

PARSHAS SHOFTIM - KOHANIM AND LEVI'IM, UPGRADED

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Kohanim and Levi'im, Upgraded¹

Kohanim of the tribe of Levi - the entire tribe of Levi - shall not have a portion and inheritance with Yisrael. They shall eat Hashem's fire-offerings and His inheritance.

This pasuk cannot fail to puzzle us. What does it tell us that don't already know? It seems to repeat what we have already established elsewhere.

Rashi, as we might expect, helps considerably - but not quite enough for the really curious. He tells us that the function of the pasuk is to enlarge the license of Kohanim to eat portions of korbanos offered to Hashem. Our pasuk teaches, says Rashi citing the Sifri, that even Kohanim who cannot serve in the beis hamikdash because of a disqualifying physical blemish nonetheless share in the apportioning of those korbanos. We now understand the general drift of the pasuk, but this approach does not really deal with several unexplained details.

First of all, the only novel element we wring from this pasuk derives entirely from the end of the pasuk that asserts the right of Kohanim to korbanos. The opening of the pasuk, however, denies rights of Kohanim to a "portion," i.e. of the spoils of war, and to an "inheritance," i.e. of the Land. What new information do we find in this? We certainly do not need a special pasuk to tell us that baalei mumin are denied a portion in the Land. Why would we think otherwise? (In fact, there is really little need to rely on the derashah from our pasuk even to allow ba'alei mumin a portion of the korbanos. That halachah can be shown from an explicit pasuk in Vayikra[2]!) There is no reason at all to suppose that ordinary Kohanim are denied a portion, but the physically disfigured are not! Rashi's explanation seems to disregard the stressed, first portion of the pasuk, and addresses only its secondary point.

Beyond the issues of the meaning of our pasuk, why is it phrased in the plural - only to be followed by the next pasuk (An inheritance shall not be his...), entirely in the singular?!

Here is an important rule about the way the Torah employs singular and plural forms: When the Torah speaks about an entire group, it uses the singular, as if speaking to a single person; where it addresses individuals who are part of a larger group, it uses the plural. Let us see how that applies

here. Our pasuk addresses Kohanim, who are only a portion of the larger group of Shevet Levi. The pasuk after ours deals with the larger group of Levi'im, and therefore switches to singular. This difference accounts for other details. Our pasuk mentions both chelek and nachalah. Indeed, the Kohein receives neither a portion of the spoils of war, nor an inheritance in the Land. But it is only the Kohein who is excluded from sharing in the war booty. The next pasuk conspicuously omits the word chelek, and only mentions nachalah, because the Levi does receive a portion of the spoils!

We can readily explain the difference. Kohanim are meant to throw themselves into a life of ahavas Hashem. This love of G-d allows for no competitors. Kohanim, charged with being the exemplars of an elevated level of living should not take part in the same material pleasures and delights as ordinary Jews. (Even Kohanim who are unable to perform the avodah - such as ba'alei mumin - can excel in ahavas Hashem through partaking of the korbanos!) Levi'im, however, are not charged as a group to live this way, and are therefore entitled to share and enjoy the spoils of war.

It might be objected that in elsewhere^[3], the Torah bars the Levi from both chelek and nachalah, from both the booty and a land inheritance, completely contradicting what we set forth above. In truth, there is no contradiction. That pasuk speaks of a new order of Levi'im - a group changed by devoting themselves intensely to the study of Torah. Once they took on this role, they were subject to the same restrictions as the Kohanim in general. They, too, must now forego many worldly pleasures and concern themselves exclusively with their love for Hashem.

We can now refresh the way we look at our pasuk. It speaks, in fact, of several subgroups among Kohanim. It begins with Kohanim haLevi'im. The proper understanding of this phrase always is Kohanim who minister in a specialized role - that of talmidei chachamim. Such Kohanim, understandably, must eschew much that the material world offers. The Torah tells us that it is unsuitable for them to share in either chelek or nachalah.

The Torah then enlarges the circle, by including "the entire tribe of Levi," in other words, even Kohanim who do not actively live up to this special expectation. These Kohanim are not "Levi'im" at the same time; they are not talmidei chachamim. Nonetheless, they, too are not to receive chelek and nachalah. This is so even though they cannot really act as full Kohanim, performing the avodah in the beis hamikdosh. (Hoshea wrote: "You spurned knowledge [by refusing the role of teaching Torah to the nation, as was expected of you - Radak], therefore I rejected you from serving as Kohein to Me^[4].") Yet, as Kohanim, they should have made it their business to become talmidei chachamim! They are not to be rewarded for their failure and transgression. They will be denied not only nachalah, but even chelek, as if they were fully-functioning Kohanim.

Finally, the Torah completes the picture by including - by way of the Sifri's derashah from the word "entire" - that ba'alei mumin also have no chelek and no nachalah, even though they cannot serve in the beis hamikdosh through no fault of their own. The end of the pasuk provides the reason. Since they are given a portion in the korbanos, they have the ability to successfully focus on ahavas

Hashem, just as other Kohanim can. They, too, should not be distracted by material pursuits.

The phrase "the entire tribe of Levi," also serves according to its plain meaning, i.e. a reference to all Levi'im who are not Kohanim. They are the point of reference of the pasuk that follows ours. Regarding them, the Torah writes that they shall have no inheritance among their brothers. Implied, of course, is that they do receive a chelek, a portion in the booty. Eschewing physical pleasure is not necessary for ordinary people - and not even for the ordinary Levi, even as one who acts as an adjunct to the avodah of the Kohanim.

1. Based on Haamek Davar, Devarim 18:1 2. Vayikra 21:21-22 3. Devarim 10:9 4. Hoshea 4:6
