

United We Stand

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Parshas Bamidbar

2nd of Sivan 5784

The Parsha's Path

Revised from Nasso 5781.

These are the duties of the Gershonite clans, to serve and to carry (4:24).

This week's Parsha discusses the roles of the Levite families. Each of the Levite families were entrusted with different parts of the Mishkan to disassemble and carry when the Israelites journeyed from one encampment to the next. The family of Gershon was entrusted with carrying the coverings and curtains of the Mishkan and courtyard, as well as the pegs which supported the Mishkan. The family of Kehat was entrusted with carrying the Mishkan's most holy vessels, including the Ark of the Covenant, the Menorah, the Table of Showbread, and the Incense Altar. The family of Merari carried the support beams and their inserts, as well as the pegs for the courtyard curtains. The first times that the families are mentioned, including their divvying of roles, Gershon is mentioned first, followed by Kehat and Merari. However, the roles are repeated at the end of the Parsha, beginning with Kehat. The Parsha then breaks, resuming with Gershon at the beginning of next week's Parsha.

The Torah uses different formulations when explaining the duties of the different families. Regarding Kehat, it states *"This is the service of the children of Kehat, in the Tent of Meeting, the most holy things"* (4:4). By the Merarites, it says *"These are the carrying tasks for all of their service in the Tent of the Meeting ..."* (4:31).

Why does the Torah keep switching formulations? Why is Gershon initially mentioned first when Kehat is entrusted with the most holy utensils? And why, when the Torah repeats their roles, does the Parsha break right after Kehat?

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz zt"l suggests that the three families of Leviim represented three different archetypes. The family of Kehat were *tzadikim*, engaged purely with the holiest of matters. Even their carrying was not real carrying; the midrash notes, for example, that nobody carried the ark, the ark carried its carriers. It would have been impossible to lift the ark normally, as the lid alone, made of solid gold, would have weighed about 3,000 pounds. The Kehatites lived a life free from mundane matters; everything they did was infused with the highest levels of holiness. This is why the word "carrying" is not used in association with their service, and why their service is described as the holiest of holy.

The Merarites, on the other hand, were simple and straightforward people, and their entire job is described as carrying. They carried the least holy items and were not on the level to have so many lofty and holy intentions. They are the people that live on the straight path, doing what they're supposed to, while never striving for or achieving greater heights. They live serenely in simplicity, enjoying the good life.

The Gershonites are described as both people who serve and people who carry. They are in the middle, who constantly aspire to achieve the heights of the righteous while simultaneously dealing with the part of them that want the simplicity of the Merarites.

Each archetype makes an invaluable contribution to the Jewish people; not everyone can be a *tzadik* of the Kehat variety, but even the simple faith and dedication of the Merarites are indispensable in the tapestry of the Jewish people's service to G-d and a role model to the rest of the Jewish people. While the Mishkan would be missing its main vessels without Kehat, it wouldn't be able to stand up without Merari. There are many essential roles that need to be filled to make society work that transcend the domain of the Kehat type.

The Gershonites, though, are particularly precious, because they are always striving to grow and consequently, always suffering. They struggle with the existential tension of perceiving greater potentials for themselves while being rooted in the simple life. They cannot exist here nor there; in a sense, they are a bridge between the two worlds, but like a bridge, they have the unpleasant task of constantly holding themselves up.

Through these difficulties, the Gershonite emerges higher than even the Kehatite. For him, nothing is easy, and in his struggle to get close to G-d he finds Him closer than a Kehatite ever could. This is why the Gershonite is honored with the Parsha opening with him.

As with any good archetype, few if anybody is entirely one and none of the other; it's just a matter of degree. There are parts of us that are Merarite, and parts that may be Kehatite, but most importantly, there are parts that are Gershonite. The Gershonites teach us to listen to that pull inside of us that wants us to be something more, to look honestly at ourselves and strive to come closer to G-d, and to magnify and express the yearning from the depths of our souls to be all we can be. The Gershonites' mission never ends; he finds no rest. But he, above all, epitomizes a fundamental part of what our service in this world is all about. Let us strive to find and emphasize the Gershonite and

all the archetypes within us and serve G-d to our fullest potential.

Deeper Meanings

Reprinted from 5781.

The Gemara (Nedarim 55a) relates how the son of Master Shmuel left in his will instructions to his workers to give Rava thirteen thousand dinars from the crop (*alalta*) produced in his fields on the banks of the Panay river. Rava sent a question to Rav Yosef: "What is called *alalta*?" Rav Yosef thought it only included the five grains, but Abaye told him that it meant all crops. The messengers relayed the message to Rava.

Rava sent back: "I wasn't asking about that - I know *alalta* includes all crops. I was wondering whether it also includes the rent for houses and boats; are they dissimilar because, unlike crops, they depreciate in value, or since the depreciation is hardly discernible, maybe it is *alalta*. The Rabbis relayed Rava's message to Rav Yosef. Rav Yosef became angry - "And if he does not need us, why did he send us the question?"

Rava heard that Rav Yosef was angry with him, so on Erev Yom Kippur he came before him. Rav Yosef was blind, so instead of just announcing his presence, Rava asked Rav Yosef's attendant to give him the cup of wine he was preparing for Rav Yosef (back then all the wine was syrupy and had to be diluted). Rava proceeded to mix it and presented it to him. As Rav Yosef drank, he said, "This dilution is similar to the dilution of Rava, son of Rav Yosef bar Chama." Rava said to him, "it is he."

Rav Yosef said to him, "Do not sit on your feet until you tell me the explanation of this matter: What is the meaning of that which is written: 'And from the wilderness Mattana and from Mattana Nachaliel, and from Nachaliel Bamot'" (Bamidbar 21:18-19)

Rava replied, "Once a person renders himself like a wilderness, which is deserted/free (*hefker*) for all, the Torah is given to him as a gift (*mattana*), and since it's given to him as a gift, G-d bequeaths it to him (*nachalo* KE-I). And once G-d bequeaths it to him, he rises to greatness (*bamot*). And if he elevates himself (and is arrogant about his Torah), G-d lowers him, as it says, "from Bamot the valley" (*ibid.* v.20), and not only is he degraded, but one lowers him into the ground, as it says "And looking over (*nishkafa*) the face of the wasteland" (*ibid.*), like a threshold (*iskopa*) that is sunken into the ground. And if he reverses his arrogance and becomes humble, G-d elevates him, as it says, "Every valley shall be lifted" (Yeshayahu 40:4).

Rashi notes that the reason Rav Yosef had Rava explain these pasukim was to drive home the point that Rava needed to be a little more humble.

Rabbeinu Bachya, on the first pasuk in this week's Parsha, points out that this is why the Torah was given *bamidbar*, in the desert - because the only way to become a people of Torah is by making ourselves like a desert, *hefker* for all.

What does it mean to be *hefker* for all? *Hefker* means free for all to do with as they please. It means to be humble and submissive, to give of oneself while expecting nothing in return. It means to accept everyone, and all of reality, for whatever it is and whatever it does to us, and seeing the good, rather than spending all of our energies trying to impose our own will on the world.

This was a fundamental part of the philosophy of Rav Kook - to see the intrinsic good in everything, and thereby, rather than imposing one's own will on it, one brings out the good that's already there, through love, acceptance, and submissiveness to the awesome goodness of G-d's world.

On Yom Yerushalayim a few years ago, my brother was on a tour of Yerushalayim with his yeshiva, when an Arab who was passing by suddenly stopped and sprayed him with tear gas. He couldn't see for forty-five minutes and his face and neck burned through the night.

Yet instead of being angry or upset, my brother was grateful for the experience. He said it made him feel closer to his fellow Jews living in Eretz Yisrael.

We can live our lives fighting the world, or we can embrace it and seize the good. The former is exhausting; the latter gives us Torah and greatness. As we approach the holiday of Torah, now is the time to make ourselves like a midbar and become its receptacle.

Goal of the week

Daven for other people you haven't in the past.

This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rochel Zlotta, Masha Sarah bas Teiviah Leah, Reuven ben Golda, Ephraim Melech ben Teilah, Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka, and all those injured by the war and acts of terror, as well as for the safe return of all the hostages and soldiers. Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.

Have A Great Shabbos !!

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