

# OF DAYS AND YEARS

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

Within the national census that dominates the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar (book of Numbers), the tribe of Layvie is unique. First of all they are separated from the general accounting and numbered by themselves. Secondly, they are counted from the age of 30 days, not 20 years. Thirdly, their active duty is from 25 to 50, not 20 to 60. Why the differences?

Before giving us the Torah, G-d defined us as His "Kingdom of priests and holy nation." As "priests," all of us, the entire nation, should have been held to the same standard of purity and obligation and all of us should have had the opportunity to attain the same level of intensity and intimacy with G-d.

Levels of purity, obligations, intensity, and intimacy, are in direct proportion to a person's perceived and accepted level of dependency on G- d. The greater the accepted level of dependency on G-d the greater the demands for purity, intimacy and intensity in relating to G-d.

The incident of the Golden Calf separated Shayvet Layvie from the other tribes proving that they accepted their dependency on G-d more so than any other tribe. Moshe ascended Sinai and stayed 40 days and nights. The Jews miscounted the days and nights and concluded that Moshe was not returning. This turned into panic and the sin of the Golden Calf emerged. Upon returning from Sinai, Moshe broke the first Luchos, confronted Aharon, and realized that the panic had turned a relative handful of the nation toward licentiousness and the desire to be free of G-d's imposing presence. The rest of the nation did not participate in any form of worship and had not shown any active defection from G-d or Moshe; however, they also did not take issue with the obvious defection and betrayal of the relative few who did worship the Golden Calf. Therein lay the essence of the nation's sin.

Had the nation as a whole accepted the totality of their dependency on G- d, they would have understood that, like the future zealousness of Pinchus (see Rashi Shemos 32:29) nothing should stand in the way of adherence to G- d's law. Not fear, not rational, not emotion, not anything! Given the exodus from Egypt, the setting of the desert, Parting of the Sea, Manna, water from rocks, clouds of glory to lead and protect, and the giving of the Torah, mere existence was absolute proof of G-d's direct and personal control. How was it possible for anyone to stand around and watch the relative handful desecrate G-d's law and denigrate Moshe's teachings? Fear of death should have been irrelevant. Emotion and restraint should have been inconsequential. The only true reality should have

been keeping and protecting the word of G-d. Yet the nation stood around and watched. The nation as a whole did nothing. Why?

The Haamek Davar explains the attitude of the nation as being uncertain. As much as they had seen and experienced, they had not studied enough about G-d to be confident and certain. As much as they had seen and experienced, ("This is my G-d and I will glorify Him!") they had not translated those experiences into immutable acceptance and trust of their total dependency.

The word of G-d should have been the nation's only true reality. Moshe looked around after breaking the Luchos and realized that drastic measures were still necessary to restore the nation's focus and sense of reality. (Shem.32:25-29) He called out, "Who ever is for G-d, join me!" The Torah testifies that the entire tribe of Layvie, and only the tribe of Layvie, responded to Moshe's call. At that moment the tribe proved their loyalty to G-d and Moshe. At that moment the tribe proved the totality of their dependency on G-d. As Rashi explains, they were willing to put their lives on the line and engage in mortal battle for the sake of G-d's honor and Moshe's summons. It demanded that each Layvie set aside his personal fear of his own death and the emotion of possibly killing a brother. (See Rashi Shem. 32:26) Only someone who fully believes and trusts that G-d is Creator and Master of the universe and that He chose Moshe to teach His law can suspend all other concerns and considerations in carrying out Moshe's instructions. That was Shayvet Layvie.

Shayvet Layvie, more so than any other tribe, acknowledged their dependency on G-d. Shayvet Layvie, more so than any other tribe, were given greater obligations in relation to G-d. Shayvet Layvie, more so than any other tribe, were afforded the opportunities for greater purity, intimacy, and intensity in relation to G-d. Shayvet Layvie, more so than any other tribe, were commanded to live their lives in a manner than reflected greater overt dependency on G-d. "G-d is their inheritance ?  
portion.style="mso-spacerun: yes">

In the aftermath of the Golden Calf G-d gifted the tribe of Layvie with representing what otherwise would have been the nation's obligation: the purity, intensity, and intimacy of His "Kingdom of priests and holy nation." No longer would the entire nation be held to the same standard, only Shayvet Layvie. Had it been otherwise, the Bechorim ? first-born in each family would ha functionaries in the Mishkan (Tabernacle) and Bais Hamikdash (Temple) while the entire nation would have lived on the Kohain's level of purity and intimacy.

As noted in Parshas Bamidbar, each Layvie replaced one first-born to the extent that the 273 extra first-born had to be redeemed from what otherwise would have been their designated service in the Mishkan. Because the exchange between Layvie and first-born was person for person, body for body, the criterion for being counted was unrelated to actual service in the Mishkan. Instead, the criterion was personhood or non-personhood. In Halacha, personhood is conferred upon a newborn

child at the age of 30 days; therefore, for a Layvie to be able to replace a first-born the Layvie had to minimally "be alive;" therefore, the Leviyim were counted from the age of 30 days. The rest of the nation was counted on the basis of personal service (military) and the three-generational-family-unit; therefore, they were counted starting at the age of 20 years.

However, the lesson of the Leviyim and their individual census is far more profound.

Shayvet Layvie represents the Kingdom of Priests and Holy Nation that should have been the entire Jewish People. As such, the most evident feature of the tribe is their commitment to the study of Torah and the totality of their dependency on G-d.

Dependency on G-d is predicated on learning about G-d. The more you learn about G-d, the more you recognize the totality of your dependency on Him. The only means for learning about G-d is by studying Torah, and the only Torah we accept as the authentic word of G-d is the Torah taught by Moshe Rabbeinu. "And they believed in Hashem and In Moshe His servant." Shayvet Layvie proved their loyalty to G-d and Moshe at the time of the Golden Calf; therefore, they were granted the uniqueness of their additional Mitzvos and obligations as well as the opportunity to have a purer, more intense and intimate relationship with G-d.

Dependency on G-d and Moshe is not easy. The human ego demands independence. The ego propels us to challenge all limits, restrictions, and expectations. For many, the standard and the established are mountains to be scaled and wrongs to be corrected rather than wisdoms to be accepted. For some reason we always believe that we are better than the past.

To be better than what was is to judge the past lacking, and to judge the past lacking is to forgo the lessons of history and tradition. It is not by accident that included in the laws of Yiras Av VaEm ? Being in Awe of Parents, is contradict their words." A child may think they know better and may in fact know better; however, under no circumstances can that child simply contradict or correct a parent's statement or opinion. At all times the child must be cognizant that he or she stands at the apex of history confidently battling history because of their parents. Parents are the ones who sweated and sacrificed to forge the history upon which their children stand.

The Talmud uses an expression. "Your ancestors left you opportunities to become great and famous." Greatness should come from building on the past rather than destroying the past. Every generation is presented with new challenges that demand innovative solutions and answers; however those answers must be founded on the immutable absolutes of Halacha (Jewish law) and tradition. Our greatness must never infringe on the greatness of the past. The past always leaves us enough room to attain our own greatness. By cherishing what we were given we guarantee the eternity of who we are.

The infant is the most dependent of all of G-d's creatures. Without the ministrations of those who preceded him, he has no future. Shayvet Layvie was counted from 30 days and up. Their count began with infancy. As the symbolic "servant of G-d" that all of us should have been, the Layvie is counted from the first moment of his Halachik (legal) personhood. Just as he started his mission in absolute dependency, so too must he serve with absolute dependency. However, practically speaking, the service in the Temple is sophisticated, involved, and demands a degree of maturity and experience; therefore, Shayvet Layvie trained as Leviyim and Kohanim until the age of 25. From 25 to 50, the Kohain and Layvie ministered their nation. Then, at the age when their strength and wisdom matured and achieved greatness, they were instructed to step down.

The lesson could not be clearer. Service to G-d has nothing to do with personal greatness or strength. Service to G-d is predicated on humility, subjugation, and the acceptance of total dependency on Him. Therefore, at the very age when we otherwise would have expected to see personal greatness emerge from 25 years of devoted service, the Kohain and Layvie were commanded to retire.

---

Text Copyright © 2004 by [Rabbi Aron Tendler](#) and **[Torah.org](#)**

The author is the Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA, and Assistant Principal of YULA.