

# SHEVET LEVI OF TODAY

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

In this week's parsha the Torah highlights the special role and status of the tribe of Levi. They are counted separately from the rest of the tribes of Israel. Their status in society is that they are engaged in work in the Temple, have their own separate cities distributed throughout the Land of Israel and are to be supported by the tithe (ten percent of the crop produced from the agriculturally based economy of the Jewish society) contributed to their upkeep and economic well being. They are, so to speak, the elite class of the Jewish people, the beneficiaries of the apparently unearned largesse of the working class.

Now, why would the Torah countenance and even prescribe such an uneven societal status? Especially in our time when the current, yet always fleeting, political correctness of society strives for the ultimately equal distribution of wealth and national responsibilities, this Levite exceptionalism seems anachronistic. I imagine that in the current particular expression of demonization, the tribe of Levi would be labeled as being "parasites." And yet the Torah ordains and demands such a societal condition.

The tribe of Levi, which included the descendants of Aharon - the kohanim, was the smallest of all of the tribes of Israel numerically. Their exceptionalism began already in the land of Egypt when they were exempted from the hard labor that was endured by their fellow Jews. Yet we find that there was little opposition recorded in the Torah to this special treatment of the tribe of Levi.

Even Korach, who claimed to be the champion of equal treatment for all Jews, really only wanted to replace Moshe and Aharon with himself and other Levites. I think that all of this has basic relevance to our current Jewish society and its vexing challenges.

Not every one has the opportunity to devote one's self to full-time Torah study or to constant public or religious service. Not everyone has the ability to create a start-up technological company. Not everyone has the ability or inclination to be a university professor or a medical doctor or technician. Not everyone can be a successful storekeeper or business manager. Yet there is no doubt that our Jewish society here in the state of Israel needs full-time Torah students, religious and social service volunteers and professionals, start-up geniuses and computer geeks, professors, physicians, auto mechanics and all sorts of technicians, plumbers and builders, storekeepers and even rabbis.

In the times of the Temples, the Torah made it easy by classifying, so to speak, who was who and specifically identified the tribe of Levi for constant Torah study and teaching and full-time Temple

service. In our current society this process of identification is more difficult, inexact and even confusing. Yet it is basically one of the most important issues that we must successfully deal with.

In the current society we certainly need "Levites" - Jews who are exclusively devoted to Torah study, teaching and public religious service. The problem is in identifying these "Levites" and nurturing them. That is really the core of the issue after all of the political smoke dissipates and wafts into the passing air.

Shabat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com)