

Parashah Ninety-Nine

Numbers 3:14–4:16; Isaiah 43:8–13; Ephesians 4:11–16

notes by Tim Hegg

The Levites—God's Legion

In our Torah section this Shabbat we have the numbering of the Levites, but not in the same way as the other tribes were numbered. Of the other tribes, males 20 years old and up were counted, taking into the census all who still had strength to bear arms. Here the Levites are counted twice: first all the living males from a month old and upward (without any limit) and secondly, all males 30 to 50. Why two counts? The first count was to total the number of viable males of the Levites. Infants were considered viable after one month, because most infant mortality occurs within the first month. The second counting was for the Kohathites who were in the prime strength of life (30–50), who could do the physical labor required in transporting the sacred objects. Thus, what made the counting of the Levites distinct from the rest of the tribal census was that the Levites were counted particularly for their ability to carry out the sacred service of HaShem, not for bearing arms.

It appears that up until the sin of the Golden Calf, the duty of performing the sacrificial ritual fell upon the heads of households. In the narrative of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Gen 12–50), each one offers sacrifice unto the Lord. And before Abraham, Noah offered sacrifices. After the sin of the Golden Calf, however, the duty of leading the people in the sacrificial ritual, as well as in other aspects of the service of worship pertaining to the Mishkan (Tabernacle), fell to the Levites. God had given to them this most sacred and wonderful duty because they alone of the tribes turned away from the idolatrous worship of the Golden Calf and stood with Moses in confession of HaShem as their only God (Ex 32:26).

Because of this, they took the place of the first born who would, in the natural course of events, take up the position of the head-of-household upon the death of the father of the family. Since the first born belonged to God from the Passover event, (in which all the first born were slain, save the first born of the Israelites whom God spared on account of the blood on the doorpost), it was God's prerogative to exchange them for the Levites (Num 3:11–13, 40–41). In this way, the Levites became entirely given over to HaShem for His service. They therefore had no need to own their own land. They were to be honored by the people for their service and given the produce and livestock they needed to sustain their living.

Since the Levites were taken by HaShem in the place of the first born of Israel, the number of each is recorded. The first born of Israel (again, from one month old and older) totalled 22,273, while the number of the Levites was 22,000. This means that there were 273 more first born than Levites. These were thus redeemed by the payment of five shekels, which was given to Aaron and his sons, apparently for the maintenance of the Tabernacle (cf. vv. 40–48). For the 22,000 redeemed by exchange for a Levite, the Sages say the tradition held that a Levite brought a first born to the Tent of Meeting and said, "This Levite has redeemed this first born." Here we have the foreshadowing of the priest himself becoming redemptive payment for another, just as Yeshua is both the priest that offers the sacrifice, as well as the sacrifice itself. The on-going redemption of the first born was set at five shekels on the basis of this text as well (cf. Num 18:15f).

Within the Levites the family of Kohath was chosen to carry the sacred objects of the Mishkan, including the various parts of the Tabernacle itself and all of the objects within it. Carefully prepared by Aaron and his sons (those who functioned as the High Priest [כהן הגדול] and those who officiated daily in the Mishkan), the objects of the Tabernacle were duly covered before the Kohathites could touch them. Such careful preparation insured that the utter sanctity of the Tabernacle

and the rituals performed therein would not shift toward being common or mundane as they were transported from one place to another. Even when being transported, they were to be cared for as entirely sacred, that is, set apart to God.

This reminds us, as our *havdalah* service does each week, that God intends for us to maintain the difference between the sacred and the profane—that which belongs to God and that which is contrary to Him. In our society and times there has come a terrible demise of the sacred, resulting in an inability to distinguish between sacred and profane. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident in our times than in the demise of the sacred nature of marriage. What God commands to be holy has been considered of little or no value in much of our society.

Consider as well the flippant attitude often encountered in “pop-religion,” which portrays the Almighty as one’s equal, and Who is therefore approached in a kind of nonchalant attitude. While we recognize that by His grace He desires to dwell with us in our earthly abode, we nonetheless should remember that the One we worship is the King of kings, and that He ought to be treated and approached as the royalty He actually is. This means that there is a constant recognition that He is to be feared on the one hand, while at the same time appreciating His willingness to be our companion and Savior.

Another important lesson we may derive from the *parashah* before us is that in God’s way of doing things, everyone has a duty in the sphere of His service or worship. Notice how each aspect of the Tabernacle is carefully apportioned to the Levites so that the moving and setting up of the Tabernacle should be always done “decently and in order.” Paul teaches us in our Apostolic section that the same is true with the body of Messiah—each member must supply what God has equipped him or her to do, so that He might be glorified and the whole body may benefit. To the extent that anyone within the community fails to accomplish the task God has fit him or her for, to that extent the community is weakened and fails to accomplish all God intends for it to be. No duty is small or insignificant in the eyes of HaShem. Every part is important and vital for the smooth functioning of the whole together, and therefore we must encourage each other to fulfill the roles within God’s kingdom for which He has equipped us.

In the history of the Christian Church, the issue of the priesthood was an early concern. By the time of the 4th century CE, there had already emerged a well structured papacy in which those who were constituted as overseers had taken the position of “priest,” having declared the so-called “Eucharist” as a sacrifice. Since sacrifices were only to be done by priests, the papacy (Roman Catholic priesthood) was born. Ultimately the role of High Priest was taken over by the Pope, chief of the Roman Catholic priesthood, and finally declared to be the “Vicar of God,” meaning he spoke *ex cathedra*, as it were the very words of the Almighty—what the Pope said became canon law on par (and actually above) the Scriptures.

After the reformation of the 16th century, which was, among other things, a direct reaction to the papacy, the Reformed church, and particularly the division among the reformers led by groups such as the Anabaptists, declared the doctrine known as “the priesthood of all believers.” This was, no doubt, in reaction to the Roman priesthood, and was taught in order to assure that the papacy never developed within the Protestant faction.

The problem with the doctrine, however, is that it has very little biblical basis. The primary text used by those who teach the “priesthood of all believers” is 1 Peter 2:9, “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvellous light.” Apparently many who have taught this doctrine fail to recognize that this is a quote from Exodus 19:5–6 in which Moses declares that Israel, as she obeys the Torah, would be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Thus, well before the coming of Yeshua, Israel was herself considered to be a “royal

priesthood,” yet clearly (as our Torah section declares) the Levites were distinct from the population as a whole. The Levites had specific duties relative to the service of the Tabernacle, duties which were exclusive to them, but only the sons of Aaron “ministered as priests” to God (Ex 29:44; 40:13, 15). Yet every Israelite had direct access to God in prayer and in personal communion with Him. It was in the vital matter of the sacrificial service that Israel as a whole was represented by the priests. In this way, Israel was to be known as a “kingdom of priests,” a nation characterized by her relationship with the God of the universe through the mediatorial service of her priests.

In the same way, the followers of Yeshua would be known as having Him and His priesthood as the central and core issue that defined them. As the Israelites of old had direct access to the atonement provided by God through the intercession of their High Priest, so we have direct access to God through our High Priest, Yeshua. The doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers” in the Reformation period was originally taught to do away with the papal priesthood. Unwittingly, this doctrine, in which every believer was said to be a priest in his or her own right, and thus had access into the Holy Place and Most Holy Place, diminished the unique work which Yeshua alone can accomplish as our High Priest. What need do we have of His intercession if we are ourselves priests who enter the Most Holy Place? Rather, the Scriptures teach that our presence before HaShem is “in the Messiah” (Col 3:3). It is in His priesthood, and His priesthood alone that we have access to the Father. Consequently, our life, both now and in the world to come, is dependent upon Yeshua functioning in the role of priest for us, a role He alone can fulfill.

In this regard, some might wonder at the priestly language used by John in the Apocalypse (book of Revelation). Three times we find John describing the believers as a “kingdom of priests:”

Rev. 1:6 and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Rev. 5:10 “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.”

Rev. 20:6 Blessed and holy is the one who has a part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power, but they will be priests of God and of Messiah and will reign with Him for a thousand years.

Our Torah portion is the perfect backdrop against which to understand John’s words in these texts. For the Levites were the helpers of the Aaronic priests, who alone were allowed to approach the altar and carry on the sacred duties of offering sacrifices to the Holy One. John likewise characterizes the believers as those who minister to the Great High Priest, Yeshua, who alone fulfills the role of High Priest. As believers, we assist Yeshua in His work as High Priest, by (as it were) carrying, setting up, and arranging the sacred articles for His duties. In this metaphor, we form the place of His ministry, for we are ourselves (in one sense) the Tabernacle where His glory (*Shekinah*) is seen, and where the atonement He enacts is lived out. To be “priests of God and of Messiah” means to be those who attend Him, and provide the place for His work. This is a sacred duty! As a Temple, built with living stones (1Pet 2:5), we are the place where the fruit of Yeshua’s sacrificial atonement is seen and made known to a watching world. And each of us, therefore, is given something to do, just as each family of the Levites was assigned their duties to assure the Tabernacle was ready for the service of the Aaronic priests. As fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, single adults, and children, together we have the joyful duty of making a place for God’s glory to be known. We have been chosen and blessed with this important duty. May we all fulfill our service to the glory of the One Who has granted us eternal life!