BS”D

Parshas BaMidbar 5778

Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

*The Divine presence rests upon those who seek His presence.*

Counting the Levites

The Parsha of BaMidbar describes the census of the Israelites in the desert. A good part of the Parsha describes the special census of the Levites. First they are counted from age thirty days and up. The total is 22,300. They are counted again from age 30 to age 50 when they are fit for doing the heavy work of carrying the Sanctuary through the desert. The total (as recorded in the next Parsha of Naso) is 8,580.

There is a great disparity between the numbers of the Levites and that of the other tribes. The other tribes were counted only from age twenty. The average number of members per tribe was about 50,000. The smallest in number was Menashe at 32,200, the largest, Yehuda, at 74,600. How come the Levi’im, who were counted not from age twenty but from infancy had such a small population of only about 22,000?

The Ramban asks this question. He rejects an answer that the Levi’im had a high death rate because they were carrying the Holy Ark and were thus prone to dying even for small infractions. Well, says the Ramban, this census was taken *before* the Levi’im were entrusted with carrying the Mishkan, so their smaller numbers cannot be attributed to the Ark.

He quotes another answer, that since Yaakov rebuked Levi when he blessed his sons, the Levi’im were not blessed with as high a birth rate as the other Jews and were therefore lesser in number.

The Ramban’s principle answer is that because the Egyptians enslaved and persecuted the Jews, G-d blessed them to increase and multiply to an inordinate degree. The tribe of Levi who were not subject to the same harsh treatment as the rest of the Jews in Egypt did not receive a special Divine blessing to multiply at an extraordinary rate. As it say, “The more the Egyptians oppressed them, the more the Israelites proliferated and spread.” (Shmos 1, 12) Instead, the population of Levi rose more slowly at a normal rate, and they were therefore much less in number than the other tribes.

Abarbanel suggests that since the Levi’im did not receive a share of land in Israel (except for the villages they were given), G-d saw to it that their birth rate was lower so they would find it easier to subsist in Israel on the tithes they were given.

The Ohr HaChaim points out that at a later time, the Levi’im had a higher birth rate than the rest of the Jews. In Divrei HaYaomim (I 23, 3) when David took a census of the Levites over 30 years old, they numbered 38,000. That’s a more than fourfold increase from their number in the desert (8, 580). The rest of the Jews from age twenty and up numbered 1,570,000, about more than two and half times their number in the desert. So, in principle, the birth rate of the Levi’im was considerably greater than the rest of the Jews.

The Ohr HaChaim makes a suggestion based on the teaching of the sages who said that when the Egyptians declared that Jewish boy babies be killed, their leader Amram divorced his wife so that no more children be born. Other Jews then followed suit. The Ohr HaChaim suggests that it’s the Levi’im specifically who took Amram’s suggestion to heart. Thus, for a certain period of time before the Exodus, the Levites were not multiplying while the rest of the Jewish people were. This would account for their smaller numbers.

The Kli Yakar gives another, more spiritual explanation:

According to the sages there must be a minimum of 22,000 Jews for the Divine presence (the Shechina) to dwell among the Jewish people. For this reason, Divine Providence saw to it that there would be 22,000 Levi’im to symbolize the Divine presence in Israel.

As we know, the Levites were exemplary in their behavior. They remained loyal to G-d and did not participate in the golden calf. They became the servants of G-d in the Mishkan and Beis HaMikdash and the teachers of Israel. The Divine presence rests upon those who seek His presence and who are a vessel for that presence. This is what the number of the Levi’im represent.

The Rambam at the end of the laws of Shmitah (13:13) states that any person can be a Levi in the spiritual sense. Any person can seek to serve G-d, to know Him, and to be sanctified in His service.

The role of the Jewish people is to be a dwelling place for the Divine presence in this world. To be a vessel for that requires spiritual integrity and determination. It requires a critical mass of people (22,000). Whatever the significance of that particular number we all have the power to join together in the Divine service. All of us can be Levi’im.