

D'VAR TORAH



Singing into Silence

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Parashah

When counting people, whether for a national census or for a wedding guest list, it is easy to be reminded of those who are no longer with us. We are struck by both the births and the deaths. In this week's parashah, we are forced to confront, yet again, the deaths of Aaron's sons, Nadav and Avihu, as we record their existence and their childless demise. Immediately afterward, we learn that the tribe of Levi is to be assigned to serve Aaron, doing the work necessary for the Tabernacle. While Aaron and his remaining sons are the kohanim, the priests, the Levites are given to them to serve them.

The precise role of the Levites is shrouded in mystery. We do not know what it means exactly to serve the kohanim. We know they are superb movers, as we read in this parashah of their duties in dismantling, transporting, and rebuilding the Tabernacle during its wilderness journey. We know that they are guards of the Tabernacle, charged with camping out around it in order to keep it safe. We also read in our parashah that the Levites "serve" the Tabernacle, just as they are to serve Aaron and his sons. This description is unclear - we do not get details on what the terms of their service are.

Looking elsewhere in the Tanakh helps us to fill in the gap, providing us more Levitical jobs that might have been indicated by the service to the Tabernacle and to Aaron and his sons as mentioned in our parashah. In many other places, we learn that the Levites sang as their service. The Book of Chronicles describes the whole ensemble - "David also commanded the chiefs of the Levites to appoint their kindred as the singers to play on musical instruments, on harps and lyres and cymbals, to raise loud sounds of joy." It continues to describe Levites offering praise to God through playing music, especially after the completion of the Temple. Moreover, many of the songs located in the Book of Psalms are attributed to Asaph, a Levite. The Mishnah (Tamid 7:4) explains that the Levites would recite the daily song for the week from the Book of Psalms. Likewise, we read elsewhere in the Mishnah of the Levites recitation of the fifteen Psalms of Ascent during Sukkot, accompanied by all sorts of musical instruments. In the Tosefta (Pesachim 4:11), we read how the Levites would sing the Psalms of Hallel as the Pesach sacrifice was offered.

While it is possible that all of this singing is a later innovation, happening long after the story of the wilderness, I prefer to read the singing as latent in our parashah. The Levites are by their very nature singers, waiting and ready to burst into song. But the conditions are not yet right. Yehezkel Kaufman called this phenomenon "the sanctuary of silence," *mikdash hademama*. Our Tabernacle at this point was only visual, lacking the noises, the words, the songs which would eventually fill the Temple.

The silence of the Tabernacle mirrors Aaron's silence. When he learns of the death of his sons, we read that he fell silent, *vayidom*. Now, in our parashah, Aaron is still silent. We read once more of the death of his sons. Taking the census, we come face to face with our losses. Aaron grieves not only Nadav and Avihu but also the future generations that will not rise from them. It is into this grief, into this silence, that Moses introduces the Levites. The Levites, who serve in place of the dedication of our firstborn sons to God, also serve to comfort Aaron of the loss of his firstborn sons. They stand, ready to serve, helping Aaron erect the physical space and keep it safe. But they also serve as singers, as reminders of hope and happiness. Silent in our parashah out of respect for Aaron's loss, they are at the ready to raise their voices to turn mourning into joy.