

BEING A LEVI

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The term that the Torah uses for counting the Levite family of Gershon is nasso - to raise and lift up. The word can also mean to carry and bear a burden. It can also mean to lead. When such words appear in the Torah with multiple, differing meanings - and Hebrew is replete with so many of them - the commentators remark that all of the possible meanings of that word are nuanced and meant to be part of the verse of the Torah itself.

I think this insight is especially pertinent regarding the word nasso as it appears in this week's parsha. The family of Gershon, as is the tribe of Levi generally, is quite small in number but nevertheless laden with great responsibilities. It can use its paucity in numbers as an excuse for shirking its responsibilities and for refusing to perform the holy tasks assigned to it. But since it is meant to assume a leadership role in Jewish society, it is bidden to rise to the occasion.

There is no question that this role of leadership will be burdensome and frustrating. Yet it is enjoined at the beginning of its public service to bear up under the yoke of the Jewish people and to serve as the leaders, role models and mentors of the generations of the Jewish people. The Levites are not to shirk their duties and role but rather are to proudly lift themselves up to a higher level of Torah dedication and service to all of Israel. All of this is implicit in the word nasso that introduces this week's parsha to our attention.

Rambam, in a famous statement from his Mishne Torah, states, in effect, that all human beings who enter this world can reach the spiritual status of being a Levite. One must devote one's self to the service of God and of man, practice compassion and goodness and be satisfied and not too over ambitious with one's physical lot in life, in order to aspire to such a status. The Levites were the bearers of the Torah both literally and figuratively. Rambam indicates that they avoided the petty foolishness in our daily lives and instead concentrated on the holy and noble task to which God assigned them.

The tasks and goals of the Levites were clearly delineated for them by the Torah. And even in our time when the service of the Temple is not yet present within Jewish society, the uniqueness of the role of the Levites in our midst has been preserved. At the time of the Golden Calf, when all of Israel was threatened with physical destruction and spiritual annihilation, it was the tribe of Levi that redressed the situation.

In the difficult times and circumstances that surround us today we are also in need of potential

Levites who will rise to the occasion and its challenges. One cannot alter one's genealogy but one's spiritual aspirations to become a Levite have no limits or restraints.

Shabat shalom Chag sameach

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