

Sefer Devarim- the most misunderstood book in the Bible

/Class # 11 For Torah in Motion - by Menachem Leibtag

Why the 'Levites' are Called 'Priests' - in Sefer Devarim

I. Intro Over last two weeks, we've seen how the "chukim u'mishpatim" section contains laws that will guide our national behavior, i.e. our national center dedicated to Hashem's reputation, as well as an organized & just judicial system in every marketplace, as well as just leadership following the guidelines of the Torah. This topic continues in today's class, as we discuss the function of the tribe of Levi- and their 'Biblical history'.

A. When did "shevet Levi" become special?

See Devarim 10:8-9

ח בַּעַת הַהוּא, הִבְדִּיל יְהוָה אֶת-
שֵׁבֶט הַלְוִי, לְשֵׂאת, אֶת-אֲרוֹן בְּרִית-
יְהוָה--לְעֹמֵד לְפָנַי יְהוָה לְשָׂרְתּוֹ
וּלְבָרֵךְ בְּשֵׁמוֹ, עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.
8 At that time the LORD separated the tribe of Levi, to bear the ark of the covenant of the LORD, to stand before the LORD to minister unto Him, and to bless in His name, unto this day.

ט עַל-כֵּן לֹא-הָיָה לְלֵוִי, חֵלֶק וְנַחֲלָה-
עִם-אֶחָיו : יְהוָה הוּא נַחֲלָתוֹ,
כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לוֹ.
9 Wherefore Levi hath no portion nor inheritance with his brethren; the LORD is his inheritance, according as the LORD thy God spoke unto him.--

See Shmot chapter 2 - what is a "ish Levi"

Were Aharon & Moshe already special people?

יג וַיֹּאמֶר, בִּי אֲדֹנָי ; שְׁלַח-נָא, בְּיַד-
תִּשְׁלַח.
13 And he said: 'Oh Lord, send, I pray Thee, by the hand of him whom Thou wilt send.'

יד וַיַּחַר-אַף יְהוָה בְּמֹשֶׁה, וַיֹּאמֶר
הֲלֹא אֶהְרֹן אֶחֱיֶיךָ הַלְוִי--יָדַעְתִּי, כִּי-
דִבֶּר יָדַבֵּר הוּא ; וְגַם הִנֵּה-הוּא יֵצֵא
לְקָרְאתְךָ, וְרָאֶךָ וְשָׂמַח בְּלִבּוֹ.
14 And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses, and He said: 'Is there not Aaron thy brother the Levite? I know that he can speak well. And also, behold, he cometh forth to meet thee; and when he seeth thee, he will be glad in his heart.'

Another proof of their special status before Matan Torah!

See story of chet ha'Egel in Sefer Shmot

כה וַיֵּרָא מֹשֶׁה אֶת-הָעָם, כִּי פָרְעוּ הוּא: כִּי-פָרְעָה אֶהְרֹן, לְשִׂמְצָה בְּקִמְיָהֶם.

25 And when Moses saw that the people were broken loose--for Aaron had let them loose for a derision among their enemies--

כו וַיַּעֲמֵד מֹשֶׁה, בְּשַׁעַר הַמַּחֲנֶה, וַיֹּאמֶר, מִי לַיהוָה אֵלַי! וַיֵּאסְפוּ אֵלָיו, כָּל-בְּנֵי לֵוִי.

26 then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said: 'Whoso is on the LORD'S side, let him come unto me.' And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him.

כז וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם, כֹּה-אָמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, שְׂיָמוּ אִישׁ-חֶרְבּוֹ, עַל-יָרְכוֹ; עֹבְרוֹ וְשׁוֹבוֹ מִשַּׁעַר לְשַׁעַר, בַּמַּחֲנֶה, וְהָרְגוּ אִישׁ-אֶת-אָחִיו וְאִישׁ אֶת-רֵעֵהוּ, וְאִישׁ אֶת-קָרְבוֹ.

27 And he said unto them: 'Thus saith the LORD, the God of Israel: Put ye every man his sword upon his thigh, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbour.'

כח וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְנֵי-לֵוִי, כַּדְבַר מֹשֶׁה; וַיִּפֹּל מִן-הָעָם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא, כֶּשֶׁלְשֶׁת אֲלָפֵי אִישׁ.

28 And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses; and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men.

Finally, note their relative small population in Bamidbar chapter 3

[Approx. 22,000 from age 30 days / compare 50K/ tribe - 20+]

B. What is "at that time" ["b'et ha'hi"] in Devarim chapter 10?

Note the 'footnotes' to the story in chapter 9

At the time of chet ha'Egel or of Matan Torah?

Definitely relates to the luchot ha'brit!

Depends if Mishkan is before or after chet ha'egel

C. The logical need for a corps of teachers & educators to teach and interpret the Torah, and hence, would make sense that these laws are included in the 'leadership section' of the main speech:

Chapters 17 thru 18 - parallel to "kibud horim"

The national **leaders**:

Judges, supreme court, King

Then, kohanim & levi'im, and navi

Moshe's blessing to the tribe of Levi - to teach Torah:

ח וּלְלוֹי אָמַר, תִּמְיֵךָ וְאוּרִיֶךָ לְאִישׁ
חֲסִידֶךָ, אֲשֶׁר נִסִּיתוֹ בְּמַסָּה, תִּרְיַבְהוּ
עַל-מֵי מְרִיבָה.

8 And of Levi he said: Thy Thummim and Thy Urim be with Thy holy one, whom Thou didst prove at Massah, with whom Thou didst strive at the waters of Meribah;

ט הָאֵמַר לְאָבִיו וּלְאִמּוֹ, לֹא רָאִיתִיו,
וְאֶת-אָחָיו לֹא הִפִּיר, וְאֶת-בָּנָיו לֹא
יָדַע: כִּי שָׁמְרוּ אִמְרֹתֶיךָ, וּבְרִיתֶךָ יִנְצְרוּ.

9 Who said of his father, and of his mother: 'I have not seen him'; neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor knew he his own children, for they have observed Thy word, and keep Thy covenant.

י יוֹרוּ מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ לְיַעֲקֹב,
וְתוֹרֹתֶיךָ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל; יִשִּׂימוּ קְטֹרֶה
בְּאַפֶּיךָ, וְכָלִיל עַל-מִזְבְּחֶךָ.

10 They shall teach Jacob Thine ordinances, and Israel Thy law; they shall put incense before Thee, and whole burnt-offering upon Thine altar.

יא בָּרַךְ יְהוָה חֵילוֹ...

D. Rambam re: Who fulfills the function of shevet Levi today?

Rambam/Hilchot Shmita 13:12-13

וְלָמָּה לֹא זָכָה לוֹי בְּנַחֲלַת אֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבְבִזְתָּהּ עִם אָחָיו מִפְּנֵי
שֶׁהִבְדִּיל לְעַבְדָּהּ אֶת ה' לְשִׁרְתוֹ וּלְהוֹרֹת דְּרָכָיו הַיְשָׁרִים וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו
הַצַּדִּיקִים לְרַבִּים שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר " יוֹרוּ מִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ לְיַעֲקֹב וְתוֹרֹתֶיךָ לְיִשְׂרָאֵל".
לְפִיכָּה הִבְדִּילוּ מִדְּרָכֵי הָעוֹלָם לֹא עוֹרְכִין מִלְחָמָה כְּשָׂאֵר יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא
נוֹחֲלִין וְלֹא זוֹכִין לְעֶצְמָן בְּכַח גּוֹפֵן. אֲלֵא הֵם חֵיל הַשֵּׁם שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "בָּרַךְ
ה' חֵילוֹ". וְהוּא זוֹכָה לָהֶם שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר "אֲנִי חֵלְקֶךָ וְנַחֲלָתֶךָ":

12 Why were the Levites not allotted land in Eretz Yisrael or a share in its booty along with their brethren? Because they were singled out to serve the Lord and minister to him, to teach his upright ways and just laws to many people, as it is written: "They shall teach thy laws to Jacob, and thy instruction to Israel" ([Deuteronomy 33:10](#)). For this reason, they were separated from worldly affairs: they fought no battles like the rest of Israel; they inherited no land; they won nothing by means of their physical ability. They are indeed the Lord's army, as it is written: "Bless, O Lord, his substance" (11). He, blessed be he, has won them for himself, as it is written: "I am your portion and your share" ([Numbers 18:20](#)).

וְלֹא שֶׁבֶט לוֹי בְּלִבָּד אֲלֵא כָּל אִישׁ וְאִישׁ מִכָּל בְּאֵי הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר נִדְּבָה רוּחוֹ אוֹתוֹ –
וְהִבִּינוּ מִדְּעוֹ לְהִבְדִּיל לְעַמְד לִפְנֵי ה' לְשִׁרְתוֹ וּלְעַבְדוֹ לְדַעְתָּהּ אֶת ה' ו
הַלֵּךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמוֹ שֶׁעָשָׂהוּ הָאֱלֹהִים- וּפְרָק מֵעַל צִנְאוֹרוֹ עַל הַחֲשׂבוֹנוֹת הַרַבִּים אֲשֶׁר
בְּקִשּׁוֹ בְּנֵי הָאָדָם-- הַרִי זֶה נִתְקַדֵּשׁ קִדְשׁ קִדְשִׁים
--וְיִהְיֶה ה' חֵלְקוֹ וְנַחֲלָתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וְלְעוֹלָמֵי עוֹלָמִים
וְיִזְכָּה לוֹ בְּעוֹלָם הַזֶּה דְּבַר הַמִּסְפִּיק לוֹ כְּמוֹ שֶׁזָּכָה לְכַהֲנִים לְלוֹוִים:

13 Not only the tribe of Levi, but each well-informed thinking person whose spirit moves him to devote himself to the service of the Lord, to know the Lord, and has walked uprightly after casting off his neck the yoke of many a cunning wile that men contrived, is indeed divinely consecrated, and the Lord will forever and ever be his portion. God will provide sufficiently for his needs, as he did for the priests and the Levites.

E. Concept of "bechor" in light of Sefer Breishit & Shmot 4:22

Connection to "kedusha" in light of Shmot 19:5-6

Dedication of first born to Hashem /Shmot 13:1-3, 11-16
& Transfer of duties to Levites/ Bamidbar 3:

Was transfer to Levi God's original plan or an 'after-thought'?

Discussion - concept of 'privilege' vs. 'responsibility'

Note Bamidbar 16:8-9

Relate to underlying purpose of being 'chosen'

What it means to be a "kohen" - in the service of...

F. What is the distinction between a "kohen" & a "levi"

Devarim chapter 18

א לא-יהיה לכהנים הלויים כל-
שבט לוי, חלק ונחלה--עם-
ישראל; אשי יהוה ונחלתו,
יאכלון. **1** The priests the Levites, even all the
tribe of Levi, shall have no portion nor
inheritance with Israel; they shall eat
the offerings of the LORD made by fire,
and His inheritance.

ב ונחלה לא-יהיה-לו, בקרב
אחיו: יהוה הוא נחלתו, כאשר
דבר-לו. {ס} **2** And they shall have no inheritance
among their brethren; the LORD is their
inheritance, as He hath spoken unto
them. {S}

ג וזה יהיה משפט הכהנים מאת
העם, מאת זבחי הזבח--אם-שור
אם-שה: ונתן, לפהו, הזרע
והלחיים, והקבה. **3** And this shall be the priests' due from
the people, from them that offer a
sacrifice, whether it be ox or sheep, that
they shall give unto the priest the
shoulder, and the two cheeks, and the
maw.

ד ראשית דגנה תירשך ויצהרה,
וראשית גז צאנך--תתן-לו. **4** The first-fruits of thy corn, of thy
wine, and of thine oil, and the first of
the fleece of thy sheep, shalt thou give
him.

ה כִּי בּוּ, בָּחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ--
מִכָּל-שִׁבְטֶיךָ: לְעֹמֵד לְשֵׁרֵת בְּשֵׁם-
יְהוָה הוּא וּבָנָיו, כָּל-הַיָּמִים. {ס}

5 For the LORD thy God hath chosen him out of all thy tribes, to stand to minister in the name of the LORD, him and his sons for ever. {S}

ו וְכִי-יָבֵא הַלֵּוִי מֵאֶחָד שְׁעָרֶיךָ,
מִכָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֲשֶׁר-הוּא, גֵּר שָׁם;
וְבָא בְּכָל-אַיִת נַפְשׁוֹ, אֶל-הַמָּקוֹם
אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר יְהוָה.

6 And if a Levite come from any of thy gates out of all Israel, where he sojourneth, and come with all the desire of his soul unto the place which the LORD shall choose;

ז וְשֵׁרֵת, בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו--כָּכֹל-
אֲחָיו, הַלֵּוִיִּם, הָעֹמְדִים שָׁם, לִפְנֵי
יְהוָה.

7 then he shall minister in the name of the LORD his God, as all his brethren the Levites do, who stand there before the LORD.

ח חֶלֶק כְּחֶלֶק, יֹאכְלוּ, לֶבֶד
מִמֶּכְרֵיו, עַל-הָאָבוֹת. {ס}

8 They shall have like portions to eat, beside that which is his due according to the fathers' houses.

Note as well "birkat kohanim" in 6:22-27

See Devarim 10:8-9; 17:8-9

G. Original designation of Shevet Levi, according to Devarim 10:8-9

יח בָּעֵת הַהוּא, הִבְדִּיל ה' אֶת-שִׁבְט הַלֵּוִי,

• לְשֵׂאתָ, אֶת-אָרוֹן בְּרִית-ה'—

(do we need an entire tribe for a one-time job?)

• לְעֹמֵד לִפְנֵי ה' לְשֵׁרֵתוֹ

▪ (what type of service does this refer to?)

• וּלְבָרֵךְ בְּשֵׁמוֹ, עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.

▪ (isn't that only the kohanim who bless the people?)

• See what brings BLESSING - DEVARIM CHAPTER 28!

ט עַל-כֵּן לֹא-הָיָה לַלֵּוִי, חֶלֶק וְנַחֲלָה--עִם-אֲחָיו: ה' הוּא נַחֲלָתוֹ, כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לוֹ .

Discussion - what does it mean to carry "the ark of the covenant" Relating to purpose of Mishkan & connection to Matan Torah

To serve Hashem - in the Temple, or in the court system?

Devarim chapter 19

טו לֹא-יָקוּם עַד אֶחָד בְּאִישׁ, לְכָל-עוֹן וְלְכָל-חַטָּאת, בְּכָל-חַטָּא, אֲשֶׁר יִחַטָּא : עַל-פִּי שְׁנֵי עֵדִים, אוֹ עַל-פִּי שְׁלֹשָׁה-עֵדִים--יָקוּם דְּבַר.

15 One witness shall not rise up against a man for any iniquity, or for any sin, in any sin that he sinneth; at the mouth of two witnesses, or at the mouth of three witnesses, shall a matter be established.

טז כִּי-יָקוּם עַד-חָמָס, בְּאִישׁ, לַעֲנוֹת בּוֹ, סָרָה.

16 If an unrighteous witness rise up against any man to bear perverted witness against him;

יז וְעַמְדוֹ שְׁנֵי-הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר-לָהֶם הָרִיב, לְפָנֵי יְהוָה, לְפָנֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים וְהַשֹּׁפְטִים, אֲשֶׁר יִהְיוּ בַיָּמִים הָהֵם.

17 then both the men, between whom the controversy is, shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges that shall be in those days.

יח וְדָרְשׁוּ הַשֹּׁפְטִים, הֵיטֵב ; וְהִנֵּה עַד-שֶׁקֶר הָעֵד, שֶׁקֶר עָנָה בְּאָחִיו.

18 And the judges shall inquire diligently; and, behold, if the witness be a false witness, and hath testified falsely against his brother;

H. Their obligations as teachers and judges - & to inspire

see Devarim 33:10 , in Moshe's blessing [see also 24:8]

see Devarim 14:22-23, teaching the fear of God in Jerusalem

note 14:26-27; 12:11-12; 12:17-19 - in contrast to 16:10 & 14

see Devarim 17:7-8;12 ; 17:18 & 21:5 - in regard to their authority

see Devarim 18:1-8, regarding their compensation

see Devarim 19:16-17, regarding their function as judges [& 16:18-20]

see Devarim 27:9-14 & 31:9-13, 24-26 -regarding to their national function

see II Divrei Hayamim 17:7-9; 29:1-15; 30:21-27; 35:1-5//

and Nechemya 8:13-18