

“To Be an Honorary¹ Levite or a Firstborn?” —That is the Question!

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Parashat BaMidbar

The Divine Plan to Set aside the firstborn of each Jewish family for Divine Service.

Originally, God’s Design called for the firstborn of every family to serve in the capacity of Kohanim and Levi’im, performing the sacrificial services in first the Mishkan, and then the Beit HaMikdash. God Expected that in return for having Saved the Jewish firstborn residing in the Egyptian homes where blood from the Pesach sacrifice had been painted on the doorposts during the final plague in Egypt (Shemot 12:12-4, 22-3), they would be sanctified and dedicated to His Service forever afterwards (Ibid. 13:2; BaMidbar 3:13).² Biblical parallels to the dedication of the Levi’im to God’s Service include the manner in which Manoach and his wife are told by God’s Messenger that their firstborn, Shimshon, was to be totally devoted to carrying out God’s Plans for repelling the Philistines (Shoftim 13:5), and Chana’s dedicating her first child, Shmuel, to Divine Service (I Shmuel 1:11).

The quality of human free choice leads to an alteration in this Plan, whereby the Levi’im are substituted for the firstborn.

However, at a seminal point in biblical history, immediately following the Exodus from Egypt, during the Sin of the Golden Calf, it is the tribe of Levi, rather than the firstborn Jews of all the tribes, that distinguishes itself in terms of its refusal to participate in the idolatrous activities. When Moshe demands that the people choose to stand with or against HaShem, it is only the Levites, and not the firstborn, who answer the call. (Shemot 32:26) “...’Whomever supports HaShem, let him come to me,’ and there gathered unto him ALL of the tribe of Levi.” The next three verses (27-29) describe how this specific tribe, in accordance with Moshe’s instructions, put to death those who actively worshipped the calf, ignoring any prior personal relationships that they may have had with the perpetrators. Their demonstration of loyalty to God, above and beyond allegiances they may have felt towards even blood relatives, is commemorated in Moshe’s valedictory address, when he describes the members of the tribe of Levi to the entire Jewish people: (Devarim 33:9) “He was ready to say to his father and his

¹ While an individual never has control over to which tribe his patrimony derives or his birth order within his particular family, nevertheless, he can strive to emulate the admirable qualities of other groups. Some claim that the institution of Nazir is a means by which a non-Kohen can impose upon himself practices ordinarily obligatory on the Kohanim—not becoming intoxicated or willfully exposing oneself to ritual impurity emanating from a deceased human being (BaMidbar 6:3-4, 6-7).

² Although Shemot 13:13, a stage in the Exodus story months before the Sin of the Calf and the consequent replacement of the firstborn by the Levi’im, already discusses the redemption of firstborn Jews, i.e., removing their sanctity by a transferal of the holiness that they acquired by being miraculously saved from death onto money, which is in turn given to one of the Kohanim who has assumed the firstborn’s intended role, RaShBaM states that this ritual only came into effect during the second year following the Exodus, after the Mishkan had already been constructed. Such an assertion allows the Sin of the Golden Calf to have already happened, and therefore the transfer of sanctity from the firstborn to the Levi’im had taken place as well. Consequently, even a commentator as committed to the literal meaning of biblical texts as RaShBaM, concedes that this particular verse is an instance of the principle “Ein Mukdam U’Me’uchar BaTora” (there is no chronological order with respect to topics that appear in the Tora.)

mother, 'I don't recognize him/her'; and his brother he did not acknowledge; and his children he did not know, because he observed Your Directives and Your Covenant he guarded."³

Consequently, the combination of the failure of the firstborn to resist participation in the Sin of the Calf, coupled with the Levites' unwavering and forthright opposition to the manufacture and worship of this idol,⁴ eventually results in the Levi'im, from whom Aharon's family is separated to constitute the Kohanim, being chosen to replace the firstborn as those who will administrate and celebrate the sacrificial rituals (BaMidbar 3:13, 45). The rite of Pidyon HaBen continues to this day to demonstrate the transfer of holiness and therefore Divine Chosenness from the firstborn to a subgroup within the tribe of Levi, with the Kohen of choice receiving at least the equivalent of five Shekalim (biblical coins) from the father of the firstborn son, thereby removing any residual holiness from the child (BaMidbar 3:46 ff.; see fn. 2).

An alternative explanation for the designation of the Levi'im to replace the Bechorim.

The NeTzIV on 3:39 is apparently dissatisfied with the explanation that the singular reason why the Levites were chosen to replace the firstborn was their response to the Golden Calf. He feels that there must be more to their qualifications beyond this single act. Basing his hypothesis upon the relatively small size of the tribe of Levi, 22,000 (BaMidbar 3:39), the number of Levites being brought into stark relief when compared to the next smallest tribe, Menashe, 32,200 (1:35), let alone the largest, Yehuda, 74,600 (1:27),⁵ the author of HaEmek Davar offers the following speculation:

It would appear that in Egypt they (the Levites) were "a chariot" (a platform) for the Divine Presence, (i.e., that for a significant period prior to Sinai) they had already separated and set themselves apart, dedicating themselves to the Service of the Blessed One and spreading

³ An obvious question that arises when the verses from Shemot and Devarim are juxtaposed with one another is if the entire tribe of Levi was loyal, how would it have been possible for them to have raised their hands against blood relatives? Wouldn't the latter also be Levites? RaShI suggests that the verse in Devarim could be referring to a person's mother's father, a step-brother by means of one's mother, or the son of a daughter. Since membership in a tribe is determined by an individual's patrimony—see VaYikra 24:10, RaShI—therefore one's mother, and by extension her father or her child could be non-Kohanim or Levi'im. Similarly, were one's daughter to marry a non-Kohen or Levi, then her child would be a non-Kohen or Levi.

⁴ The only exception, and it is a glaring one at that, to the Levites' non-participation in the Sin of the Calf is Aharon!—see Shemot 32:1 ff., especially v. 21-4. Aharon is roundly criticized not only by Moshe himself in v. 21, but also by R. Yehoshua ben Korcha in Sanhedrin 7a for having inappropriately rationalized the propriety of his participation in the sin. Furthermore, Aharon is continually reminded of his need for expiation, as in RaShI on VaYikra 9:2. Could Aharon's duplicity qualify him that much more for the role of Kohen Gadol (High Priest) in the sense that he will be able to empathize with individuals as well as the entire nation when he represents them and pleads for their collective forgiveness on Yom HaKippurim?—see e.g., Mishna Yoma 6:2.

⁵ The census of the other tribes produced the following results: Reuven 46,500 (BaMidbar 1:21); Shimon 59,300 (1:23); Gad 45,650 (1:25); Yissachar 54,400 (1:29); Zevulun 57,400 (1:31); Ephraim 40,500 (1:33); Binyamin 35,400 (1:37); Dan 62,700 (1:39); Asher 41,500 (1:41); Naftali 53,400 (1:43).

belief in Him.⁶ And because of this dedication to HaShem, they were few in number at this point in Parashat BaMidbar for two reasons: a) Their involvement in spiritual matters put them constantly in precarious positions (i.e., because they dealt with holy matters associated with God, the margin for error was extremely narrow and those erring received catastrophic punishments—e.g., the deaths of Aharon’s sons as a result of their offering a “strange fire” in VaYikra 10:1 ff., Miriam’s punishment for speaking about Moshe in BaMidbar 12:10, and Moshe’s punishment for striking the rock in BaMidbar 20:12), and for this reason they would be punished quickly for some shortcoming in the Divine Service that they would try to perform. Furthermore, they were already aware, even before the giving of the Tora, of the nature of the sins and transgressions that God Demanded must be avoided, on the one hand, and the positive actions that they must strive to fulfill, on the other. The Levi’im accepted upon themselves the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, as had the Forefathers done before them in the book of Beraishit (a reference to the Rabbinic tradition embodied in e.g., RaShI on Beraishit 26:5). And they accepted these matters upon themselves in the context of a vow (i.e., an optional, self-imposed obligation—although an individual does not need to impose upon him/herself a vow, once s/he does, there is a Tora obligation to honor it, as in BaMidbar 30:3⁷—rather than as an obligatory commandment from HaShem, which would apply only when there was an explicit revelation, as takes place at Sinai), whose violation would nevertheless constitute a sin, as we find in Beraishit 32:26 (the sinew that is not eaten once Yaakov was injured by the angel with whom he fought prior to reuniting

⁶ RaShI on Shemot 5:4 claims that the tribe of Levi were never enslaved in Egypt. This then accounts for Moshe and Aharon’s coming and going as they pleased, rather than being subjected to the same work quotas imposed upon the rest of the tribes. RaMBaM on 5:4 expands on the idea even further: “It is the custom for every nation to have their class of scholars and teachers of law. Therefore Pharaoh allowed the tribe of Levi to serve as their scholars and elders. And this was all due to HaShem’s Influence (upon Pharaoh)...”

⁷ Akeidat Yitzchak’s explanation for why taking vows with regard to Commandments is described in negative terms both in TaNaCh (e.g., Kohelet 5:4) and ChaZaL (e.g., Yevamot 109b) (cited by Nechama Leibowitz in the following Gilayon: <http://tiny.cc/bboqs>), i.e., an individual who obligates himself to perform a Commandment by adding to it the framework of a vow, even as a form of motivation, ends up carrying out the action not because God has Commanded it, but rather because he has obligated himself in a vow, and therefore has turned the action inside-out from the perspective of why it is obligatory, would apply to Commandments such as Gid HaNasheh only after it was Revealed at Sinai. Prior to the Revelation, such actions were deemed to be optional rather than obligatory, with the vow specifically changing their status. As for vows with respect to optional actions, an individual is clearly making himself vulnerable to the possibility of ending up not being able to fulfill his verbal commitment; might the NeTzIV have viewed the entire tribe of Levi as “Zerizim” (particularly diligent), as in Chullin 123b, with respect to all Divine Obligations, and therefore were considered not at risk for failing to carry out the responsibilities that they accepted upon themselves? Of course, there is the additional consideration that vows themselves, prior to Sinai would have a different status prior to Sinai in comparison with once the Tora was given and this particular Commandment articulated.

with Eisav) and 40:23 (a reference to the butler forgetting about Yosef for two years as a punishment for the latter's having requested a favor from him in 40:14. These are two instances where despite the fact that there was no covenant entered into or Divine Commandment issued to either Yaakov or Yosef, restrictions were imposed upon them and even their descendents, and guilt assessed for non-compliance.) The Levi'im officially committed themselves to observance of God's Law, in contrast to the rest of Israel, who remained unaware of such matters until the Tora was given, and they therefore never accepted upon themselves the need to avoid certain behaviors and indulgences prior to Sinai, when such restrictions were explicitly imposed upon them.

b) Anything that is exceptional and out of the ordinary, its growth is especially deliberate, and it has difficulty reaching the height and perfection of its development at the same pace that more ordinary things are able to do. This is similar to a fruit tree, whose maturation is slower than a non-fruitbearing tree. The more exotic and desirable the fruit tree, the slower its growth. Man is compared to the tree of the field (Devarim 20:19). Whoever is more distinguished than his fellow, his growth and development is more difficult and delayed. Therefore, the Jewish people as a whole, from the time of Avraham until they came to Egypt, did not grow at a particularly rapid rate. It was in Egypt where their development was completed and they began to rapidly multiply. As for the tribe of Levi, their development was delayed even beyond the Egypt experience, until the people reached Israel. These ideas are alluded to in the Rabbinic comment in Beraishit Rabba 45:1.⁸

If the Bechorim can be replaced due to cause, to whom else might this apply in one form or another?

The phenomenon being described, i.e., that a group that has been chosen for a particular Divine Role, can be replaced by another, in the event of evidence emerging that the original group always was or has become unworthy due to its exercising its free choice in an unacceptable manner, has implications beyond the immediate situation of the firstborn and the Levi'im, discussed in Parashat BaMidbar. The Jewish people as a whole are God's Chosen People, as they are told via Moshe in Shemot 19:5. Rabbinic tradition suggests that the choice of the Jewish people to be God's Light unto the Nations, was made prior to the very creation of the universe as in RaShI on Beraishit 1:1 d.h. Beraishit Bara. But as in the case of the firstborn following the Exodus from Egypt, who might have thought that their special status was innate due to their passively having been saved from the Plague of the Firstborn, and therefore did not specifically need to adhere to high standards or pursue lofty ideals, it would be remiss for all of us to similarly think that once we have been chosen as by God to be His Special Nation, that we will retain this privileged status regardless of how we choose to live our lives. The books of the bible are replete with threats as well as descriptions of exiles and punishments that are directly associated with the Jews' non-compliance with Jewish tradition and values. And while we have

⁸ Beraishit Rabba 45:1--...Avraham was a year older than Nachor, and Nachor was a year older than Haran. Therefore Avraham was two years older than Haran. It took one year for Milka to be conceived and born; and one year for Yiska to be conceived and born. And Haran had children over the course of six years, and Avraham did not have any children during this entire time...

assurances that God will never totally Foresake the Jewish people once they have been chosen, and that a remnant of Jews will always survive every calamity in order to serve as the basis for rebuilding the nation once it undergoes one of its more difficult historical experiences,⁹ the fact that those who were under the impression that they were “Chosen”, are constantly subject to reevaluation, disorientation, and even replacement by at least the generations that will follow them, as in the case of the Generation of the Exodus, who after the Sin of the Spies were doomed to wander in the desert until the next generation would completely replace them—see BaMidbar 14:23, should be cause for careful consideration.

Were the Bechorim “set-up”?

Furthermore, a case could be made that the firstborn are essentially “strawmen”, much in the spirit of Shaul’s inability to establish a royal dynasty with David in the wings, who never really have a chance to maintain their special status, and are doomed to spiritual failure, destined to be replaced by those more worthy and deserving. Does their replacement by the Levi’im constitute yet another example of the rejection of primogeniture in favor of a system more closely resembling a meritocracy when it comes to those who will have Divine Favor bestowed upon them?¹⁰ And what does it take to be worthy? The simple meaning of the text in Parashat BaMidbar suggests that all that is necessary is rising to the occasion in a single instance, as Rebbe comments in Avoda Zora 10b, “There are those who ‘acquire their worlds’ (they earn a portion in the World to Come) in a single moment...” But the NeTzIV’s description of how the Levi’im positioned themselves so that they would be qualified to replace the Bechorim, is more in keeping with the continuation of Rebbe’s pithy statement, “...while others acquire their world over the course of many years,” and conveys the conviction that earning God’s Respect and Confidence is a complex and long-term project, to which one must be deeply devoted, ready to take risks and make sacrifices, and be extremely patient for significant periods of time. Of course the Midrash to which RaMBaN makes reference (see fn. 6) that suggests that HaShem’s Influence was responsible for the Levi’im being given the opportunity to grow spiritually in the first place, implies that our personal free will may not be as totally free as it may appear at first glance.

⁹ E.g., VaYikra 26:44; Devarim 30:4; I Shmuel 15:29; Zecharia 3:2.

¹⁰ In family after biblical family, beginning with the story of Cain and Able, the oldest child never inherits truly significant status, often deferring to the youngest child!