

A SOURCE FOR THE SINGING OF THE LEVITES

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Naso

A Source For The Singing of the Levites

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 771 - Ashkenazim, Sephardim and Bishul Akum. Good Shabbos!

Each of the three Levite families had their own job. The sons of Kehas had the very unique job of carrying the Aron. The Medrash notes that unlike the sons of Gershon and the sons of Merari, the Torah does not call the family of the third son of Levi by the title "the sons of Kehas" but uses the term "the sons of Ha'Kehati" [Bamidbar 4:34,37]. The Medrash states that because their job was to carry the Aron, G-d joined his own name to theirs (the Yud following Kehas and the Hay preceding it), in order that they not be wiped out. They had a dangerous occupation. If a person had an improper thought while carrying the Aron, he was in danger of losing his life. The Yud and the Hay of G-d's Name were thus placed in proximity to their name to fulfill that which is written "to save from death their souls" [Tehillim 33:19].

This had a protective effect, it was a "segulah"; but it was not fool-proof. It did not always work. The Medrash quotes Rav Peda in the name of Rav Yosi ben Zimra that when the Aron travelled, two bolts of fire emerged from the ends of the poles of the Aron to protect the camp from any enemies who might attack them. However, sometimes the bearers of the Aron were themselves the victims of these bolts of fire and their number was diminished by the fire's destructive force. It was a dangerous occupation.

Knowing this, we can perhaps understand another teaching of Chazal. They were commanded specifically to carry the Aron on their shoulders. The Talmud [Eruchin 11a] senses a redundancy in the words "on their shoulders they should carry it" [Bamidbar 7:9] - obviously if it is on their shoulders they will be carrying it! The Talmud therefore derives a nuance of "song" in the word "yisa-u" [literally 'they will carry it'] as we find in the expression 'se-u zimra' [Tehillim 81:3] [carry a tune] and states that this is a hint from the Torah to the fact that the Levites accompany the Temple Service with shirah [song].

Usually, when the Talmud or Medrash provides homiletic exegesis from a pasuk, the exegesis somehow dovetails with the simple interpretation of the pasuk. However, here we have a situation where the p'shuto shel mikra [simple reading of the pasuk] relates to one matter (i.e. - carrying the Aron on their shoulder) and the d'rush (i.e. -- they sang while doing the service) seems to come literally out of left field. What is the connection? Who would ever think that carrying the Aron is related to carrying a tune and singing shirah during the course of the Temple Service?

The Shemen HaTov (volume 4) suggests a connection. Whenever a person is in a trying situation where his life is on the line, if he emerges successfully or victorious from that situation, he feels an extraordinary sense of joy and jubilation. We find this by soldiers who have been in combat. If they come out alive, having achieved success, they feel a sense of euphoria. This same concept occurs in the Mishna in Yoma [7:4]: After Yom Kippur, the Kohen Gadol made a holiday for his friends and relatives. The fact that he survived entrance into the Holy of Holies, which was fraught with danger and from which many High Priests did not emerge alive was reason to celebrate. To this very day, there are many places that have a special festive meal after Yom Kippur - having hopefully emerged successfully from the awesome Judgment that we face during the High Holiday period. Many people sing and dance immediately following the conclusion of Neilah for this same reason. We were just figuratively "in battle" and we have "emerged in peace from the (period of) Kodesh [holiness]."

The children of Kehas felt themselves in mortal danger, having been tasked with the awesome duty of carrying the Aron. When they successfully completed this mission, they sang to express the emotion one feels having emerged from danger. Thus the two expositions (1) they carried the Aron and (2) they carried a tune (se'u zimra) are not disconnected and disjointed expositions. They dovetail perfectly.

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic portions for this parsha from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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