

When You're Offered A Job - Take It!

PARSHA INSIGHTS - SHMOS (5758)

MOSHE RABAINU - WAS HE A KOHEN OR A LEVI?

Let us begin with the basics. What is a Levi, and what is a *kohen*? It is undisputed that anyone from the family of Levi ben Yaacov is considered a Levi. That includes all descendants of Levi's three sons: Gershon, Kehas, and Merari. Moshe *Rabainu* [Moses our teacher] and his brother Aharon were obviously *Levi'im* [those from the tribe of Levi], since their father was Amram, their grandfather was Kehas, and their great-grandfather was Levi himself. However, **anyone who descends from Aharon himself (who is, of course, from *Shaivet* [the tribe of] Levi) has an additional, exalted status - that of a *kohen* [priest]**. The distinction between these two groups is well known. *Kohanim* [priests] have greater privileges and responsibilities when it comes to their service in the *Mishkan* [Tabernacle] and *Bais Hamikdosh* [the Temple], plus in other areas of Jewish life. *Levi'im* also serve in a capacity superior to the regular Yisroel, but their rank is not the same as that of the *kohanim*. As you see, every *kohen* is a Levi with an added dimension of sanctity.

"Moshe *Rabainu* was a *Kohen Gadol* [High Priest]..." (the opinion of the sage, *Rav*, in the *Gemara Zevachim* 101B).

☞ Please keep in mind that ***Rav***, a relatively later authority, made this statement. Further on, the *Gemara* will remark that his opinion originates in the *Tanaim* [earlier sages].

What is the meaning of this? The *Gemara* points out that Hashem gave Moshe the rights and obligations that *kohanim* usually have, even though Moshe did not *DESCEND* from Aharon. From then on, the only ones who could do such tasks would be Aharon's progeny. Further on that same page, however, the *Gemara* questions the validity of *Rav's* opinion in the following manner. It would seem that Moshe was not a *kohen* at all, based on the Oral Torah's interpretation of an episode recorded later in the Torah.

We know that Miriam criticized one of Moshe's actions regarding his marital life, and she received *tzora'as* [a leprous-like affliction] for her *loshon hora* [evil gossip], as recorded in the end of *Parshas* [the Torah portion of] *Beha'aloscha* (*Bamidbar* [Numbers] 12:10). The *Chazal* [Sages] wonder - who possessed the authority to decide on Miriam's status as a person who officially contracted *tzora'as*? Usually, a *kohen* is required for this (*Vayikra* [Leviticus] 13:2). The *Gemara* brings an early source which declares that Moshe could not have been the one to tend to her *tzora'as*, because Moshe was a ZAR [a non-*kohen*]. Aharon *Hakohen* [Aaron the priest] was also not qualified for the job, since he was related to Miriam, the one with the *tzora'as*. The conclusion is that Hashem Himself "played the role of a *kohen*" in honor of Miriam. Doesn't this prove that *Rav's* opinion that Moshe was a *kohen* cannot be accepted? After all, it states clearly that MOSHE WAS A ZAR!

But the *Gemara* says that even so, Moshe might have been a *kohen* for all other purposes besides deciding on *tzora'as*. He was only considered a "zar" in regard to this area of *halacha* [law]. *Tzora'as* could be its own category, because the Torah specifies clearly that the one with *tzora'as* must be brought to "Aharon the *Kohen*, or to one of his sons, the *kohanim*" (*Vayikra* 13:2). That is the reason Moshe was ineligible to decide on this particular case (besides the fact that he was also related to her).

Thus, we can still say that Moshe was a *kohen*, as stated by *Rav*. A bit later, the *Gemara* continues the discussion of Moshe's status, **AND THIS IS WHERE OUR PARSHA [TORAH PORTION] COMES INTO THE PICTURE**. When informed that he was the leader chosen to rescue *Bnai Yisroel* [the Children of Israel] from the bondage of *Mitzraim* [Egypt], Moshe objected to taking on such a massive responsibility. After Moshe persisted in his refusal, we are told that Hashem became angry at him (today's *parsha* [Torah portion], 4:14). "Isn't there Aharon, your brother THE LEVI - I know that he surely has the ability to speak..." (And he can eloquently state your case to Paroh, so do not worry about taking *Bnai Yisroel* out of Egypt.)

Do you notice the unusual terminology employed by Hashem? In speaking to Moshe about his brother, G-d refers to Aharon as "THE LEVI". What is the significance of this? Our *Gemara Zevachim* 102A analyzes this declaration in the following manner, and it impacts our discussion in a certain way. The issue is: Who was originally supposed to father the *kohanim*?

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai remarks that there is a punishment stated here. Moshe is being told that he was originally SUPPOSED to be the progenitor of all *kohanim*. From him was supposed to emanate that special family of *Levi'im*, those who would enter the inner sanctum of Hashem's house, the *Bais Hamikdosh*. From him, *kohanim* were supposed to descend - those who would receive the first *aliyah* [honor of being called to the Torah] for reading of the Torah, those who would lead *bentching* [Grace after meals], those who would recite *Birchas Kohanim* [priestly blessing]. But since Moshe so adamantly resisted the task of delivering *Bnai Yisroel* from their vicious oppressors, the Egyptians, the privilege was moved from Moshe to Aharon. How is this derived? It is indicated by Hashem's choice of words when He communicated with Moshe. "Aharon your brother, THE LEVI" means that **Aharon your brother was supposed to be ONLY a Levi**, and you, Moshe, were supposed to father the elite family of *kohanim*. Now that you have resisted the holy task of redeeming the Jews, **Aharon** will be the father of the *kohanim*. You, Moshe, will be a "regular" Levi.

Rashi on the *Gemara* adds that the reason Aharon deserved to be the originator of all *kohanim* is because of his magnificent ability **and willingness** to communicate skillfully. That is stated clearly by Hashem Himself, in the above-mentioned *pasuk* [verse] - "Aharon surely has the ability to speak". Since you refused to go ahead with the assignment, but your brother, Aharon, will certainly speak in a persuasive manner to Paroh, HE is privileged to have the *kohanim* come from him.

We can summarize the view of Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai by saying that Moshe *Rabainu* was supposed to be father of all *kohanim*, but his position was changed. He lost that ability; his brother, Aharon, got it instead. But what about Moshe's OWN function, during his lifetime? Was he a full-fledged *kohain*, or just a Levi? Recall that *Rav* held that Moshe was a *kohen*, since we see he performed functions usually only done by *kohanim* at other times in history.

The *Gemara* here cites a *Tanaic* [of the earlier sages] opinion that Moshe never actually had the status of a *kohen*, except for the role he played during the week long induction ceremony of the *kohanim* (*Parshas Tzav*). Afterward, the *Gemara* brings a different view— that Moshe himself DID have the total status of a *kohen*, just as *Rav* stated before. However, his children did NOT retain this privilege. *Rashi* explains that the *Gemara* brings this opinion to show that there was an earlier source for *Rav's* statement, that "Moshe *Rabainu* was a *kohen gadol*".

In summary, opinions debate Moshe's own level of function. But even if he himself had the status of a *kohen*, his children were considered *Levi'im*.

By Rabbi Moshe Heigh

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