

CLOSED GATES AND DEAD-ENDS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

In this week's parsha, Beha'alosecha, G-d designates the Levi'im (Levites) instead of the first born to help the Kohanim (Priests) with the Tabernacle (Mishkan) service. Hashem gave this honour to the Levi'im because they didn't worship the Golden Calf. After describing the procedure of sanctifying the Levi'im for their holy service, the Torah says:

And Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: "This shall apply to the Levites: From the age of twenty-five years and upward they shall go to perform the service in the Mishkan. And from the age of fifty years they shall return from the service of work, and they shall serve no more. But he shall administer together with his brethren in the Tent of Meeting to keep charge." (8:25-26)

Rashi notes that while here the service of the Levi'im is described as beginning at twenty-five, elsewhere (4:2) they are only counted from the age of thirty. At twenty-five, Rashi explains, the Levi began a five-year period of training. From thirty to fifty he served in transporting of the Mishkan. After fifty the Levi would, "administer together with his brethren to keep charge." This, according to our Sages, refers to "opening and closing the gates, singing, and loading the wagons."

The significance of the age of fifty is found in the last Mishnah of the fifth chapter of Pirkei Avos. The Mishnah says:

At the age of five [a child begins] the study of Scriptures; at ten - Mishnah; at thirteen - [the obligation to observe] mitzvos; at fifteen - the study of Gemara (Talmud); at eighteen - marriage; at twenty - pursuit of a livelihood (perhaps they spent two years in kollel?); at thirty - one reaches full strength; at forty - understanding; at fifty - [one is qualified to give] advice and counsel..."

Commentators explain that the Mishnah's statement that at age fifty one is qualified to give advice is based on the above parsha, where the Torah says that at fifty the Levi, "shall administer together with his brethren to keep charge," - which refers to them teaching and offering counsel to the younger Levi'im (see Rashi on the Mishnah).

What is the connection between "offering counsel" and "closing the gates," which the Levi'im performed at the age of fifty?

Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Gur (Chiddushei HaRim) zt"l explains this with the following parable: A man once got lost in the thick of the forest. For days he tried hopelessly to find his way out, yet it was to no avail. This continued for many weeks and months. One day, he came across an old man, who was

coming toward him. He ran to the stranger and pleaded, "Please tell me how to get out of this forest - I have been wandering for many weeks and months!"

"My son," the old man replied forlornly, "unfortunately, I too am lost. I have been wandering in this forest not for weeks nor months, but for many years, yet I still have not found the way out. However, before you conclude that any advice I may offer is certainly useless, consider this: Although I may not know the way out of the forest, I can tell you better than anyone which paths lead to nowhere!"

This, says R' Yitzchak Meir, is the counsel every fifty-year old can give: Even if they can't advise us the right path, they can at least give us counsel as to which paths to avoid! This, he explains homiletically, is what the Torah means by saying that at fifty, the Levi will serve by "closing the gates." Although they may not yet know the true path to eternal life, they can at very least counsel others which areas to avoid.

With this we can perhaps shed light on a cryptic passage in the Torah. In parshas Kedoshim (Vayikra/Leviticus 19:32), the Torah describes the mitzvah of giving honour to the elderly and wise. "You shall rise before the elderly, and you shall honour the presence of a sage." Rashi (ibid.), based on one opinion in the Talmud (Kiddushin 32b), combines both halves of the pasuk into one command: i.e. You shall rise and give honour to an elderly sage. Halachah, however, follows the view that the verse contains two distinct commands: 1) You shall rise before the elderly, and 2) You shall give honour to the wise. In fact, the Talmud derives that one must both rise and give honour for the elderly, and rise and give honour for the wise. Still, there must be some reason that the Torah chose to single out the elderly for rising, and the wise for honour.

Perhaps by differing the methods of recognition, the Torah is stressing the different qualities of the wise and of the elderly. The elderly, while they may not have attained true wisdom, can at least help us to know which ways lead astray. They may not be able to tell us how to reach the pinnacle of morality and character, but they can help us to avoid life's pitfalls. Accordingly, the Torah orders us to rise before them - for their advice, at very least, stands us on our feet and keeps us from falling into the abyss of human failure and character deterioration. The wise, on the other hand, are deserving of true honour and distinction, for they have "found the path" of righteousness.

The Talmud (Gittin 43a) says, "One does not truly understand the Torah's lessons unless one first stumbles in them." Life's lessons are best learned through its mistakes. While no one likes to stumble and falter, we must realize that each time we fall, we have just discovered one more dead-end among life's maze of paths. If we take care to "mark it down," we will have drawn one step closer to finding the path to Eternity.

Have a good Shabbos.

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