



Likkutei Sichos

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Joining the Fight

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1.

THE ROGATCHOVER GAONS'S QUESTION

Regarding the verse,¹ “Moshe wrote this Torah and gave it to the kohanim, the sons of Levi, the bearers of the Ark of the Covenant of Hashem, and to all the elders of Israel,” the Rogatchover Gaon² examines the words, “the kohanim, the sons of Levi”:

The words, “the kohanim, the sons of Levi” also appear earlier, in *parshas Shoftim*, concerning the law of the *eglah arufah*:³ “The kohanim, the sons of Levi, shall approach....” *Sifri* says there:⁴ “I might think that only unblemished kohanim are eligible {for this rite}; therefore, it says, ‘the sons of Levi.’” Meaning, the extra expression, “the sons of Levi,” serves to teach that even blemished kohanim are eligible to perform the *eglah arufah* rite.

The Rogatchover Gaon⁵ asks: “And here, why {were these words written}?” Meaning, what does the verse include by using the ostensibly superfluous words, “the sons of Levi”? Here, we cannot answer that the verse includes even blemished kohanim, because {there would be no reason for us to assume that they were excluded, for} this verse is not talking about any type of service, or even something similar for which blemished kohanim are not eligible.

This is one of the few places where the Rogatchover Gaon leaves his question unanswered.⁶

¹ *Devarim* 31:9.

² Rogatchover Gaon’s Torah commentary on *Devarim* 31:9 (p. 261).

³ *Devarim* 21:5. {*Eglah arufah* refers to the calf that was decapitated as penitence for an unsolved murder.}

⁴ {*Sifri*, “*Devarim*,” ch. 21, sec. 208.}

⁵ {[Rabbi Yosef Rosin](#) (1858–1936), called a “Gaon” because of his unparalleled genius, was one of the foremost Talmudic commentators of the twentieth century.}

⁶ And as known, the Previous Rebbe referred to the Rogatchover Gaon as the “*Sar HaTorah*” {the Prince of Torah}.

2.

THE WHOLE TRIBE

As discussed on numerous occasions, Rashi's commentary on Torah contains wondrous insights, even in other areas, parts, and dimensions of Torah. The same applies in our case. According to Rashi, specifically according to *pshat*,⁷ the answer to the question above comes to light:

Rashi explains our verse: “*Moshe wrote, etc., and gave it* — When it was all completed, he gave it to the members of his tribe.”

We can appreciate the meaning of Rashi's words, “when all of it was completed” (as the commentators on Rashi explain):⁸ (Since the verse recounts **here** how Moshe wrote and **gave** the Torah) we might think that Moshe only wrote the *sefer Torah* until **this parshah** and no further, and that he then gave the Jews an incomplete Torah. Therefore, Rashi negates such a supposition and says that he gave it to them “when it was **all** completed.”

[With this in mind, we can appreciate why Rashi quotes also the words, “and gave it,” etc., in his caption, and does not say, more concisely, “**Moshe wrote** — all of it.”

This is because these words, “Moshe wrote” {by themselves}, do not prove that Moshe wrote the entire Torah. However, since the verse adds, “and gave it,” this proves that “Moshe wrote” means that he wrote the entire Torah, because Moshe would not give the Jews an incomplete Torah.]

Rashi's closing words, though, are puzzling: “He gave it to the members of his tribe.” Isn't Rashi just repeating what the verse itself already said, “and gave it to the kohanim, the sons of Levi, the bearers of the Ark of the Covenant”?

⁷ The plain meaning of Scripture. Rashi says in his commentary to *Bereishis* 3:8: “I have come only to explain the plain meaning of the Scripture.” Though there are many levels and depths of interpretation on the Torah, Rashi adopts a straightforward approach.

⁸ See *Gur Aryeh*; *Sefer Zikaron* (in his first interpretation) and *Chiddushei Upirushei Maharik*, *ibid*. See *Sifsei Chachomim* and *Maskil LeDavid* for different explanations of Rashi's words.

If Rashi had intended to clarify that “kohanim” here means (not only actual kohanim, but) “the members of his tribe,” i.e., the tribe of Levi in its entirety, then this raises another question: The wording, “the kohanim, the sons of Levi” appears earlier in the Torah, as mentioned, and overthere, it means specifically the **kohanim** (and **not** the entire tribe of Levi). As the verse continues in that context,⁹ “For them has Hashem, your L-rd, chosen to minister to Him and to bless with the name of Hashem, and according to their word shall be every dispute and every plague” (this refers to kohanim specifically). Additionally, the expression, “the kohanim, the leviim,” appears many times¹⁰ in the Torah, and it always means only **kohanim**, as Rashi clarifies the first time it appears:¹¹ “The kohanim who come from the tribe of Levi.”

In light of this, what is Rashi’s proof here that the phrase, “and gave it to the kohanim, the sons of Levi,” means, “to the members of his tribe” — the entire tribe of Levi?

Perhaps the answer is as follows: The verse itself concludes: “the bearers of the Ark of the covenant of Hashem,” and it was the leviim who carried the Ark.¹² But this answer is insufficient because we could explain (as *Chizkuni* does)¹³ that this verse refers to the kohanim who were responsible to prepare the Ark for the leviim to carry. These kohanim “shall assign them... (the family of Kehas) to his burden,”¹⁴ as the verse says at the end of *parshas Bamidbar*. Although this interpretation is not altogether smooth, it is closer to *pshat* than the alternative, which is to explain the words, “the **kohanim**, the sons of Levi” to include even those who are not kohanim — the entire tribe of Levi.

[Moreover, the words, “the bearers of the Ark of the Covenant of Hashem,” cannot refer to the **entire** tribe of Levi in any event, because only the family of Kehas carried the Ark.]¹⁵

⁹ {*Devarim* 21:5.}

¹⁰ *Devarim* 17:9, 17:18, 18:1, 24:8, 27:9.

¹¹ *Devarim* 17:9.

¹² See *Chiddushei Upirushei Maharik*.

¹³ In his second interpretation.

¹⁴ *Bamidbar* {4:19} 4:5, et passim.

¹⁵ See *Sefer Zikaron*.

3.

THE EXPLANATION: THE KOHANIM REPRESENT THE TRIBE OF LEVI

The explanation: In this verse (as in the others), Rashi understands the words, “and gave it to the kohanim, the sons of Levi,” to mean that Moshe actually gave it only to the kohanim. But this raises a question (which Rashi addresses in his comments): Moshe also gave the *sefer Torah* (as the verse concludes) to “the elders of Israel,” meaning, to all the tribes of Israel, and the elders served as their representatives.¹⁶ Now, if Moshe gave the *sefer Torah* to the “kohanim, the sons of Levi,” meaning, only to the **kohanim**, it emerges that the *sefer Torah* was given to all the tribes of Israel except for (the leviim, members of) the tribe of Levi!

Therefore, Rashi, in his remarks, emphasizes: “he gave it to the members of his tribe.” When Moshe gave the *sefer Torah* to the kohanim, he, in fact, gave it to “**the members of his tribe**,” for the kohanim represented the entire tribe of Levi, just like the elders of Israel accepted the Torah on behalf of all the tribes of Israel.

This also explains why the verse adds, “(the kohanim,) the sons of Levi.” Moshe gave them the *sefer Torah* not as **independent kohanim**, but because they were “**the kohanim, the sons of Levi**,” — members of the tribe of Levi. (But since they were the kohanim, the “ministers”¹⁷ from the tribe of Levi — they served a similar role to that of the elders of Israel — they represented their entire tribe.)

Although the kohanim remained separate from the rest of the tribe of Levi — they had a distinct encampment (of the Divine Presence)¹⁸ — the explanation for this (according to *pshat*) is that the kohanim were **not** completely detached from the tribe of Levi. Rather, **in addition** to their elevated quality as leviim, they also had the elevated quality of *kehunah*.¹⁹

¹⁶ Rashi on *Bamidbar* 11:26.

¹⁷ Rashi on *Shemos* 19:6.

¹⁸ Rashi on *Bamidbar* 2:2.

¹⁹ {The defining property or characteristic of kohanim.}

The proofs for this are as follows:

a) At the beginning of *parshas Behaaloscha*,²⁰ Rashi recounts:

Why was the passage of the *menorah* placed next to the passage of the princes? Because when Aharon witnessed the inauguration of the princes, he felt badly for neither he **nor his tribe** was with them in the inauguration. The Holy One told him. {I swear} by your life! Your role is greater than theirs, for you kindle and prepare the lamps.”

This teaches us that although only Aharon (the **kohanim**) prepared and kindled the *menorah*, the entire tribe was considered participants. Hashem assuaged Aharon’s shame that “neither he **nor his tribe** was with them.”

b) Following Korach’s quarrel with Moshe, Hashem told Moshe,²¹ “Take from them one staff for each... twelve staffs... and the name of Aharon shall you inscribe on **the staff of Levi**, for there shall be one staff....” As Rashi explains there: “For there shall be one staff: Although I divided them into two families, the family of the kohanim, and the family of the leviim, nonetheless, **it is a single tribe.**”

4.

INCLUDING BLEMISHED KOHANIM

On this basis, we can also appreciate — also in a *halachic* framework — how the words, “(the kohanim,) the sons of Levi,” in the verse (at the end of *parshas Shoftim*) include kohanim who have blemishes (as mentioned above in Section 1):

Blemished kohanim are considered kohanim to the extent that they eat *kodshei kodashim*.²² When a kohen eats *kodshei kodashim*, the person who brought the sacrifice receives forgiveness for his sin.²³ But blemished kohanim

²⁰ {*Bamidbar* 8:2.}

²¹ *Bamidbar* 17:17,18.

²² {*Kodshei Kodashim* — Lit., “holy of holies,” referring to the holiest grade of sacrifices, as distinct from *kodashim kalim*.}

²³ *Shemos* 29:33.

are termed “foreigners” relative to unblemished kohanim. As the *Jerusalem Talmud* says:²⁴ “He is a foreigner, he is blemished.” Similarly, although the leviim are members of the same tribe as the kohanim, they are considered “foreigners” relative to kohanim. Because of this correlation, the {apparently redundant} phrase “the sons of Levi” implies an inclusion of the blemished kohanim.

The same applies in our case: Moshe gave the *sefer Torah* to the kohanim not because of the (sanctity of the) **kehunah** per se, but because they were “the kohanim, **the sons of Levi**.” Meaning, he gave it to them as kohanim who also possessed the quality of *leviyah*²⁵ (although this quality was considered “foreign” relative to their quality of *kehunah*).

5.

SO SEPARATE THEM!

But this matter is not altogether smooth: In the end, the kohanim were segregated from the leviim even having their own encampment. Why, then, didn’t Moshe give them the *sefer Torah* by virtue of them being **kohanim**, and not just because of their role as “ministers” over the leviim?

The same question can be raised concerning the two above-mentioned matters: (a) Preparing and lighting the *Menorah* instead of partaking in the inauguration of the *Mishkan*²⁶ and the altar; and (b) the staff used in the dispute with Korach {that Moshe took for the kohanim and the leviim} — why, in those cases, were the kohanim not set apart from the leviim?

Moreover, in all three places, seemingly, it would have made more sense to differentiate the kohanim from the tribe of Levi:

²⁴ *Yoma* 2:1.

²⁵ {The defining property or characteristic of the leviim.}

²⁶ {Tabernacle.}

a) In our case, the verse says,²⁷ “They shall teach Your laws to Yaakov, and Your Torah to Israel.” Meaning, they all — the entire tribe of Levi — were responsible to teach Torah to the Jewish people. Nevertheless, the kohanim had a unique responsibility, as specifically regarding them, the verse says,²⁸ “You shall come to the **kohanim**... and they will tell you... according to the teaching that they will teach you...,” “and according to their word shall be every dispute and every plague.”²⁹ (We do not find something similar regarding the leviim.) Thus, Moshe should have given the *kohanim* the *sefer Torah* separately — not together with the leviim.

b) The mitzvah of (lighting and) preparing the {*menorah*'s} lamps **only** applied to the **kohanim**. As Rashi says, as mentioned above, “**for you** {Aharon} kindle and prepare the lamps.” The leviim, like all other Jewish people, were **forbidden** from doing so. Thus, the leviim should have been involved in the inauguration of the *Mishkan* (in other ways).

c) Korach argued, “So why do you exalt yourself over the congregation of Hashem?”³⁰ He had no claim against the tribe of Levi — Korach was a member of the tribe of Levi himself. His claim was **specifically** about the **kehunah** as an entity unto itself, as he alleged, “yet you seek the **kehunah** as well.”³¹ The staffs served, “as a safekeeping, as a sign,”³² so that “they should no longer complain against the **kehunah**.”³³ Thus, it would have made more sense for the kohanim to have had their own staff.

²⁷ *Devarim* 33:10.

²⁸ *Devarim* 17:9-11.

²⁹ *Devarim* 21:5.

³⁰ *Bamidbar* 16:3.

³¹ *Bamidbar* 16:10.

³² *Bamidbar* 17:25.

³³ Rashi on *Bamidbar* 17:25.

6.

THE KOHEN NEEDS TO BECOME A LEVI

The explanation (based on the inner dimension of the Torah): Hashem elevated both the kohanim and the leviim from among the Jewish nation to serve Him³⁴ and to remain aloof from materialism.³⁵ Nevertheless, there was a difference between these two groups: A kohen could not become impure³⁶ (and for this reason, could not leave the land of Israel),³⁷ but a levi does not have this prohibition. That is, a kohen was completely separated from matters that were contrary to (holiness and) purity. The kohen's very identity warrants that he did not become impure, whereas a levi's identity did not totally preclude it. When a levi needed to perform his **avodah**, however, he had to purify himself.

The same applies to the aspect of “kohen” and “levi” within **every** Jewish person.³⁸ The level of “kohen” refers to a level of the soul where there is no impurity (or alternatively, impurity has no impact). “Levi” alludes to a level that impurity can reach; the **avodah** on this level is to nullify the impurity. (The word, טבילה, *tevilah* {immersion (in a *mikvah*)} has the same letters as הביטול, *ha'bittul* {lit., “the nullification,” alluding to nullifying negativity}).³⁹

In other words (or in the words of *Tanya*):⁴⁰ “Kohen” refers to a state (and *avodah*) of *is'hapcha*;⁴¹ on this level, there is no bad, but like tasty food, “savory and sweet foods.” “Levi” refers to the *avodah* of *iskafya*,⁴² subjugating and breaking negativity. The analogy for this is “sharp or sour foods that have been well spiced and prepared....”

³⁴ See *Devarim* 10:8.

³⁵ See *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Shemita VeYovel*,” sec. 13, par. 12.

³⁶ *Vayikra* 21:1.

³⁷ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Avel*,” sec. 3, par. 13; *Tur* and *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Yoreh Deah*,” end of sec. 369.

³⁸ See *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Shemita VeYovel*,” sec. 13, par. 12, where Rambam says: “Not only the tribe of Levi, but anyone... is sanctified as holy of holies.”

³⁹ *Siddur Im Dach*, conclusion of *Maamar* “*Kavanas HaMikveh*,” 159d ff.

⁴⁰ *Tanya*, “*Likkutei Amarim*,” ch. 27.

⁴¹ {Lit., “transformation,” the *avodah* by which a person transforms his negative impulses and urges into good.}

⁴² {Lit., “bending,” the *avodah* by which a person subdues his negative impulses and overcomes his urges and impulses.}

On this basis, we can appreciate why the kohanim were not separated from the leviim in the three instances mentioned above. The purpose and goal in those three matters was to address and fix something undesirable (not by utilizing the quality of a kohen who has no connection with negativity, but) by using the quality of a levi, specifically. Therefore, even among the kohanim themselves, they were performed based **not** on their virtues of *kehunah* but on the levitical quality within them.

7.

THE COMMON THREAD – PUTTING THINGS RIGHT

The explanation:

a) In our context, Moshe gave the *sefer Torah* not just to learn from it. Rather, he gave it mainly to forestall any undesirable behavior. Therefore, he specifically gave the *sefer Torah* after rebuking the Jewish people and forging a covenant in *parshas Ki Savo* and *parshas Nitzvavim*.

b) Preparing the lamps (and lighting them) was linked to Aharon feeling dejected, an inclination of repentance that stemmed from his “levi” quality. Additionally, and more generally, the light of the *menorah* was diffused throughout the entire world,⁴³ whereby (even a little) light (also) dispels **darkness**.

c) The dispute of Korach: Taking the twelve staffs was part of the process to nullify and undo the damage caused by Korach’s rebellion. As the verse says,⁴⁴ “I will {thus} calm the complaints of the Children of Israel....”

Therefore, in these three instances, the kohanim were not set apart from the tribe of Levi.

⁴³ *Tanchumah*, “*Tetzaveh*,” sec. 6.

⁴⁴ *Bamidbar* 17:20.

On the other hand, the kohanim (and Aharon) served as the emissaries of the tribe of Levi in performing these three tasks. This way, the repentance and rectification included **two** special qualities: the levis' special quality of *iskafya* — repairing what was wrong; the kohens' special quality of *is'hapcha* — repairing what was wrong to the maximum extent, such that the darkness was **transformed** into light; and bitterness, into sweetness: It becomes **wholly** good.

— Based on talks delivered on *Shabbos parshas Nitzavim* and *Vayelech* 5726 (1966)