon which society is to be based. Now, the Book of Numbers continues the narrative of Exodus. Its Hebrew name is *Bamidbar*, which means in the wilderness, an apt description not only for where they are located, but also for the emotional state of this ragtag group of ex-slaves emerging into the daunting world of freedom. In order to proceed on their journey, they must develop organizational structures. In the course of this book, five censuses are taken, beginning with a count of all males over the age of 20 who are fit for military service. They are to form legions according to ancestral tribes. But the tribe of Levi is omitted from this first census and in the arrangement of encampments that follows. The Levites are unique among the Israelites, and their role is twofold: They are given to Aaron by HaShem to serve in the *mishkan*, and rather than receiving land like the other tribes, they are to encamp around it and derive their livelihood from it. In addition, they are taken by HaShem in lieu of the firstborn sons of Israel, whom HaShem sanctified for killing the firstborns of Egypt (13:1-16). But how did the Levites, of all people, merit this distinction? When Jacob blesses his sons at the end of the Book of Genesis, he mentions Levi together with his brother Shimon, rebuking them for their violent impetuosity (referring to the massacre they orchestrated at Schechem), cursing their wrath, and promising to “disperse them throughout Jacob and scatter them throughout Israel” (Genesis 49:7) The tribe of Shimon was likely absorbed into the tribe of Judah, although it is listed among the 10 lost tribes, but because the tribe of Levi did not join in worshiping the golden calf and rallied around Aaron to quell the ensuing rebellion, it is singled out by HaShem for special service. According to some midrashim, the Levites were not enslaved, either because they were the spiritual leaders of the Israelites and Egyptians afforded them the same status as they did their own clergy, or because when the rest of the Israelites began to settle in other parts of Egypt, the Levites remained in Goshen and studied Torah. This of course, is reminiscent of Jacob, “a wholesome man who dwelled in tents.” (Genesis 25:27) Both the Shimonites and the Levites were indeed dispersed, says Rashi. But while the “the very poor – the scribes and elementary teachers – were all of the tribe of Shimon ... since such poor people must wander from city to city to eke out a livelihood ... the tribe of Levi traveled from one threshing floor to another to collect their offerings and tithes.” In his book »The Exodus – How It Happened and Why It Matters,« biblical scholar Richard Elliot Friedman theorizes that the Levites, who were part of the Semitic laborer force in Egypt, eventually left due to mounting ill treatment. They began to worship HaShem in Midian, and merged this with the Canaanite worship of El when they came to Canaan, a development Friedman sees as the beginning of monotheism. It is interesting reading. Whoever the Levites were, their exceptional, dual role is defined and emphasized in our parashah by the use of words based on the Hebrew root פקד (count, number, muster, appoint, oversee, pass in review, remember). They are indeed appointed to oversee the workings of the *mishkan*, and later, the Temple, and because of the strenuous work involved, the members of the Kohath family will only serve between the ages of 30 and 50. It is unclear in our parashah whether this rule applies to the Gershonites and Merarites, who were assigned equally heavy work, but it is generally accepted that it does. And they are indeed counted, but from the age of one month, because in addition to their practical duties, each Levite is numbered to replace the firstborn Israelite sons. In essence, their dual function represents the transformation of their patriarch Levi’s impetuous zeal from destructive to constructive. In their role as Temple overseers and servants, they work on behalf of the Israelites by assisting with their offerings and also by functioning as a buffer between the people and HaShem. This will be reiterated later in Parashah Beha’a lot’cha, but the dangers of approaching too close are mentioned in our parashah: “Nadav and Avihu died before the Lord when they brought alien fire ...” (3:4), and “...any outsider who approaches shall be put to death.” (3:10) Levi’s zeal is to be tempered with rigorous training and channeled into deep respect for the duties of their office. And in their role as a replacement for the firstborn, they represent a major paradigm shift that defines us as monotheists and as Jews. The firstborn of Egypt were not only priests; they, along with certain firstborn animals, were also worshiped in their own right. But we worship HaShem, not HaShem’s creations, with an inviolable boundary separating the world of the Eternal from our ephemeral world. This innovation radically diminished the special status of the firstborn, leaving only the ceremony of *pidyon ha-ben*, the monetary redemption of firstborn sons, and the obligation to fast before Yom Kippur, both of which are founded on gratitude. Their holiness, i.e., consecration, to HaShem is not privilege; it is an obligation in remembrance of our miraculous deliverance from Egyptian slavery and our eternal covenant. Now, two millennia removed from Temple hierarchy, and in the glorious multiplicity of the geographical, linguistic, and cultural distinctions in our big Jewish tent, we all count, each and every unique one of us, each in our own special way.

Shabbat shalom!