Parshat HaShavua  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

**PARASHAT EIKEV**

**"At That Time Hashem Distinguished the Tribe of Levi"**

**by Rav Amnon Bazak**

A. Introduction

Our parasha provides an extensive description of the sin of the Golden Calf (Devarim 9:10), concluding as follows:

"At that time Hashem distinguished the tribe of Levi to carry the Ark of Hashem's covenant, to stand before Hashem to serve Him and to bless in His Name until this day. For this reason Levi had no portion and inheritance with his brothers; Hashem is his inheritance, as Hashem your God told him." (10:8-9)

According to the literal reading of the text, the tribe of Levi was selected in its entirety as a result of the sin of the Golden Calf. As Rashi explains:

"'At that time' – in the first year following your exodus from Egypt. Since you stumbled in the (matter of the) Calf and the children of Levi did not stumble, Hashem separated them from you."

The description of the tasks assigned to the Leviim – "to stand before Hashem to serve Him and to bless in His Name" - raises a question: are these not the functions of the Kohanim? Rashi explains that the pasuk should be read as two distinct parts:

"…to carry the Ark" – the Leviim

"to stand before Hashem… to bless in His Name" – the Kohanim.

This explanation, however, does not sit well with the literal text, which mentions "the tribe of Levi" as a whole and makes no distinction between Leviim and Kohanim. In fact, even the continuation of the text – "For this reason Levi had no portion and inheritance with his brothers…" – refers to the tribe of Levi as a whole. On what basis does Rashi decide that just these two specific expressions – "to serve Him" and "to bless in His Name" – refer only to the Kohanim?

Secondly, we may ask: was the selection of the tribe of Levi really a response to the sin of the Golden Calf? After all, the selection of the Kohanim is described at length in Shemot 29 (prior to the description of the sin of the Calf in chapter 32), where it states, "And Aharon and his sons I shall sanctify to serve as priests to Me"! Even according to Rashi, who maintains (Shemot 31:8) that the sin of the Calf preceded the command to build the Mishkan, and that the events of chapter 32 of Shemot chronologically precede those of chapter 29, the Torah still shows no evidence of linking the selection of Aharon and his sons as Kohanim to the sin of the Golden Calf, which is described only later. It would seem, then, that at least concerning that which we are told in our parasha – "to stand before Hashem to serve Him" – the selection was made independently of the sin of the Golden Calf!

B. Two Aspects to the Selection of the Leviim

The uncertainty discussed above indeed reflects two different aspects of the selection of the tribe of Levi as described in the Torah. Let us examine each aspect individually:

1. The first selection, as mentioned, appears in Shemot 28-29. There Aharon and his sons are selected for priesthood, and - according to the literal text – with no connection to the sin of the Calf. Aharon is selected for priesthood because of his personality and his merits, and his descendants are to follow in his footsteps:

"And the sanctified garments that are for Aharon will be for his children after him, to be appointed in them and TO BE CONSECRATED IN THEM." (Shemot 29:29)

The continuation of this aspect is to be found at the beginning of sefer Bemidbar (chapter 3). Up until this time there have been two different ranks of holiness within the nation: the Kohahim - "who were consecrated to minister" (pasuk 3), and the firstborn – "for Mine is every firstborn; on the day that I smote every firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated to Me every firstborn of Israel" (pasuk 13). Now we read that the tribe of Levi replaces the firstborn:

"Bring close the tribe of Levi and present them before Aharon the Kohen, and they shall serve him. And they shall keep his charge and the charge of the entire congregation before the Tent of Meeting, to perform the service of the Mishkan… and you shall give the Leviim to Aharon and to his sons; they are given over to him from among the children of Israel." (Pesukim 6-9)

The Leviim are a sort of gift from Bnei Yisrael to assist the Kohanim in their service, their task being defined as "keeping his charge." The chapter describes at length the process of exchange between the firstborn and the Leviim, the crux of the command being, "You shall take the Leviim to Me, I am Hashem, in place of all the firstborn of Bnei Yisrael." The selection of the Leviim is therefore carried out no earlier than "the first day of the second month of the second year" (Bemidbar 1:1), and comes as a second stage, following the selection of the Kohanim. This selection is elaborated upon once again in Bemidbar 18, after Korach and his congregation undermine the legitimacy of the Kohanim and Leviim, and there again it is emphasized that "Behold, I have taken your brethren, the Leviim, from among Bnei Yisrael for you as a gift they are given to Hashem, to perform the service of the Tent of Meeting." (pasuk 6)

2. However, there is also another aspect to the selection of the Leviim, differing not only in character but also in its relation to the status division between Leviim and Kohanim. This aspect first appears in the wake of the sin of the Golden Calf: Moshe calls at the gate of the camp, "Whoever is unto Hashem – come to me!" (Shemot 32:26), and all of the tribe of Levi answer his call. Moshe commands them to slaughter their brethren in the midst of the camp, and after they obey his command, he tells them:

"CONSECRATE YOURSELVES this day to Hashem, each man against his son and against his brother, that He may bestow a blessing upon you this day." (pasuk 29)

This expression – "consecrate yourselves" – also appeared in the first aspect that we described above, in Shemot 29:9 – "and to be consecrated in them." The phrase "consecrate oneself" (le-malei yadayim) means, apparently (as Rashi explains on 32:29) – "You, who slaughter them for this matter, shall be consecrated to be priests to the Holy One." And it seems that it is this aspect to which the pesukim in our parasha refer, where after the description of the sin of the Golden Calf the text reads: "At that time Hashem distinguished the tribe of Levi…." According to this aspect, the tribe of Levi was selected as a whole, with no division or distinction between Leviim and Kohanim!

It appears, then, that if only this aspect were presented in the Torah, then all the Leviim would indeed engage in the tasks mentioned in these pesukim – "to stand before Hashem to serve Him, and to bless in His Name," since the selection of the Leviim in light of this aspect was not a "gift" to the Kohanim but rather the result of a special property of the tribe of Levi as a whole.

C. Continuation of This Aspect in sefer Devarim

It would seem that this second aspect that we described is what appears throughout sefer Devarim. Explicit expression of this is to be found in chapter 18, pesukim 6-8:

"And if a Levi should come from one of your gates from anywhere in Israel where he lives, and his soul desires to come to the place that Hashem has chosen, then he shall serve in the Name of Hashem his God like all his brethren, the Leviim, who serve there before Hashem. They shall eat like portions, except for that which comes from the sale of their patrimony."

The literal text would seem to suggest that any Levi can come to the Beit Mikdash and serve in the most superior position – the type of service that bestows the right to eat of the sacrifices. Here too, Rashi – following the Sifrei – explains that the text is referring specifically to a Levi who is also a Kohen. But as we have stated, in sefer Devarim the second aspect stands out, giving the impression that all of the tribe of Levi was selected with no division between Leviim and Kohanim at all.

The same idea may be understood from Moshe's blessing to the tribe of Levi prior to his death (Devarim 33:8-11):

"And to Levi he said, Your 'urim ve-tumim' shall be unto Your pious one… who said to his father and to his mother, 'I have not seen him,' who did not acknowledge his brothers and did not recognize his children, for they kept Your word and followed Your covenant. They shall teach Your judgments to Yaakov and Your Torah to Israel; they shall offer incense before You and burn sacrifices upon the altar."

Here, too, the tribe of Levi is depicted as a whole, with no indication of any special status reserved for Kohanim. The selection of the Leviim here results, obviously, from the sin of the Golden Calf – "…who said to his father and to his mother, 'I have not seen him'" (in accordance with the interpretation of Rashi and Ramban). Here again, this selection makes mention of the functions of priesthood: the 'urim ve-tumim,' the incense and sacrifices. Hence we infer that the intention here is that the entire tribe of Levi is fit for the highest status in the Beit Mikdash.

This would also appear to explain the unusual expression, "The Kohanim the Leviim," which appears five times in the Torah – all of them in sefer Devarim (17:18; 18:1,8; 27:9), as well as "the Kohanim – children of Levi" which appears twice (Devarim 21:2; 31:9). These expressions would seem to imply that there is in fact no difference between Kohanim and Leviim, except for their practical definition: a "Kohen" is a Levi who serves in the Beit Mikdash. In light of what we learned in chapter 18, it is clear that any Levi can come to the Beit Mikdash and thereby become a "Kohen."

There are only two places in sefer Devarim where the expression "Kohanim" appears without mention of "Leviim," but in both instances the reason for this is clear:

1. 18:3 – "And this shall be the law of the KOHANIM from the nation… and he shall give the KOHEN the shoulder and the cheeks and the maw… for Hashem your God has chosen him… to perform the service in Hashem's Name."

Here the "Kohanim" are mentioned specifically, since the text refers to Leviim who are serving in the Beit Mikdash. Only someone who is actually serving in the Beit Mikdash is entitled to receive the priestly gifts. As stated, immediately following these pesukim the Torah teaches that any Levi can serve in the "place that Hashem will choose": "And he shall serve in the Name of Hashem his God like all his brethren, the Leviim." This lends further support to our impression that in sefer Devarim, "Kohen" means a Levi who is serving in the Beit Mikdash.

2. 17:12 – "And a person who acts willfully and fails to heed the KOHEN who stands to serve Hashem your God… that person will die." This, too, only strengthens our claim, since just a few pesukim previously we learn, "And you shall come to the Kohanim the Leviim… and they shall tell you the matter of judgment" (pasuk 9). Here again, the "Kohen" mentioned in pasuk 12 is a Levi who is serving before Hashem.

Further proof for our claim is to be found in the fact that throughout all the halakhic portions of sefer Devarim, no mention is made of Aharon's name at all; neither is there any mention of "the children of Aharon," an expression which in the other chumashim refers to the Kohanim. In sefer Vayikra, for example, the expression "children of Aharon" with reference to the Kohanim appears more than twenty times!

D. Combination of the Two Aspects

Thus far we have learned that the selection of the Kohanim and Leviim has two different aspects to it: the first refers to the initial selection of the Kohanim, children of Aharon, and later on the Leviim were added in place of the firstborn, for tasks on a lower level than those of the Kohanim. The second refers to the selection of the tribe of Levi as a whole, following the episode of the calf, to serve before Hashem, with no distinction between Kohanim and Leviim, other than the fact that "Kohen" means "a Levi serving in the Beit Mikdash."

But when it comes to the practical application of their respective status, it becomes clear that both aspects together form the necessary condition for the status of priesthood. Ultimately, a Kohen who performs the priestly service in the Beit Mikdash must meet two conditions: he is a member of the tribe of Levi, and he is a descendant of Aharon.

For this reason, the aspect described in sefer Devarim does not find any practical expression. This aspect depicts the selection of the entire tribe of Levi, and if this were the sole criterion then the Leviim would indeed stand before Hashem to serve Him and to bless in His Name, as our parasha suggests. But in practice there is an additional aspect, depicting the Kohanim as the descendants of Aharon exclusively. For this reason the literal description of the Levite status described in sefer Devarim has no practical expression.

At the same time, it should be emphasized that when Rashi, following Chazal, interprets the pesukim in sefer Devarim as pertaining exclusively to the Kohanim ("to stand before Hashem to serve Him and to bless in His Name" in our parasha, as well as in chapter 18), his intention is not thereby to interpret the literal meaning of the text in sefer Devarim, but rather the COMBINATION of the two aspects described in the Torah IN PRACTICE. Hence, from the perspective of the combination of aspects contained in the choice of Leviim, the conclusion that arises from the Written Law itself is that in effect these pesukim refer only to the Kohanim who are descendants of Aharon.

However, this explanation as the practical law does not contradict the written text, which describes only one aspect of the nature of the priesthood.

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