

WHO WOULD YOU CHOOSE?

by Shlomo Katz

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on the yahrzeit of his grandfather

Harav Aharon ben Harav Nossan Lewin z"l Hy"d (the Reisher Rav)

The Torah relates that, in response to Korach's rebellion, Moshe Rabbeinu "spoke to Korach and to his entire assembly, saying, 'In the morning, Hashem will make known the one who is His own and the holy one, and He will draw him close to Himself; and, whomever He will choose, He will draw close to Himself.'" Why, asks R' Aharon Lewin z"l Hy"d (the Reisher Rav; killed in the Holocaust in 1941), does Moshe Rabbeinu appear to say the same thing twice: "Hashem will make known the one who is His own and the holy one, and He will draw him close to Himself," and, again, "Whomever He will choose, He will draw close to Himself"?

Perhaps, writes R' Lewin, some of the pronouns in the verse need to be translated differently, so that the verse says: "Hashem will make known the one who is His own and the holy one, and He will draw him close to Himself; and, whoever will choose him--i.e., whoever chooses to be on the side of the 'holy one' that Hashem chooses--He, Hashem, will draw that person close to Himself also."

Alternatively, R' Lewin continues, the verse could be translated: "Hashem will make known the one who is His own and the holy one, and He will draw him close to Himself; and, whoever will choose Him--i.e., whoever chooses Hashem--He, Hashem, will draw that person close to Himself also."

Throughout history, R' Lewin concludes, there have been people who challenge Torah sages and leaders, ostensibly L'shem Shamayim / for the sake of Heaven. Like Korach, these rebels speak in the name of Hashem and claim to be looking out for the good of the Jewish People. Hashem is not fooled, of course, and He declares: "He who truly chooses Me, him I will draw close." (Ha'drash

Ve'ha'iyun)

"The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them and their households, and all the people who were with Korach, and all their wealth." (16:32)

Why was their wealth swallowed up as well? R' Chaim Zaichik z"l (1906-1989; Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Bet Yosef-Novardok in Buczacz, Poland; later in Israel) explains as follows:

We read regarding the inauguration of the Levi'im (Bemidbar 8:6-8), "Take the Levi'im from among Bnei Yisrael and purify them. So you shall do to them to purify them: Sprinkle upon them water of purification, and let them pass a razor over their entire flesh, and let them immerse their garments, and they shall become pure. They shall take a young bull and its meal-offering, fine flour mixed with oil, and a second young bull you shall take as a sin-offering." Rashi z"l explains that this process was meant to bring atonement to the firstborn for the sin of the Golden Calf. But, observes R' Zaichik, this is difficult to understand. The Levi'im were replacing the firstborn as the Temple functionaries because the firstborn sinned, but the Levi'im themselves had not sinned! Why should the Levi'im shave their heads and bring a sin-offering?

R' Zaichik answers: The Gemara (Megillah 27a) records that Rabbi Zeira's students asked him, "In what merit have you lived such a long life?" He answered, "I never rejoiced at another's suffering." Taken at face value, this is difficult to understand. Only a depraved person would rejoice at another person's suffering. Not doing so does not seem to be anything special; certainly not a reason to merit an unusually long life. Rather, R' Zaichik explains, Rabbi Zeira meant that if he had a happy event in his house--for example, a child's wedding--at a time when his neighbor was suffering some misfortune, he moderated the celebration of own simcha in order not to highlight the contrast between himself and his neighbor, which would have exacerbated his neighbor's pain.

Here, the Levi'im were being "promoted" because the firstborn had been "demoted," and the Levi'im needed to be sensitive the sadness inherent in this event. That is why the Torah subjected them to the atonement process that the firstborn themselves needed to undergo.

Perhaps, continues R' Zaichik, this also explains why Korach's and his followers' wealth had to be swallowed up with them. The death of Korach and his followers was a great tragedy, particularly because these were men with such potential. Had their wealth remained behind and people benefitted from it, that would have lessened the pain that had to be felt at their loss. (Maayanei Ha'Chaim p.225)

"To the sons of Levi, behold! I have given every tithe in Yisrael as a heritage in exchange for the service that they perform, the service of the Ohel Mo'ed." (18:21)

"For the title of Bnei Yisrael that they separate to Hashem as a gift have I given to the Levi'im as a heritage; therefore have I said to them, 'Among Bnei Yisrael they shall not inherit a heritage.'" (18:24)

These verses offer two separate reasons why Ma'aser / tithes must be given to Levi'im. According to the first verse, Ma'aser is compensation for the service that the Levi'im perform in the Temple. According to the second verse, it is compensation to the Levi'im because they did not receive a portion in Eretz Yisrael. Why are two reasons necessary?

R' Pinchas Halevi Ish Horowitz z"l (1731-1805; rabbi of Frankfurt, Germany; author of several important Talmud commentaries) explains: Eretz Yisrael was divided among the twelve tribes. Therefore, if Ma'aser was only compensation to the Levi'im for not receiving a share in the Land, it should have been 1/12 of the farmer's crop, not 1/10. The extra Ma'aser, the difference between 1/10 and 1/12, is compensation for the service the Levi'im perform. (Panim Yafot to Devarim 18:1)

R' Aryeh Leib Zitel Segal Horowitz z"l (Ukraine; 1758-1844) offers another answer: If Ma'aser was only compensation to the Levi'im for not receiving a share in the Land, they would only be entitled to Ma'aser when the other tribes are living in their allotted portions [which was only the case until approximately 100 years before the first Bet Hamikdash was destroyed]. Also, the prophet Yechezkel writes that, when Mashiach comes, the Land will be reapportioned and the tribe of Levi will receive a portion. Thus, they would not be entitled to Ma'aser in the future. That is why a second reason is needed also. (Marganita Tava Al Sefer Ha'mitzvot: Shoresh 12)

A Torah Tour of the Holy Land

"Then Shmuel said to the people, 'Come and let us go to Gilgal, and let us renew the kingdom there.' So all the people went to Gilgal; there they made Shaul king before Hashem in Gilgal . . ." (Shmuel I 11:14-15 -- opening verses of the Haftarah for Korach.)

[This Haftarah is not read this year, because this Shabbat is Rosh Chodesh.]

R' David Kimchi z"l (1160-1235; Spain; Radak) writes: They used to honor that place (Gilgal) because the Aron Kodesh and Ohel Mo'ed were located there when Bnei Yisrael first entered Eretz Yisrael [see Yehoshua 4:19], even though they were no longer there by the time of the events in our verses.

R' Yehosef Schwartz z"l (1805-1865; Germany and Eretz Yisrael; Torah scholar and geographer) identifies Gilgal as a city in the territory of the tribe of Binyamin, and writes: According to Josephus, Gilgal is ten ris (a half hour walk) from Yericho and fifty ris (a 2½-hour walk) from the Jordan River. Near Yericho is a mound--essentially a pile of rocks--which the Arabs call "Galgala," i.e., Gilgal. However, it is not 2½ hours from the Jordan as Josephus wrote.

Referring to Yehoshua 4:20 ("These twelve stones that they had taken from the Jordan, Yehoshua erected at Gilgal"), R' Schwartz writes: "I did not see the stones of Gilgal." [As his editor notes, this is

not surprising, since thousands of years had passed.]

R' Schwartz continues, describing the surrounding region: The Jordan and the surrounding areas are a wonder of wonders! There is nothing comparable in the whole Land! The Kikar Ha'Yarden / plain of the Jordan is very wide, and the river flows through it. On either side of the river are forests with many species of flora. Many of the trees make tent-like coverings in which one can dwell; it is all natural. One would not believe it

if he would hear how beautiful and pleasant it is. There is a soft sound, which is the river; the sound of birds chirping and singing; and the rays of the sun, which flicker into the "tents" through the tree branches. All this adds to the beauty, but also inspires a person to reflect and to pour out his heart. "My Elokim! My soul is downcast, because I remember You from the land of the Jordan" (Tehilim 42:7). "He saw the entire plain of the Jordan that it was well watered everywhere . . . like the garden of Hashem" (Bereishit 13:10). (Tevuot Ha'aretz p.155 & 113)