



Sicha Summary

Chelek 18 | Bamidbar | Sichah 1

The Verse:

In the middle of a passage dedicated to the duties and obligations of the Levites, the Torah interjects, “*You shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall keep their kehunah; any outsider [non kohen] who approaches shall be put to death.*” (Bamidbar 3:10) What does the phrase “keep their kehuna” mean? Rashi offers the following explanation.

The Rashi:

They shall keep their kehunah — This refers to receiving the blood in a basin, dashing the blood, burning the fats, and rites entrusted to the priests.

The Question:

Ibn Ezra offers an interpretation that hews closer to the literal meaning of the phrase: “*They shall keep their kehunah* — They should not allow their priesthood to become invalidated.” Meaning, the kohanim should guard their very status as kohanim, and not do any action which would invalidate their kehuna.

How does Rashi conclude that the verse refers to services performed by the Kohanim?

The Groundwork:

Rashi cannot follow Ibn Ezra here because the verse’s opening “You shall appoint” intimates a new, novel command. The command for Kohanim to protect themselves from invalidation is found earlier, in Parshas Emor. Rashi therefore explains that the command “keep their kehuna” refers to

certain rites which kohanim should protect for themselves and not allow a non-kohen to perform.

But why would the Torah insert this command in the middle of a passage delineating the Levites' responsibilities? From this placement Rashi deduces that the section about Levites might lead to the mistaken conclusion that there are some rites that can be performed by a Levite. It is these rites which are being censored in this verse.

The Explanation:

Earlier, in verse 8, the Torah defined the role of the Levite as one who executes certain ritual obligations in the Mishkan on behalf of the people. It might be thought, therefore, that any ritual service performed by the Jewish people themselves at any point in history can be done for them by the Levites.

In Parshat Bo (12:7-9), we find that the Jews themselves collected the blood from the Pesach sacrifice, applied it to the doorposts, and roasted it over the fire. These three actions correspond to 1) collecting the blood, 2) dashing it on the altar, and 3) burning the fats of the sacrifice.

Perhaps the Levite can perform these rites of the Pesach sacrifice on behalf of the people even once the Mishkan is erected?

To counteract this mistaken assumption, the Torah interjects with "they shall keep their kehunah:" these rites belong exclusively to the Kohanim.

The Lesson:

The severity of the distinction between the role of the Kohen and the non-kohen, despite the Torah's general attitude of inclusivity in divine service, is a reminder of how important the distinction is between Jew and non-Jew. The desire to dissolve that barrier through a conversion that does not meet the Halachic requirements does great harm to both the Jewish people and the non-Jewish individual.