



Leadership through Separation • Parshat Beha'alotekha

In Judaism, holiness is achieved through separation. We ritualize separations between holy and profane time, holy and profane foods and objects, and holy and profane behaviors. Separation, in this sense, requires conscious and deliberative choices to move away from or to move towards, to divide or to segment experiences through constant awareness and vigilance.

In our Torah reading for this week, *Beha'alotekha*, Moses is told to separate the Levites for special service: "You shall place the Levites in attendance upon Aaron and his sons and designate them as an elevation offering to God" (Num. 8:13). In their service to the priests who offer sacrifices, the Levites themselves become a sacrifice. Through this service, they elevate themselves as offerings. Sacrifices come in a lot of forms. Gifts on the altar are one form of service. People also sacrifice time, money, thought, and attention.

As the chapter continues, we see the special regard with which God holds the Levites:

Thus, you shall set the Levites apart from the Israelites, and the Levites shall be Mine. Thereafter the Levites shall be qualified for the service of the Tent of Meeting, once you have purified them and designated them as an elevation offering. For they are formally assigned to Me from among the Israelites: I have

taken them for Myself in place of all the first issue of the womb...(Num. 8:14-16)

In his commentary *Ha-emek Davar*, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893) explains that Moses was to command the Levites "to distinguish and separate themselves in their conduct for God's sake." Moses could articulate the rules and even set them apart to fulfill their duties, but it was up to the Levites themselves to make an internal decision to see themselves as different and separate themselves from the ways of the world to sanctify themselves.

Rabbi Berlin continues this theme in his explication of these verses. The Levites were to direct all of their actions and thoughts to God, to be carriers, literally and figuratively, of the *Mishkan* and its holy objects. This physical role was established in the very first chapter of *Bamidbar*: "You shall put the Levites in charge of the Tabernacle of the Pact, all its furnishings, and everything that pertains to it: they shall carry the Tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall tend it; and they shall camp around the Tabernacle" (Num. 1:50). In this capacity, *Ha-emek Davar* stresses that the Levites behave with the utmost piety so that they are genuinely worthy of carrying the Divine Presence as they lifted and transported the portable Sanctuary.

God elevated the Levites so that they could elevate the boards, curtains, table, menorah and all the constituent parts of the *Mishkan*. This was not only a job that required great strength. It required immensity of spirit and righteousness. Let no Israelite feel that those who carried the representation of God in the world be anything less than outstanding ambassadors of holiness.

It is at this point, on Numbers 8:15, that Rabbi Berlin explains the challenge. The Levites had to be fastidious about keeping themselves pure of thought because those who are designated or designate themselves for special service run the risk of stumbling because of pride. “Anyone who sees himself as greater than another has an enlarged inclination” and in “getting close to holiness may bring impurity.” In explaining how this played out in the prophetic book Malachi, Rabbi Berlin concludes that their greatness was the cause of their faltering. The Levites had the difficult job of separating themselves for God’s service while making sure that their service was always an expression of humility, especially towards others who did not enjoy their status.

Earlier, in Exodus, God spoke through Moses with words designed to help all the Israelites, a few months out of slavery, see their own leadership and capacity to serve a higher order through the commandments they were about to receive at Sinai: “You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6). In Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’ essay “Servant Leadership” (*Korach*, Covenant & Conversation), he writes that, “In Judaism to lead is to serve. Those who serve do not lift themselves

high. They lift other people high.” As this week’s Torah reading reminds us, all great leadership requires intentionality, humility, and impulse control, as if we, too, are carrying the holiest vessels of the sanctuary and moving them. That means elevating our speech, refraining from the gossip that is so often the currency of people in positions of power, and giving people the benefit of the doubt.

In his book *Serve to Lead*, James Strock writes that the fundamental question for leaders in every situation is: “Who Am I Serving?” Once you can answer this question, he believes that, “...clarity and priorities can emerge, consistent with your calling, your deepest values. It is in answering that question that you can combine service and leadership into the unique masterpiece that combines your life and work. You resolve the question with the purity of your calling, expressed in the eloquence of action.”

There is clearly an onerousness in the notion of service, but the Lebanese-American poet Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), reminds us that there is also delight and pleasure in service, “I slept and I dreamed that life is all joy. I woke and I saw that life is all service. I served and I saw that service is joy.”

When, in a leadership role, did you have to work hard at righteousness?