

LEVI-LIKE ACTIONS

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

In Parashas Emor we spotlighted the Kohanim. In this week's parshah, we will take a closer look at the Levi'im, even though once they were the source of the Kohanim. However, that too is indicative of the essence of the Tribe of Levi.

Levi first showed up on the historical scene when he was born to Leah, Ya'akov Avinu's first wife, at least unintentionally. Recalling the story, Ya'akov had wanted to marry Rachel, and only Rachel. However, even though the two of them had anticipated Lavan's, Rachel's and Leah's (they were twins) father, attempt to trick Ya'akov into marrying Leah first, they had not anticipated Rachel's replacing herself with her sister. She just couldn't bear the thought of Leah falling to Eisav and becoming his wife. Though giving Ya'akov to Leah almost cost Rachel her husband-to-be, in the end, she married him as well, and everyone lived happily ever after, right?

Wrong. Though Ya'akov Avinu did not annul the marriage to Leah, he also did not accept her into his family with open arms. As the Torah reports, Leah was hated by Ya'akov, or, at least as the Midrash explains, less loved than his beloved Rachel, even though it had been obvious, for someone like Ya'akov Avinu, that Divine Providence had made the events occur as they had. How much so was this the case after Leah gave birth to sons long before Rachel had even a single child.

However, though Leah was the mother of Reuven, Shimon, and Yehudah in succession, the latter being the future lineage of Jewish kings, still, she felt slighted by her husband. Whatever the reason that someone of Ya'akov's spiritual stature could not treat his second wife as the first, it did not compensate Leah to make her feel content to have given birth to her "share" of the 12 Tribes. She wanted to also know that she was as much Ya'akov's wife as her twin sister, Rachel.

The birth of Levi represented this, as she proclaimed upon naming him:

She became pregnant again, and gave birth to a son. She said, "This time my husband will be attached [laveh] to me, because I have given birth to three sons for him." Therefore, he called him Levi. (Bereishis 29:34)

Hence, the name Levi comes from a word that means "accompany," which is why a Jewish funeral procession is called a lavayah, since those who attend are there to accompany the body to its final resting place. There is also a big mitzvah to be melaveh living people as well, such as a guest leaving one's house. There are examples of rabbis who took this mitzvah so seriously that they did it miles beyond the required 6-8 feet stated in halachah.

However, Leah's naming of her fourth son went beyond the creation of walking companion. Levi, to Leah, was a status changer, the child that would finally compel Ya'akov Avinu to accept her as a full-fledged wife, as an equal to Rachel in his heart. Levi was meant to be a spiritual bonding agent, and therein lay the special quality of the Levi'im, his descendants, and the reason why the Kohanim were taken from his tribe.

It is this that, in a later parshah, will give Korach his credibility in the eyes of those who followed him in his rebellion for the leadership. By challenging Moshe Rabbeinu, Korach pitted Levi against Levi, a very risky proposition unless it is fueled by an extreme desire to be closer to God, and to act as the interface between God and the Jewish people. This is why Moshe Rabbeinu responds by saying:

"Tomorrow, Korach and all his assembly should take fire pans, and put fire and incense in them before God. The one whom God chooses, he is the holy one. It is enough that you are Levi'im!" (Bamidbar 16:6-7)

It was as if to say, "This is not about being a Levi, but about being something altogether different, something foreign to what Levi'im are all about."

This is why the Levi'im were not included in the count of the rest of the Jewish people, aside from the other reasons mentioned. It was as if they did not exist with the rest of the nation on some level, as if they were some spiritual reality beyond the physical one to which the rest of the nation belonged. That is what gave them the ability to act as the spiritual interface between God and the Jewish people: Hisbatlus.

Hisbatlus is a concept that has been discussed many times, and it means that someone has made his sense of self secondary to a higher cause. It happens often involuntarily, like during a crisis, when the needs of the moment can supersede one's own needs. The average person feels petty when he acts selfishly at a time that someone else desperately needs his help, and he will push his own concerns to a back burner, or forget about them altogether, in order to help the other person in need.

It only happens consciously when someone is more impressed by a cause other than their own, and there is no greater cause than that of God and Torah, which is all about world rectification. Levi has a special propensity to give himself up for this cause, as was evident to his Moshe-commanded response to the building of the golden calf. Moshe said that the Tribe of Levi were those . . .

Who said of his father and mother, "I have not seen them," nor did he acknowledge his brother, or his own children. They kept Your word and protected Your covenant. (Devarim 33:9)

When the Jewish people sinned with the calf, and I said, "Whoever is for God, to me!" (Shemos 32:26), all of the Levi'im came to me, and I commanded them to kill the father of one's mother was a Yisroel [and not a Levi], or his brothers from his mother [who was not a Levi], or the son of his daughter [who was not a Levi], and they did so. (Rashi)

Can one assume that if the Levi'im had a desire to kill, and to such an extent that they could kill their own relatives upon command, there would be no point in praising them? On the contrary, their greatness lay in the fact that they were relationship-oriented, and in better circumstances, would have done whatever they could for the benefit of the people they now had to kill for their involvement in the incident of the golden calf. This is why Levi'im were the guardians of the Cities of Refuge to which accidental murders had to flee and in which they lived.

They may have sounded ruthless, but in fact, it hurt them to harm others. However, it hurt them more to not fulfill the command of God, and if they had to go against their own nature to do so, so be it. They were mevatel themselves to the will of God, and it is for this that Moshe Rabbeinu praised them before his death.

This was Moshe's criticism of Korach: You are not acting the part of a Levi, and therefore your complaint and request is unfounded, and detrimental to the Jewish people. For, if you were acting as a true Levi, you would be unconcerned with what you do not have, and be more concerned about doing that which God requires of you and the rest of your tribe.

Rather than disrupt relationships, you would be trying to build them. You would mevatel yourself to the cause, and not mevatel the cause to yourself. This creates a good segue to two mitzvos that follow the section about the Levi'im and their responsibilities in the Mishkan, that of the Sotah—the adulteress wife—and the Nazir. Obviously, if people do not believe in God, or at least Torah, then adultery is far less an offense than it ought to be, which is why it has always been rampant throughout history, especially today. However, for someone who does believe in God and Torah, how is it possible to commit such a grave error?

For the exact opposite reason of what Levi represents. Even though adulterers might think that they are passionately in love with one another, the truth is that by taking for themselves what the Talmud calls "stolen waters," they are really self-serving, and are not serving each other. The goal is personal satiation, which just happens to be mutual in the case of two adulterers.

There is no question that a man and wife can lose their love for each other, or at least one for the other. And, there is no question that it can happen while developing a love for another, or that the second love will fill the place of the first one. But, does that justify deceit, and impulse reactions? Do not decent people take into account the feelings of others, even if they have to hurt them? Divorce may be in order, and marriage to another may be inevitable, but only after following the full protocol of Torah, designed to allow us to act Godly even in not-so-Godly situations.

The Nazir, on the other hand, as the Talmud explains, represents the opposite of the Sotah. He makes his vow to abstain from wine to avoid the kind of selfish passion that leads to the taking of "stolen waters," as the following episode reveals:

This man who came to me from the South, had beautiful eyes and handsome features with his locks heaped into curls. I asked him, "My son, why did you decide to destroy such beautiful hair?" He

replied, "In my home town, I tended my father's flocks and once upon going to the fountain to draw water, I gazed at my reflection. Then my evil inclination attacked me and sought to banish me from the world. I said, 'Evil one, why are you prideful in a world that is not yours? You who are destined to be consumed by worms. By the Temple service, I will cut off these locks for the sake of Heaven.' " Then I (Simon HaTzaddik) rose and kissed him and said, "May there be many Nezirim like you amongst the Jewish people." (Nedarim 9b)

What a Levi-like reaction. No wonder a Nazir, upon ending his vow, shaves his hair as did the Levi'im upon their initiation. This is why Korach was called Korach, because the word means "bald." In a world that spends billions of dollars each year just for the sake of hair maintenance, it is clear how much our hair makes up our self-image, as we project ourselves onto the world around us. Removing the hair represents hisbatlus, the relinquishing of our need to be acknowledged for the needs of a greater cause.

However, in this lies our true greatness, and an even greater sense of being. It is the source of our integrity, and everything that is Godly about man. Most important of all, it is the vehicle that will carry us through life in good stead, and keep carrying us well into the eternal world of Olam HaBah, where we are reward for having made God's cause more important than our own.

Text

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