

Spotlight on...Leviim

Background:

Parashat BaMidbar contains the details of the census conducted of all of the Israelites in the desert. It is basically a big record of the numbers of Israelites in each tribe and clan. As we see in the third chapter, the Leviim were treated differently. Their job was to serve and protect the mishkan. They didn't get any land of their own, and instead lived among the other tribes. There are a few different reasons given in the Torah for why the Leviim were different, and why their job was to serve Hashem. The reason that is given is that the Leviim were an exchange for every Israelite first born son, as we see in Bamidbar 3:12:

I hereby take the Levites from among the Israelites in place of all the first-born, the first issue of the womb among the Israelites: the Levites shall be Mine.	וְאָנֹכִי הִנֵּה לִקְחֹתִי אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תַּחַת כָּל־בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָיוּ לִי הַלְוִיִּם:
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We know from other places in the Torah that the first born of every species, both animal and human, were supposed to be given to Hashem. However, as we see here, the Leviim took the place of first born humans, so that families could keep their children. They would do so through redeeming their child from the Leviim (which we still do today as a pidyon haben.) Many societies had the custom that a child would be dedicated to the local religious center for service. Here we see that Hashem didn't want us to follow this system and instead to have the Leviim for religious service.

However, the next pasuk adds another reason:

For every first-born is Mine: at the time that I smote every first-born in the land of Egypt, I consecrated every first-born in Israel, man and beast, to Myself, to be Mine, the LORD's.	כִּי לִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּיוֹם הַכֹּתִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הִקְדַּשְׁתִּי לִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאָדָם עַד־בְּהֵמָה לִי יְהִי אֲנִי ה':
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This pasuk introduces another reason - that the Leviim represent the first borns not just to serve Hashem but because all of the first borns should have been slain by Hashem in Egypt! Therefore each first born is given to Hashem not just for service, but as a recognition that if Hashem hadn't saved them they would have died.

Questions:

1. According to the first pasuk, what should we feel when we watch the Leviim serve Hashem? What does it represent for us?
2. According to the second pasuk, what should we feel when we watch the Leviim serve Hashem? What does it represent for us?
3. What might be some other reasons that there is a tribe dedicated to the purpose of serving Hashem?