

BEHAVIORAL LEVIS

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The tribe of Levi was counted independently in the desert of Sinai, apart from all of its fellow Israelites. Almost from its onset, the tribe of Levi was deemed to be special. Even though it had a violent start in its history, as Levi himself was one of the chief instigators of the rift between Joseph and the brothers as well as being a destroyer of the city of Shchem, the tribe of Levi, already in Egypt, began to redefine itself almost exclusively in terms of pious leadership and service within Israel. It became the miniature "kingdom of priests and holy nation," the prototype for all of the other tribes and individual families of the Jewish people. Therefore, after the debacle of the Golden Calf in the desert, the first-born Jews forfeited their original priestly role and the tribe of Levi was then designated as their successors "for the [holy] work and the burden [of public service]." The tribe of Levi was "given over" to G-d's service, to engage in the holy work of the Temple, and perhaps even more importantly, to become the teachers of Torah and the role-models of life-behavior and values for their fellow Jews. As such, the tribe of Levi was separated from ordinary life. It owned no property in the Land of Israel, it was freed from most taxes and national service burdens, it was supported by the tithes and contributions of its fellow Jews, and it devoted itself exclusively to the fulfillment of its G-dly charge of spiritual example, education and inspiration in the midst of the Jewish people. Being a Levite was thus a distinction and an honor but it carried with it grave responsibilities, high expectations and constant demands. In the eyes of the rest of Israel, a Levi had to behave as a Levi. Failure to do so, was deemed to be a desecration of the holy name of G-d itself.

After the destruction of the Temple, the tribe of Levi lost much of its unique role in the Jewish world, though vestiges of its preferred status were retained as a reminder of its chosen standing. But the task of the Levites in being the nucleus of Torah knowledge and moral inspiration for the Jewish world still remained. Even though there was no longer a Temple, a Levi still had to behave as a Levi. Perhaps even more now than ever, in a "Templeless" exile, the Jewish people required spiritual teachers and role-models, people who operated above the mundane problems and requirements of every day life, and who therefore would introduce the spark and color of holy behavior into the drab and depressing world of Jewish exile. Apparently, in the new and more difficult Jewish world of exile, just the tribe of Levi alone would not be sufficient for the task. Therefore, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, in his monumental Mishne Torah, states that every human being can now become a Levi. In his golden words: "Every person who enters this world, whose spirit moves him and his intellect instructs him, to separate himself [from the pettiness of the world] in order to stand before G-d, to truly serve Him, to be responsible to Him, to know Him, and to walk upright and straight in His paths

as G-d created him; and he has freed himself from the yoke of petty human considerations that other people pursue - such a person has sanctified himself as being holy of holies, and the L-rd is his share and inheritance for all time and all worlds, and he will receive in the World to Come his proper and fulfilling [reward] as G-d has given such to the Priests and the Levites."

Let us be on the lookout therefore to discern the true Levites in the Jewish and general world. Let us be aware of the Levi who behaves as a Levi, and give that exalted person due honor, recognition and emulation. Let us count those Levites separately from the whole nation and extend to them our appreciation and blessing.

Shabat Shalom.

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