

# Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

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## Chapter XXXV: Naso (Num. 4:21–7:89)

### Essay 1. Different responsibilities and outlooks of the Levites

This essay discusses differences in the instructions given to Moses regarding three of the Levite tribes, the Kohathites, Gershonites, and Merarites. The Kohathites were responsible for carrying the Ark of the Covenant, the Table of Showbread, the Menorah, and other holy items. The Gershonites were responsible for the decorations in the sanctuary—curtains, ropes, and coverings. The Merarites were responsible for maintaining and carrying the pillars, bases, frames, pegs, and cords that created the structure of the Tent of Meeting.

**"נָשָׂא אֶת-רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי גֵרְשׁוֹן" וכו'. פֶּאֶן כְּתוּב "כֹּל־הַבָּא לְצַבָּא צָבָא לְעַבְדַּ עֲבֹדָה בְּאֵהָל מוֹעֵד", וּלְעֵיל בְּבְנֵי קֹהַת כְּתִיב "כֹּל־בָּא לְצַבָּא לְעֲשׂוֹת מְלָאכָה בְּאֵהָל מוֹעֵד". וְצָרִיף בִּיאור לְמָה בְּבְנֵי גֵרְשׁוֹן כְּתוּב "לְצַבָּא צָבָא" וּבְבְנֵי קֹהַת "לְצַבָּא" בְּלִבָּד. וְעוֹד פֶּאֶן כְּתִיב "כֹּל־הַבָּא" וּלְעֵיל "כֹּל־בָּא". וְכֵן כְּתִיב "לְעַבְדַּ עֲבֹדָה" וּלְעֵיל "לְעֲשׂוֹת מְלָאכָה". וּבְבְנֵי מְרָרִי אֵינֻ אוֹמֵר "לְעֲשׂוֹת מְלָאכָה" כְּמוֹ בְּבְנֵי קֹהַת אֱלָא "לְעַבְדַּ עֲבֹדָה"<sup>4</sup> כְּמוֹ בְּנֵי גֵרְשׁוֹן. וְכֵתִיב נְמִי "כֹּל־הַבָּא" אֲבָל אֵינֻ אוֹמֵר "לְצַבָּא צָבָא" רַק "כֹּל־הַבָּא לְצָבָא".**

**“Take a census of the Gershonites also, by their ancestral house and by their clans.”<sup>1</sup> Here it is written, “Record them from the age of thirty years up to the age of fifty, everyone who is coming [כֹּל־הַבָּא] [col-ha’ba] to muster an assembly [לְצַבָּא צָבָא] [litzvo tzava] to perform religious service [לְעַבְדַּ עֲבֹדָה] [la’avod avodah] in the Tent of Meeting.”<sup>2</sup> But above, for the Kohathites, it is written, “everyone coming [כֹּל־בָּא] [col-ba] for the assembly [לְצָבָא] [la’tzava] to perform a task [לְעֲשׂוֹת מְלָאכָה] [la’asot malacha] in the Tent of Meeting.”<sup>3</sup>**

**It requires an explanation why for the Gershonites, it is written, “to muster an assembly,” but for the Kohathites it is written, “for the assembly” alone.**

**Also, here for the Gershonites, it is written, “everyone who is coming,” but above for the Kohathites, it is written, “everyone coming,” without the definite article designating “who is.”**

**Also, here for the Gershonites, it is written, “to perform religious service,” but above for the Kohathites, it is written the apparently synonymous, “to perform a task.”**

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<sup>1</sup> Num. 4:22.

<sup>2</sup> Num. 4:23.

<sup>3</sup> Num. 4:3.

**For the Merarites, it is not written, “to perform a task” as with the Kohathites, rather “to perform religious service” as with the Gershonites.<sup>4</sup>**

**It is also written for the Merarites, “everyone who is coming,” as with the Gershonites, but it does not say, “to muster an assembly,” only “everyone who is coming to the assembly,”** as with the Kohathites.

ואיתא בבבראשית רבה על פסוק "ויכלו השמים" וכו', שלוש צבאים הם צבא לשמים וארץ, צבא לתלמידים, וצבא לייסורין, ופרש רש"י שלוש צבאים הם לשון חפץ ורצון ומאנה עכ"ל.

**It's brought in Gen. Rabbah (10:5) on the verse, “ “The Heaven and earth were finished:”<sup>5</sup> There are three [kinds of] services [צבאים] [tzeva'im]: a service for Heaven and earth; a service for disciples; and a service for suffering.”<sup>6</sup> However, Rashi interprets the word [צבאים] [tzeva'im] as the plural of the word צבא, which we have translated above as “an assembly,”<sup>7</sup> or which can also be called “a service.”<sup>8</sup> Thus, he is quoted as writing: **These three services are language for wish [חפץ] [chefetz], desire [רצון] [ratzon], and longing [מאנה] [ta'avah].<sup>9</sup> I.e., one who wishes to serve has a desire to be helpful.****

ועוד במדרש רבה על פסוק "אל-תכריתו את-שבת משפחת הקהתי", רבי שמואל בר נחמן אומר אף על פי שהארון הנה מכלה בהם היו נותנים נפשם על הארון. ולמה מזהיר עליהם "אל-תכריתו" וכו', אלא מפני שהיו יודעים שכל מי שטוען בארון שפרו מרובה היו מניחין השלחן והמגורה וכלן רצין אל הארון ליטול שפר ומתוך כך היו מריבים, ומתוך שהיו נוהגים בקלות ראש היתה השפינה פוגעת בהם, ולכן אמר האלהים למשה עשה להם תקנה "וזאת עשו להם" וכו' עכ"ל.

**Also, in Midrash Rabbah (Num. 5:1) on the verse, “Do not let the group of Kohathite clans be cut off from the Levites,”<sup>10</sup> it says:**

**Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman says, “Even though the Ark destroyed them,<sup>11</sup> they would give their souls for the Ark. Why does [Scripture] warn**

<sup>4</sup> Num. 4:30. Rather than לעבד את-עבדת אהל ["to perform religious service"], Scripture actually reads לעבד את-עבדת אהל ["to perform the religious service of the Tent of Meeting"]. This adds in the sign of a definite article, את [et], and instead of “religious service” [avoda] uses the possessive form “religious service of” [avodat].

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 2:1.

<sup>6</sup> The word צבאים can have different interpretations, and some commentaries translate it as “fixed periods.” Thus, with this interpretation, there is “a fixed period for Heaven and earth, a fixed period for disciples [after which they became leaders and teachers themselves], and a fixed period for suffering.”

<sup>7</sup> Tzava [צבא] typically has a military connotation, such as a large group of soldiers, i.e., an assembly, or a host. “The L-rd of Hosts” refers to G-d being Master over large groups of people.

<sup>8</sup> In the context of understanding Rashi, it makes more sense to translate tzava [צבא] as “service.” However, for the verse under investigation, it would have been awkward to translate, “everyone who is coming to serve service to perform religious service,” and therefore the translator has used “everyone who is coming to muster an assembly to perform religious service.”

<sup>9</sup> We do not find this explanation in our versions of Rashi for Gen. 2:1, but the Matnot Kehunah commentary on Gen. Rabbah 10:5 cites it and attributes it to Rashi.

<sup>10</sup> Num. 4:18.

<sup>11</sup> Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah, Chizkuni on Num. 26:62: “Due to flashes of lightning emanating from that Ark from time to time.”

them, “Do not let the group of Kohathite clans be cut off,” because they knew that everyone who claimed a great reward from [their service of] the Ark would be ignoring the Table [of Showbread] and the Menorah, and all would run to the Ark to claim a reward. Because of that, they would quarrel over who could get to the Ark first. Since they were acting in a lightheaded manner, the Shechinah would hurt them. Therefore, G-d said to Moses, “Enact an ordinance for them, ‘Do this with them, that they may live and not die when they approach the most sacred objects: let Aaron and his sons go in and assign each of them to his duties and to his portage. But let not [the Kohathites] go inside and witness the dismantling of the sanctuary, lest they die.’”<sup>12</sup>

- Num. Rabbah 5:1

ומכאן נראה שבני קהת לא היו הולכים על דעת לפרוק את המשכן פלו שנה נקרא עבודה דהיינו העבודה שהיתה צריכה במשכן, אלא היו הולכים כלם על דעת לישא את הארון לבדה, ומשום הכי אמר הכתוב "לעשות מלאכה" שמלאכה אחת בלבד היו עושין ולא עבודה שלימה. ועוד קראם מלאכה שמי שעושה מלאכה אינו עושה אותה אלא כדי להרויט, כך הם היו רצים כלם אל הארון כדי ליטול שכר.

From this, it seems that the Kohathites would not have thought of unloading the entire sanctuary, which is called religious service, that is, the religious service that was needed in the sanctuary, but they all would have thought of carrying the Ark alone. That is why Scripture said, “to perform a task,” that only one task was to be done, and not a complete religious service. Also, they called it “a task” that just as one who does a task only does it to earn money, so too they would all run to the Ark in order to receive a reward.

ולפי שבאותה מלאכה שרוצים לעשות דהיינו טעינת הארון לא היה אפשר להם לזכות כלם בה, לכן כתיב "כל-בא" דהיינו מי שמקדים בה היה זוכה בה. ומי שלא זכה בה לא היה רץ לשלחו ולמנוחה פל כך ברצון לבו. ומשום הכי לא אמר כאן "לצבא צבא" מפני שלא היה להם הרצון אלא לדבר אחד בלבד דהיינו הארון, ד"צבא" לשון חפץ ורצון כפרוש רש"י הנ"ל.

Because for this same task they want to do, namely loading up the Ark, it would not be possible for them all to merit it. Therefore, it is written, “everyone coming,” which is those who come first are able to merit it. One who does not merit this does not run to the Table of Showbread and to the Menorah so willingly. Because of this, it does not say here “to muster an assembly,” because they do only have the desire for one thing only, namely, the Ark, for *tzava* [צבא] [“assembly” or “service”] is the language for wish and desire, as Rashi explained above.

<sup>12</sup> Num. 4:20–21.

ובבגני גרשון שאף הם היו נושאים דברים יומר קדושים מבגני מררי כמו שכתב הפלי יקר, וכמו שמצינו ש"גם-הם" היו נושאים הרוב בכתף, שהרי משה לא נתן להם אלא שתי עגלות ולבגני מררי נתן ארבעה. והכי דינק קרא בבגני גרשון לכתוב "גם-הם". ומשום של בגני גרשון היה פלו שנה שלא היה בו דבר מקודש הרבה יומר מאחרים כמו שהיה הארון בבגני קהת. משום הכי היו הולכים ברצון טוב ודעת שלימה לעשות כל העבודה שלימה, ולכן אמר "כל-הבא לצבא צבא" דהיינו כלם ברצון שנה, "לעבד עבדה" דהיינו כל העבודה.

**The Gershonites carried more sacred things than the Merarites, as the *Kli Yakar* wrote.**<sup>13</sup> As noted in the introduction to this essay, the Kohathites were entrusted with the most sacred items, the Ark, the Table of Showbread, and the Menorah. Moses did not give the Kohathites any wagons, as they had to carry these sacred items on their shoulders.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, Moses gave two wagons to the Gershonites,<sup>15</sup> who were entrusted with the decorations in the sanctuary—curtains, ropes, and coverings, and he gave four wagons to the Merarites,<sup>16</sup> who were carrying the least sacred elements: the pillars, bases, frames, pegs, and cords of the Tent of Meeting.

Thus, **we find that** for the Gershonites, **“they also” carried the majority on the shoulder, for Moses only gave them two wagons, but gave four wagons to the Merarites. Thus, Scripture was precise with the Gershonites to write “Take a census of the Gershonites also.”** From the fact that Num. 4:22 includes “they also” while discussing the Gershonites, and from the fact that they only had half as many wagons as the Kohathites, we learn that the Gershonites were expected to carry some of the items on the shoulder.

**What was carried by the Gershonites was all of equal sacredness, in that there was nothing of greater holiness than other elements, as there was with the Ark for the Kohathites,** which was more sacred than the Table of Showbread and the Menorah.

**Because of this, [the Gershonites] went with a good desire and complete knowledge to do the complete service,** instead of everyone rushing to be the first to merit one particular task deemed more sacred. **Therefore, it says, “everyone who is coming to muster an assembly,” which is everyone with an equal desire, “to perform religious service,” which is the entire service.**

אבל בגני מררי שלא היתה עבודתם כל כך קדושה שהרב היו נושאים בעגלות אינו אומר "לצבא צבא" מפני שלא היה להם בו כל כך חפץ. אבל אף על פי כן היו הולכים על דעת לעבוד כל העבודה, ולכן קתיב "כל-הבא . . . לעבד את-עבדת" וכו' ואינו אומר "כל-בא" וכו' "לעשות מלאכה" כמו בבגני קהת.

**But regarding the Merarites, whose religious service was not so holy, as most of it was carried in the wagons, [Scripture] does not say, “to muster an assembly” but only “for the assembly,” because there was not so great a wish. But nevertheless, they were determined to perform all of the religious service, and therefore it was written, “everyone who is coming for the assembly to perform the religious service of the Tent of Meeting.”**

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<sup>13</sup> Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz, *Kli Yakar* (1602) on Num. 4:22.

<sup>14</sup> Num. 7:9.

<sup>15</sup> Num. 7:7.

<sup>16</sup> Num. 7:8.