

# IF NOT FOR THE TORAH . . .

*by Shlomo Katz*

## Parshas Naso

### If not for the Torah . . .

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Our parashah opens: "Take a census of the sons of Gershon also." Why "also"? R' Avraham Saba z"l (Spain; 1440-1508) explains that Gershon was the oldest son of Levi, and his descendants had a claim to be counted before the descendants of Gershon's younger brother Kehat. Since the family of Kehat was already counted at the end of last week's parashah, our parashah says, "Take a census of the sons of Gershon also."

And why were the descendants of Kehat counted first? R' Saba explains that the Torah honors Kehat for his Torah knowledge, just as we read in Divrei Hayamim I (4:9), "And Yaavetz was honored more than his brothers." As the Gemara explains, Yaavetz was one of the greatest Torah scholars of the generation after Moshe Rabbeinu.

Similarly, Kehat's family was honored over the family of the firstborn Gershon because of the former's association with the Torah. On the verse (Mishlei 3:15), "It [the Torah] is more precious than peninim / pearls," the Midrash comments: "More precious than a firstborn" (a play on "lifnim" / "earlier," i.e., the firstborn, who is the early one). The family of Kehat carried the Ark which contained the luchot. Moreover, Kehat used to assemble crowds and teach them Torah. [Ed. note: The publisher of R' Saba's work notes that the source for this statement is unknown.] Kehat's name alludes to his assembling crowds, just as King Shlomo is called "Kohelet" because he also assembled large audiences; however, King Shlomo has an additional letter "lamed" ("Kohelet" vs. "Kehat") because the Mishnah (Avot ch.6) states that a king has 30 special attributes. (The gematria of "lamed" is 30.) (Tzror Hamor)

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"Uplift the sons of Kehat..." (4:2-last week's parashah) "Uplift the sons of Gershon also.." (4:22) "The sons of Merari,...you should count them." (4:29)

In these verses, Moshe was told to count the descendants of each of the three sons of Levi. Why did Hashem use the expression "nasso" / "uplift" in connection with two of them, but not the third? R' Yaakov Moshe Charlap z"l (Yerushalayim; died 1951) explains as follows:

We read in Breishit (2:15), "He put him [Adam] in the Garden of Eden, to work it and to guard it." Our Sages interpret "to work it" as a reference to keeping positive commandments and "to guard it" as a reference to observing negative commandments. The idea, writes R' Charlap, is that in Adam's state before his sin, any action that he might have taken would have been either a mitzvah or a sin. It either would have contributed to furthering G-d's purpose in creating the world or it would not have contributed to that purpose. If we lived in the ideal world which Hashem envisioned (as Adam briefly did), this would still be true. No activities would fall into the neutral category of "reshut" / "optional."

However, we live in a world where the force of spirituality is diminished. Some of our actions are neither mitzvot nor sins, they are only "reshut." (Nevertheless, a memory of the "old world" exists in Eretz Yisrael, where "optional" activities such as planting and harvesting are intimately bound up with numerous mitzvot.) In the future, we will again live in the ideal state where all of our actions have a spiritual effect.

In last week's and this week's parashot, Hashem assigns jobs in the Mishkan / Tabernacle to the levi'im. The Mishkan was the place where our ancestors got a taste of the spirituality which will again be revealed when the world reaches its ideal state. That Mishkan had three parts: the courtyard, the Holy, and the Holy of Holies. So, too, Bnei Yisrael have three parts: Kohanim, Levi'im and Yisraelim. There are also three ways of serving Hashem: through Torah, through prayer, and through work. However, "work" is only a service to G-d in the ideal world (such as in Adam's world). For us, work is a reshut / optional. [Each set of three parallels the other set: (a) Torah, Kohanim and Holy of Holies (where the Torah was kept); (b) prayer, Levi'im (who sang / prayed in the Temple), and the Holy; (c) work, Yisraelim, and the public courtyard.]

There were also three parts to the tribe of Levi, i.e., the families of Kehat, Gershon and Merari. Kehat attained the greatest level of holiness of the three--his family carried the holiest vessels of the mishkan, including the Holy Ark. Gershon achieved the second highest level. Merari was third, and he thus paralleled service of Hashem through work. However, since, until the time of mashiach, work is not necessarily spiritually uplifting, the Torah did not use the expression "nasso" / "uplift" in connection with Merari. (Mei Marom Vol. 11, No. 11)

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"Take a census [literally, 'Lift the heads'] of the sons of Gershon, also . . ." (4:22)

R' Meir Yechiel Halstock z"l (1857-1928; the Ostrovtza Rebbe) writes: There are two ways that one can come to recognize and accept Hashem. One is to seek logical proof of His existence and His dominion, while the other is to receive a tradition from one's parents. The primary difference

between a person who discovers Hashem and one who believes in Him because of a tradition is that the belief of the former is dependent on reason, while the latter's belief is not. A conclusion that was arrived at through logic is relatively weak because, if the investigator later thinks of a reason to not believe in Hashem, he will lose his belief.

R' Halstock continues: The names of Moshe's two sons allude to these two types of belief. The older son was Gershom (not to be confused with his great-uncle Gershon, who is mentioned in our pasuk). His name alludes to Moshe's being alone in the world - a "ger" / "convert," i.e., a person who arrives at a belief in Hashem on his own. By definition, a convert has no Jewish tradition from his parents. Moshe's second son was Eliezer, whose name connotes that "the G-d of my father came to my aid" (Shmot 18:4).

In this light, R' Halstock explains our verse as follows: "Lift the heads of the sons of Gershon, also." Gershon's name also alludes to a "ger," a person who discovers Hashem through his own reasoning. Says the Torah, "Lift his head, i.e., his thoughts, also." He should not rely on his reasoning alone, but also on tradition.

Based on this, concludes R' Halstock, we can explain why the family of Gershon was responsible for transporting the tachash--skin cover of the mishkan. The tachash was a, now-extinct, one-horned animal. This was meant to convey to the Gershonites that there is only one sure path to belief in Hashem, i.e., the path of tradition. (Meir Einei Chachamim: Mahadura Telitai)

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"May Hashem bless you and safeguard you. May Hashem illuminate His countenance for you and be gracious to you. May Hashem lift His countenance to you and establish peace for you." (6:24-26)

R' Shlomo Zalman Ulman z"l (20th century Hungarian rabbi) notes that all of the Priestly Blessings are phrased in the singular. They are addressed to each individual separately. How then can the last blessing speak of peace? Isn't peace a collective concept--peace between nations, peace between neighbors, etc.?

He explains: A Jew is commanded (Devarim 6:5) to love Hashem with all his heart and with all his soul. But man has other interests, and his organs are at war with each other. Some want to love and serve Hashem, while others may not. How can man win this war? Our Sages teach that one who wants to purify himself receives Divine assistance. This is the meaning of the blessing that the Kohanim utter: "May G-d establish peace for you," i.e., within you. (Quoted in Otzrotaihem Shel Tzaddikim)

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## Letters from our Sages

This letter was written in 1895 by R' Yitzchak Elchanan Spektor z"l (1817-1896), rabbi of Kovno, Lithuania, and one of the preeminent halachic authorities and Jewish leaders of the late 19th century. The letter is addressed to a well-connected Jewish banker who had successfully lobbied the Russian government to annul a decree prohibiting the teaching of Gemara to school-age children. The letter is published in Igrot R' Yitzchak Elchanan, vol. 1 p.86.

To the honored friend of the house of Yisrael, the officer, great among the Jews, crown of Yeshurun [a synonym for Yisrael] and its glory, great and many in deeds, known for his good name and glory, Yaakov Polyakov, may he live long. Peace and eternal blessings!

After inquiring after your well-being with all due respect, with the permission of the holy Torah, and in the name of our brethren Bnei Yisrael, for whom Hashem's perfect Torah is its life and soul--it is my honor to express feelings of gratitude, praise and blessing to your lofty honor, who merited and brought merit to the many, saving the treasure of Israel from the terrible prohibition that had been published, i.e., that it not be taught in cheder to young students.

Our Sages have said that the world exists due to the Torah study of young children for, if there are no kids there will be no goats. If children don't learn when they are young, they cannot be expected to learn when they must earn a living. That is why the prohibition on teaching Gemara in cheder meant that the Torah eventually would be forgotten from Yisrael, G-d forbid. And, the physical continuity of our nation is tied, like body and soul, to its spiritual continuity. Thus, our experience shows that every sect that has denied the Oral Law eventually has vanished, for G-d's covenant with us is based on the Oral Law. Therefore, only those of our people who sacrifice themselves for the holiness of the Oral Law have persisted until this day.

Therefore, who can express the great righteousness of his lofty honor who, in a time of trouble for Yaakov such as this, was given the merit by Hashem to be the angel of salvation, to save and redeem our holy Torah which gives both spiritual and physical life. You are fortunate that this fell in your lot. Our Sages say that a mitzvah brings a mitzvah in its wake, and your many and great charitable deeds for the good of our nation are like a river flowing with charity; it is they that stood as a merit for you to be the redeemer and savior of the Torah... Until the last generation, the praises of your lofty honor will be spoken among us, for all the good you have done for our Torah and our nation...

May the merit of the holy Torah, in which is the eternity of Yisrael, stand in good stead for yourself and your household and your descendants...

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adira'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Torah.org](https://torah.org) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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