

LEVITES: WE'RE NOT JUST GENES!

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The kohanim and Leviim (priests and Levites) form a distinct and special group among the Jewish people. The Torah grants them special privileges and the Jewish people as a whole accord them special honors. In Temple times, they were the custodians and public servants of Israel in the Temple service. The gifts and tithes of Israel supported them and they were exempted from many civic responsibilities and national duties. They were to be devoted to the service of God and of Israel, a holy and dedicated cadre of teachers, role models and public servants. Even today, when Temple services in Jerusalem are nonexistent and the kohanim and Leviim receive no tithes or special gifts from the rest of Israel, they still receive special honors in the synagogue and family and are viewed with unique respect and honor. In the enslavement of the Jews in Egypt, which is described in this week's Torah reading, the tribe of Levi was exempted from the physical toil of forced labor. Moshe and Aharon, the first kohanim, were the leaders of Israel and it is through their hands that the deliverance from Egyptian bondage was achieved. We all know that being a kohen or a Levi is a matter of Jewish patrilineal descent. But nevertheless, there is a clearer and much more universal definition of being a member of this group that the Torah provides, and that definition includes all of us, in fact, every human being on earth.

Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon in his Mishna Torah, at the end of Hilchot Shmita V'Yovel, states: "What differentiated the tribe of Levi...was that they were designated and separated from the others in order to devote themselves to the service of God, to teach God's righteous ways and just statutes to the many...Therefore, they were held apart from worldly ways and mundane tasks; they did not participate in the battles of war; they did not inherit or acquire for themselves land. Rather, they were God's army... and the Blessed One sustained them for it is written 'I am your share and your inheritance.' And this is true not only for the tribe of Levi exclusively, but for every human being that enters this world's life whose spirit moves one and one understands of one's own knowledge and will that one wishes to be apart and to stand before the Lord and serve and obey Him, to know God and to walk righteously as the Creator intended; to remove from one's neck the yoke of the many schemes that man pursues - such a person is sanctified and is holy of holies. The Lord will be that person's share and inheritance forever and the Lord will provide for this holy person in this physical world as well so that the person will be able to have that which is sufficient for life, as the Lord so provided for the kohanim and Leviim." This most powerful statement contains within it the essence of the Jewish worldview of life and its purpose. Rambam declares therein: "everyone can be a Levi!" That was the hard lesson of Egyptian bondage - namely, that the way for a Jew to escape the

physical bondage of society that otherwise engulfs us is to be a Levi. It is because of this insight, that Moshe and Aharon become the leaders of Israel and the redeemers and role models for all generations of Jews.

My beloved grandson, Ephraim Yirmiyahu Halevi Teitelbaum celebrates his Bar Mitzva this Shabat of Shmot. He is a Levi by virtue of family descent. But in our time, perhaps even in past times, family descent is an insufficient guarantee of the spiritual future of any individual Jew, and certainly of Jewish society as a whole. The road of assimilation in American Jewish life is littered with the descendants of great Jews of previous generations. Hillel had it right when he said; "If I am not for myself, then who will be for me?" It is not sufficient for Ephraim to be a Levi by descent and pedigree only. He must become a "Rambam Levi" and the accomplishment of that is dependent completely upon him.. It takes years of Torah study, personal sacrifice and unwavering commitment to become a "Rambam Levi."

The taskmasters of Egyptian bondage, in all of their attractive and unattractive guises, are persistent and cruel in our society, especially towards the young. Moshe and Aharon call out to redeem but sometimes Jews don't hear or listen to them. But the truth of the matter is that we all would like to be Leviim. And true Leviim - "Rambam Leviim" - never toil in the bondage of the Egyptian Pharaoh. May Ephraim and all of his siblings and cousins grow tall and straight in Torah knowledge and values and be of vital service to the Almighty and Israel.

Shabat Shalom.
Rabbi Berel Wein

Text Copyright © 2000 [Rabbi Berel Wein](#) and **Project Genesis, Inc.**
