

# OUR SOURCE OF HONOR

*by Rabbi Moshe Peretz Gilden*

*"Take a census of the sons of Gershon, as well, according to their fathers' household, according to their family."* (Bamidbar/Numbers 4:22) The Torah continues its narrative of the counting of the Levites, who were grouped by family. Last week's reading concluded with the offspring of Levi's son, Kehas, and this week opens with the family of Gershon. But Gershon was the first-born, and the Torah regularly demonstrates the need to give special honor to the first-born. Why, then, is Kehas listed prior to Gershon?

The Medrash Raba explains that with Kehas' awesome responsibility to carry the Holy Ark came the privilege of being listed first. But this further begs the question. Instead of foregoing the honor of the first-born for our sake of Kehas who carried the Torah, why not let Gershon, the first-born, carry the Holy Ark and then he can properly be honored?

Kli Yakar (Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Lunshitz; c.1550-1619; Rosh Yeshiva/Dean in Lemberg and Rabbi in Prague; a leader of Polish Jewry) explains that of the three sons of Levi, Kehas and his children carried the Ark containing the two tablets of the Covenant because they were the most dedicated to the study of Torah. G-d wanted to demonstrate that those who toil in Torah need to be honored. By counting them first, he brought attention to those who labor in Torah and, therefore, carry the Holy Ark. Had He simply given that responsibility to Gershon, one would conclude that the greater honor belongs to the first-born and would not understand that extra special honor is reserved for those who study G-d's Torah.

The Medrash explains that the verse "It (the Torah) is more precious than pearls ("peninim" in Hebrew)" (Mishlei/Proverbs 3:15) refers to the superiority of the crown of Torah over the crowns of Priesthood, Royalty and the First-Born. The Medrash expounds exegetically that although the High Priest is allowed to enter the innermost sanctum of the Temple ("lip'nim" in Hebrew, alluded to by "peninim"), the crown of Torah is greater. Although the Royal Crown is gold studded with pearls, the crown of Torah is greater. Although the great significance is given to the first-born, who are elsewhere referred to as "panim", meaning "first", the crown of Torah is greater. Why? What is the greatness of dedication to Torah learning that it surpasses these three other honorable positions?

Kli Yakar elucidates that Torah is accessible and available to all. The priesthood is limited to the offspring of Aaron, the first High Priest. The royalty is limited to the offspring of Yehuda (Judah). And only one child in any family can be the first-born. But achievement in Torah learning is in the hands

of every Jew. Thus, concludes Kli Yakar, we gain a deeper understand why the Holy Ark was given to the younger child. Had G-d automatically given the responsibility of carrying the Torah to the first-born, we could have thought that the Torah was only given to the first-born. He wanted to show us that the Torah belongs equally to every member of our nation.

We are all busy. Very busy. Yet we know that if we were told that a fortune, more valuable than pearls and priceless gems, was just around the corner, waiting for us to pick it up, we would all manage to find the time, between the career and the carpools and the shopping, to pick it up. The invaluable gift of Torah, G-d's personally authored Guidebook to a Meaningful Life, is here for all of us to partake. Just last week we relived the giving of the Torah. Now is the time to grab it, study it, grow from it.

Have a Good Shabbos!

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