

PARSHAS BAMIDBAR - IN PRAISE OF CHILD LABOR

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

In Praise of Child Labor¹

Count the children of Levi...every male from a month and upward.

For better or worse, many of us tend to impute a cause-and-effect to the various roles and rules that govern the tribe of Levi. First and foremost, they were meant to serve in the holiest places and capacities - Kohanim in performing the active avodah; Levi'im as porters of the Mishkan, and as guardians of the later batei mikdash. Because they ought to be devoting their time to those holy pursuits, they are discouraged from full time occupation with more mundane affairs. Therefore, they do not receive a portion in the Land, which would preoccupy them with lesser activities. Because they cannot provide for themselves like everyone else, we make it up to them by giving them what they need to live. We furnish their livelihood through the gifts of terumah and ma'aser.

Oh, yes. Since there were always more Levi'im than required for the actual work shift in the beis hamikdash, most of them had time on their hands. Therefore, they could develop into strong talmidei chachamim, and share their knowledge with the rest of the people. They developed into a cadre of Torah teachers, readily available to instruct the nation.

Our pasuk suggests that we may have our causes and effects - and perhaps our priorities - backwards.

We are instructed here to count the Leviim from the age of one month, or essentially from the time they achieve legal personhood. (It takes a month for a newborn to establish his viability.) This is strange enough, considering that no one else is counted this way. Stranger still is a parallel passage just a perek away, in which the Levi'im themselves are counted from age thirty and up! Given that the labor of some of the Levi'im was taxing and challenging, the thirty-year figure makes sense. It marks the age at which the Levi'im are brought into actual service of their duties. The one-month figure must, then, point to a different calling - one that is so important and complex, that it requires training from birth.

The two callings of the Levi'im are really complementary. We could sum up their role in the beis hamikdash - their first calling - as guardians of the place where the physical evidence of Divine Revelation - the luchos - is enshrined. The Aron, taken together with the rich symbolism that surrounds it, is a reminder to Bnei Yisrael of the moment of ma'amad Har Sinai that transfigured us, that turned us into believers, that sustained us for the millennia to follow. More important, however,

than safeguarding the symbol of the Torah is securing the Torah itself. They do this in the only way we have ever known: by becoming talmidei chachamim, and by taking their Torah back to the people. This vital role cannot wait for age thirty, or twenty, or even younger. To do it best on a national plane, it calls for nothing less than pressing the child into service - if only through a carefully scrutinized chinuch - while still in the cradle. Right from birth, the Levi should be prepared and directed to live differently than everyone else, to focus on loftier affairs.

We can perhaps tease out a third role for the Levi'im, one that also finds a place for young children in the beis hamikdosh, rather than thirty year old adults. The general duties of the Levi'im within the beis hamikdosh are called a mishmeres, a charge. This charge is called different things by the Torah. Sometimes it is called a mishmeres hamishkan, or a mishmeres Aharon haKohen, or mishmeres kol ho'edah. All of these phrases used by the Torah reflect a role of human beings performing their duties on behalf of the Jewish people in the beis hamikdosh.

One phrase modified by the word mishmeres stands apart from the others: mishmeres be-shem Hashem. This is a charge unlike the others. The Gemara^[2] finds in it a call for the Levi'im to provide musical accompaniment to the korbanos. This service is truly done "in the Name of Hashem." Here they act, as it were, more as emissaries of Hashem than of the Bnei Yisrael. When they perform the divinely inspired songs, they stand as surrogates for G-d Himself. They convey to the nation His message - what He would be saying Himself, would He not use them as His instruments.

In this charge, young children were indeed allowed to take part and assist. It may not explain why Levi'im should be counted from as early as one month, but it does add another dimension to a role that they play far earlier than the one that begins at thirty.

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1. Based on Hirsch Chumash, Bamidbar 3:13
 2. Arachin 13B
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