

Do Your Own Thing

By Rabbi Joshua (exclusively known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

In parshas Bamidbar, we learn about the encampments of the children of Israel in the wilderness. The Torah tells us that each of the twelve tribes had a separate flag, and the midrash elaborates on the special significance of each flag, denoting the special role of each tribe. We know from the incident of the son of the Egyptian man and Shlomis bas Dibri, recorded in parshas Emor, that the tribes were very careful to maintain the integrity of their specific encampment, barring those from outside the tribe from joining them. Each tribe served a particular purpose within the larger structure of the nation, and they were zealous to maintain that function properly. In regard to the tribe of Levi, the exclusivity went even further. The gemara in Arachin (11a) tells us that a Levi who served as a gatekeeper in the mishkan, could not, on penalty of death from the heavenly court, act as a singer, and so too vice versa. One may ask why it was so crucial for each Levi to maintain his particular job. Why should it make a difference which Levi does each task, as long as they are ultimately both accomplished by a Levi?

Rabbi Yeruchom Levovitz, who was the mashgiach ruchani, or spiritual adviser, in the Mir yeshiva in pre-war Poland, saw in the prohibitions of Levites switching their tasks an indication of the importance of order in one's life. This stress on order was a hallmark of the mussar school of Kelm, from which he hailed. In a mussar lecture that he delivered to the students in Mir, recorded in his work Da'as Torah to this week's parsha, Rabbi Levovitz describes in detail how his teacher, Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv of Kelm, disciplined himself to keep to a strict schedule, and measured all his movements, not even turning his head in another direction when there was no need for it. This adherence to strict order was carried over to the yeshiva of Telshe, some of whose leaders studied in Kelm, and remnants of that approach to life were carried over to Telshe in Cleveland, Ohio, as well. Students there, besides having to establish a specific seat in the study hall for prayer and study, also had to arrange for a specific seat in which they sat for their meals all week, and a specific hanger in the coat room where they would hang their outer garments. The logic behind this approach to life was that once the peripheral things in life are ordered, one can concentrate his attention on the more central things, without wasting time and thought on where one will eat each day, and where one will hang his coat. Although such a strict adherence to order may seem to stifle one's personality, Rabbi Simcha Zissel felt that it actually enabled one to concentrate on his personal development rather than on caring for the more mundane things in life.

Although one may argue that Rabbi Levovitz greatly expanded the notion of exclusivity of tasks placed upon the Levites, the basic idea of the importance for order certainly seems to be valid. Still, this approach does not explain why the tribe of Levi, specifically, was given these prohibitions of switching tasks among themselves. Perhaps the answer to this question lies in the reason behind the choice of this tribe to replace the first born as those charged to perform the divine service in the mishkan, which we read of in this week's parsha. The Levites were chosen because they did not participate in the worship of the golden calf, and answered Moshe's call to wipe out those among the people who did. We have often mentioned Rabbi Yehudah Halevi's explanation of the sin of the golden calf. He wrote, in his Kuzari, that the Jews did not actually intend to worship the calf. Rather, in the absence of Moshe, they felt that they needed a visual physical symbol through which to concentrate their thoughts in the service of God. Although the Torah itself recognized this human need, and commanded that cherubs be placed atop the Holy Ark, the mistake of the people was that they acted on their own, and transgressed the Torah's prohibition of making graven images not commanded by God. Their essential error, explains Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi, was that they failed to understand that the Jewish religion tells us how God wants us to approach Him. We cannot determine, on our own, the proper way to approach God. Rather, we must follow the guidelines that are given us in the Torah. Rav Zadok HaKohein of Lublin teaches - as elaborated upon by Rabbi Alan Brill in his recent work, Thinking God - that God speaks to each of us personally, and each of us must try to connect to that unique relationship that is embedded in our hearts. However, we are not able to know, on our own, the proper way of making that connection, and we must therefore follow the path presented to us in the Torah. The emphasis on a specific order commanded to the tribe of Levi, then, reflects the message that they understood when they fought those who demanded the creation of the golden calf. The Levites understood the need to order one's life according to the dictates of the Torah, and that, far from stifling one's life, the order of the Torah enables us to develop our inner self, and truly connect to God in our heart.

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