



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

TUESDAY MAY 11, 2010 / כ"ז אייר תש"ע

PARSHA:

BAMIDBAR/במדבר

SERMON TITLE:

JUDAISM: NOT A SPECTATOR SPORT

A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

The author is solely responsible for the contents of this document.

Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family

In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

BAMIDBAR

JUDAISM: NOT A SPECTATOR SPORT

A rabbi once asked a reporter, “Why do you only report about wars and conflicts? Why don’t you write about good things too? Write about how students in Yeshivos are studying well and how people are nice to each other!”

The reporter, ever the wit, replied, “I only report the truth.” The rabbi smiled and fell silent.

In this week’s Parshah, we read about what may be the first journalists in Jewish history.

The Torah portion tells us about Shevet Levi, the Tribe of Levi, with whom G-d had replaced the firstborn among the Jews. So let’s take a bit of a look back in Jewish history, to the time when the Jewish Nation left Egypt.

At that time, at the Plague of the Firstborn, G-d spared the Jewish firstborn from the plague, as our own Parshah tells us: “For every firstborn is mine; on the day I killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified every firstborn among Israel, man and beast alike. They shall remain mine. I am G-d.”

For this reason, G-d designated the firstborn: So that they could work in the Beis Hamikdah, the Holy Temple because they symbolized the Jewish People itself, a people which is described as “My firstborn son, Israel.”

As long as personal sacrifices to G-d were permitted on Bamos, privately built altars, before the building of the Mishkan, the actual offerings were brought by firstborn individuals only. As the Talmud (Tractate Zevachim 114) tells us, “Bamos were legal until the Mishkan was erected, and service upon them was carried out by firstborn individuals.”

But once the Mishkan was put up, the Levites replaced the firstborn.

The reason for this exchange is cited by Rashi in our parshah: “Since the services were carried out by the firstborn but they were invalidated after sinning with the Golden Calf, the Levites—who had not served any idols—were chosen in their place.”

Why indeed were the firstborn invalidated? Did they really literally worship idols? After all, anyone who had worshiped the idol of the Golden Calf was executed! So if they had done so, there would have been no one for the Levites to replace—and the firstborn were still present to be replaced!

So the commentators explain that they were replaced because they had not protested against the Golden Calf—they hadn't gotten up and raised an outcry about it. And their lack of action was considered as if they had actually engaged in Calf-worshipping action. The Levites, on the other hand, were chosen "because they are Mine—because they did not err with the Golden Calf".

The Levites were the only ones who had remained faithful to G-d; up to that point, their thinking had remained untainted. That's why when Moshe Rabbeinu came along and asked, "Whoever is for G-d, come to me!", the verse tells us, "All the sons of Levi gathered unto him." This is what made the Tribe of Levi unique.

But in truth, this faith had not begun with the Sin of the Golden Calf. Throughout the 210 years of the Egyptian exile, the Levites had not actually been subjected to slave labor. They knew from the get-go that their mission was to study and teach the Torah, and since they were the only Jews in Egypt who kept circumcision and the other mitzvos (unlike all the other Tribes, who had to circumcise themselves on Passover eve before eating the Passover Sacrifice).

Indeed, on a later verse in Devarim (33:9), which reads in part, "...they kept Your word and safeguarded Your covenant," Rashi comments, "Your word means 'You shall not have any other gods' and Your covenant means circumcision, because those Israelites born in the desert were not circumcised—but the Levites were circumcised and circumcised their sons."

Similarly, when the Sin of the Spies occurred, the Levites were the only ones who did not sin. As Rashi comments on the verse of Devarim 1:23, which states, "And I took twelve men from among you, one man per tribe," "This tells us that the Tribe of Levi was not among them."

Now, how is it that the Tribe of Levi never made a mistake? How is it that all the other tribes did? What was the problem here?

The famous Mashpia, a spiritual counselor of sorts, Rabbi Mendel Futerfas, was known to tell people standing off to the sides at Farbrengens, "Don't be a reporter!"

Now, what is a reporter? A reporter is a person who observes from the outside. He is not part of the story. He only reports what he sees. He is not part of the action at all.

He's out of the picture. He tries to be objective and emotionally uninvolved. However, to be part of the experience of the Jewish Nation, to feel spirituality, it's impossible to remain objective, it's impossible to be a reporter—one needs to jump in and really feel that it's his. Only then can one feel connected to the whole matter.

And this was difference between the firstborn and the Tribe of Levi.

Yes, almost all the firstborn had not sinned with the Golden Calf—but they stood to the side as if they were looking through one-way mirrors. They wanted to see who would be right in the whole Golden Calf scandal. That is why they were not really considered “the King's pride”—you couldn't really rely on them.

The Levites, on the other hand, always felt that Judaism is their business—they never stood off to the side as spectators to whatever was happening. Rather, they were part of whatever was happening—they took the initiative and the responsibility for whatever was happening among the Jews. And that is why G-d said of them, “Because they are mine.” Why? “Because they did not err with the Golden Calf”—because someone who errs in idol-worship matters cannot be relied on; he cannot be called G-d's “mine.”

This is especially true since the Levites' primary mission was not just to serve in the Temple, something they did only a few times a year, but to serve as Torah teachers and instructors to their fellow Jews. Their entire mission was to serve as spiritual guides for the Jewish People.

As Maimonides puts it at the end of his Laws of Shmittah and Yovel: “Why did the Tribe of Levi not merit an inheritance in the Land of Israel? Because they were limited to serving G-d and showing His upright ways and His moral laws to the masses.”

Thus, who can be depended upon for leadership? Only one who does not err in fundamental matters of faith. Only one who feels that the Jewish Nation is his business can be relied upon.

My dear friends: Don't be spectators! Don't be reporters. Don't observe the story—be part of it.

A PROJECT OF THE SHLUCHIM OFFICE

The author is solely responsible for the contents of this document.

Sponsored by Shimon Aron & Devorah Leah Rosenfeld & Family
In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman אה אביר פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.