

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



KEEP YOUR LANE

Korach

In this week's Torah reading, we read about the rebellion of Korach and his cohorts. In the aftermath of this challenge to Aharon by his Levitic cousins, the Torah makes a definitive statement: Stay in your own lane, or else! Well, it is stated a bit differently. Here's the direct quote:

They (the LEVIYIM) shall discharge their duties to you and to the Tent as a whole, but they must not have any contact with the furnishings of the Shrine or with the Altar, lest both they and you die. They shall be attached to you (KOHANIM) and discharge the duties of the Tent of Meeting, all the service of the Tent; but no outsider shall intrude upon you, as you discharge the duties connected with the Shrine and the Altar, that wrath may not again strike the Israelites (Bamidbar 18:4-6).

In three very stark verses, the roles of the functionaries of the Mishkan and, later, Beit HaMikdash are laid out. The word which dominates these declarations is MISHMERET. In various guises it appears 8 times in these three verses.

The JPS translation I used above translates it as 'discharge' when a verb form and 'duties' when used in its noun

form. But I have seen many variations, like: guard, safeguard, entrusted, charged, keep, attend, perform, take care of, watch, are responsible...

Professor Robert Alter points out that normally the term MISHMERET has a military connotation. That's definitely true for those of us who remember seemingly endless hours of SHMIRA during our IDF days.

The Aznayim LaTorah suggests that the issue here should be seen in the light of the respect or reverence generated by seeing honor guards. Especially, when the most conspicuous guarding is done in daylight, when protection is less necessary. The honor guard glorifies the Temple. Perhaps.

But here the connotation, I believe, is closer to a clear delineation of responsibilities. This makes sense after the rebellion of Korach. Going forward there would be absolute clarity about roles, and, as a result, there has never been disagreement about honors and responsibilities in any Jewish religious context. Anyone who thinks that last statement is reasonable has never been to shul.

These verses also contain the defining role of the LEVIYIM throughout history: NILVU. The root of this term is also the root of LEVI (LAMED-VAV-HEI). The JPS translation above is 'attached', but I would have chosen a form of 'accompany'. The LEVIYIM will accompany and escort KOHANIM throughout Jewish history. They did have some

starring roles in the history of Jewish ritual, especially as the singers and musicians in the Temple, but, generally they were eternal supporting actors.

Those of us who grew up watching old Hollywood movies know how important supporting roles can be. The likes of Walter Brennan, Wallace Beery, Charles Coburn, Lon Chaney Jr., Hume Cronyn, Sydney Greenstreet, Peter Lorre, Thomas Mitchell or Andy Devine could often make a mediocre movie into a great one or, at least, a memorable one. Sorry, but I periodically feel the need to justify my misspent youth.

So, should we view birth status as destiny? Is it reasonable for people to accept the circumstances of their entrance into this realm as determinative? Well, maybe.

The S'fat Emet makes the issue Kabbalistic: It says in the Zohar: Aharon is the right side and Korach is the left side... Therefore Korach should submit himself to Aharon, and that is the role of the Leviyim... Therefore the actual name Leviyim means to be supportive (and accompany) the kohanim, as in NILVU (verse 4).

This absolute acceptance of birth status makes a lot of sense to the adherents of Kabbala, I believe, because they also tend to believe in GILGUL NESHAMOT (the 'rolling over' or reincarnation of souls). So, if you got a lousy hand this time round, you will get a better situation next time. Perhaps, everyone

gets a chance at every status.

Alas, this is not my approach to Judaism and life. Remember, most Jewish authorities either didn't mention GILGUL (like the Rambam) or were anti-GILGUL (like Rav Sadya. the Radak and the Ralbag) until the mid-1200s.

So, I tend to assume that this is my one time around, and would like to make the most of it. Reb Meshullam ben Ya'akov seemed to agree and stated:

We also learned in the mishna in Kiddushin (1:10): One who performs a single Mitzva is blessed and enjoys long life. The Yerushalmi (1:9) explains that this Mishna applies to a person who has singled out a particular Mitzva which he is particularly careful never to transgress. Therefore, some of the later Amora'im would pride themselves on the fact that they were particularly careful about certain Mitzvot... The Gemara spoke of a specific dedication and commitment to a smaller number of Mitzvot with an intensity that one does not bring to bear upon the range of Mitzvot generally. (Orchot Chayim, Hilchot Rosh HaShana, 25).

In other words, I can 'major' in certain chosen Mitzvot which are especially meaningful to me. That can, I believe, truly make my spiritual life very fulfilling.

Reb Aharon Lichtenstein wrestled with this issue. He pointed out: However, there is an important caveat for anyone desiring to be a Torah 'specialist': Firstly, if a person accepts the notion of division

and decides to focus upon a particular area, this must not be done out of a sense that other areas of Avodat Hashem are insignificant. Nor must it give rise to the notion that those who devote themselves to other areas are second-class Ovdei Hashem. Rather, one's decision to specialize in a particular area must proceed from a recognition that all areas are important, but since I cannot practically devote myself to all of them in equal proportions, I therefore choose to focus upon only some... Second, a person is given the task of trying, to some extent and within the limits of his ability, to move, to prod, to change the historical scene within which he finds himself. He should try to see to it that the world he leaves behind be a little bit better, just a bit closer to the fulfillment of the great spiritual vision of the Messianic Era than it was when he entered it. In trying to determine the course of one's spiritual growth, a person needs to bear in mind the objectives relevant to it, with an eye to the fusion of those two elements: to grow personally, while contributing generally. In that way, he or she must strive for the interaction of Torah, Avoda and Gemilut Chasadim, while trying at the same time to grow and contribute on a personal level.

Sadly, I believe that there are people in the Jewish world who claim that their selfish pursuit of personal spiritual goals is really a service to the community. I actually remember a Rebbe in Yeshiva

who told us that during our time in yeshiva we should be zealously selfish about our time to accomplish the most possible in the time we had in the study hall. But for most of our lives we must help others by actually doing things which benefit someone other than myself.

We don't regularly have the life-long roles discussed in our verses nowadays. We can make decisions about how to best make our lives meaningful. I think Rav Aharon z"l gave us some important guidelines. Everyone should seriously consider these ideas, and make reasonable choices. I think these decisions should be periodically reassessed, and remember: Always factor in personal needs and communal requirements. Be MATZLI'ACH! 