

Barefoot and Backwards Levites

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Towards the end of Parashat Bemidbar, God commands Aaron and Moses to undertake a census of the Levitical clans (Numbers 4:2). They begin the census with the Kohathites, which is odd for three reasons:

(1) Elsewhere the Levites are listed in birth order—Gershon, Kohath, Merari (Genesis 46:11, Numbers 3:17)—but here Kohath is given priority.

(2) The Kohathites are set apart from the other two clans by the division between Parashat Bemidbar and Parashat Naso, the latter of which begins with the enumeration of the other two clans.

(3) The labor assigned to the Kohathites is described, without elaboration, as “Most Holy” (Numbers 4:4). Rashi explicates this as responsibility for the “the ark, the table, the candelabrum, the altars, the curtain, and the accompanying vessels.”

Some commentators attribute this foregrounding to the fact that Moses and Aaron were Kohathites themselves, their clan thus meriting extra distinction (Leqah Tov; Ibn Ezra). Whatever the reason, their singularity comes to the fore in the Torah’s description in Numbers 7:6-9 of how the respective clans were supposed to carry out their work:

6Moses took the carts and the oxen and gave them to the Levites. 7Two carts and four oxen he gave to the Gershonites, ... 8and four carts and eight oxen he gave to the Merarites,

וּלְבְנֵי קֹהַת לֹא נָתַן כִּי-עֲבֹדַת הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֲלֵהֶם בְּכֹתֶף וְשֵׂאוֹ:

9But to the Kohathites he did not give any; since theirs was the service of the [most] sacred objects, their portage was by shoulder.¹

Levi ben Gershon (1288-1344) observes, “They are commanded here to carry their load by shoulder because of

the sanctity of the ark and the other items they were carrying.” He goes on to discuss two later occasions when the ark was transported at King David’s behest. In 2 Samuel 6:3-8, the ark was mounted on a cart and disaster ensued (see the haftarah for Parashat Shemini). That David learned his lesson from the incident is clear from 1 Chronicles 15:11-15, when he orders the priests and Levites to bring the ark to Jerusalem:

11David sent for Zadok and Abiathar the priests, and for the Levites cf. 2 Samuel 6:7] 15*The Levites carried the Ark of God by means of poles on their shoulders, as Moses had commanded in accordance with the word of the Lord.*

Levi concludes, “Nowhere else but here [in Numbers 7:9] does God command that they carry their load by shoulder. David erred in this respect by having the ark mounted on a new cart. That was the reason God burst out in Uzza (2 Samuel 6:3-8), and that was why David reverted to having it carried by shoulder by the Levites.”

The special privilege and responsibility of the Levites in general and of the Kohathites in particular is elaborated in the midrash *Numbers Rabba* 5:8:

How superior was the tribe of Levi to the other Israelites! For the Israelites would walk about wearing sandals; the tribe of Levi, who would bear the vessels of the Tabernacle, would walk barefooted.” Thus we learn that the tribe of Levi was superior to all the other tribes. And pre-eminent within the tribe of Levi was the family of Kohath. An ordinary Levite would place his burden, whether it was the boards or the bars or the sockets or anything else, upon carts. The families of Kohath, however, bore their burdens on their shoulders: they were not allowed to place the ark upon a wagon as it says, “But to the Kohathites he did not give any... their portage was by shoulder.”

As if that were not distinction enough, the midrash continues,

In another respect also the [Kohathites] were elevated above all the other Levites. The other Levites carried the vessels of the Tabernacle and walked in the normal way, facing in the direction they were going, but the sons of Kohath walked backwardsⁱⁱⁱ, with their faces towards the ark, in order not to turn their backs on the ark.

This form of portage, the midrash states, is a mark of humility. The Kohathites were “subdued in the presence of the ark. Why so? Because there is no place for greatness in the presence of God. So you must conclude that, though the family of Kohath was aristocratic, nevertheless when they carried the ark, they did so like ordinary slaves.”

And why is that? The midrash continues, “God said, The Torah is life, as it says, ‘She is a tree of life to those who grasp her’ (Proverbs 3:18); ‘They are life to him who finds them, healing for his whole body’ (Proverbs 4:22). Now the sons of Kohath have charge of the Torah, synonymous with life—namely the ark that they carry, in which the Torah is contained.” They carry it in this unique manner “that they may live and not die” (Numbers 4:19).

In the first sermon on Parashat Naso in his Torah commentary, *Keli hemdahi*^v, Samuel Laniado (a leading rabbi in Aleppo at the turn of the seventeenth century) quotes the midrash and then adds a striking idea of his own. He writes,

Since all living things are capable of carrying themselves, holy things, which undoubtedly are imbued with the spirit of God, certainly would carry themselves. It is as the sages say [in *B. Sukka* 35a], “the ark bears its bearers (הארון נושא את נושאי),” so naturally it carries itself.

Laniado presents a tour de force in which he imputes a double meaning—literal and metaphoric—to several key terms in both the midrash and the biblical text that it quotes. When the midrash says that the Levites were “elevated” (מעולים) above the Israelites, that means that they were both superior in

stature, and also literally raised up by the nature of their service. When the midrash depicts the Levites as “barefoot” (יחפים), the term is to be taken both literally and as a metaphor for their self-abasement and devotion to service (ההכנעה וההשתעבדות). They were, paradoxically, elevated by their humility.

Laniado cites a variant version of the midrash^v that says that the Levites were “borne by the vessels of the Tabernacle (טעונים בכלי המשכן).” The variant substitutes the passive form טעונים/*te`unim* for the active טוענים/*to`anim*. Instead of being “burdened” with the vessels, then, the Levites are “borne” by them! He continues:

The reason for the use of טעונים is to teach that according to the grammar, the ark was carrying them.... In like manner, I explain the verse [Numbers 7:9] כִּי עֲבַדְתָּ הַקֹּדֶשׁ, יְשָׂאוּ, to mean that the ark carries them, and that is why it does not say נושאים בכתף or יִשָּׂאוּ with a *shva*.

The form יִשָּׂאוּ/*yissa'u*, in Laniado’s view, is a passive Niphal (not an active Qal pausal form), indicating that the Kohathites literally were carried along by the ark (נושאים מהארון).

The image of the ark-bearers floating alongside their “burden” as it carries them through the wilderness is charming, but it also has a serious side. Laniado’s discussion boils down to something like a riddle: When is a burden not a burden? The answer: when it is the burden of Torah. The biblical Levites humbly assumed the burden of the Tabernacle and they, in turn, were elevated in stature and literally transported for doing so. Their ancient work was represented in Laniado’s day, and may be emulated nowadays, by what Laniado calls הטורח בעמל התורה, “exertion in the toil of Torah.” For those who dedicate their full vigor to learning and practice, the Torah is a burden that is not a burden; she is the Tree of Life that sustains them.

ⁱ Note the final placement of the second-born Kohathites, again out of birth order.

ⁱⁱ See *Exodus Rabba* 2:6 on Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3:5; cf. Joshua 5:15): “כל מקום שהשכינה נגלית אסור בנעילת הסנדל,” “Wherever the Divine Presence appears it is forbidden to wear shoes.”

ⁱⁱⁱ Jacob Zvi Meklenburg painstakingly explains that they walked “sideways” (*Ha-ketav ve-ha-qabbalah*). For an elaborate discussion of walking backwards

from the Presence, see [Rabbeinu Chananel](#) on Exodus 32:15. In principle (with exceptions), in synagogue one should not turn one’s back to the Torah scroll (Rambam, *Laws of Tefillin* etc. 10:10; *Shulchan Aruch Yoreh De`ah* 282:1).

^{iv} Jerusalem, 5743 (1983), pp. 14-21.

^v See Israel al-Nakawa (d. 1391), *Menorat ha-Ma’or*, ed. Enelow, part 3, p. 237.