

Sermon: Parshat B'haalotcha

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It has been a rough few months, and a particularly complicated few weeks, so let's start with some levity before we get serious: A relatively new member of our congregation called me and asked, "Rabbi, I have a favor to ask. I want you to make me a Kohen." I responded, "I would love to help you. I'm so glad that you are a part of our community. But I cannot make you a Kohen." But he was relentless, "Please, Rabbi! If you make me a Kohen, I will donate \$10,000 to the Hineini campaign." I thanked him for his generosity, and reiterated my position: "I cannot make you a Kohen." A few weeks later he called again. "Rabbi, if you make me a Kohen, I will contribute \$50 million to Hineini." I decided to humor him, so I called him and invited him to have an *aliyah* as a Kohen as soon as we are able to gather again in person. He mailed in the check and with his check there was a beautiful note: "Rabbi, I can't thank you enough. You can't imagine what this means to me. You see, my father was a Kohen my grandfather was a Kohen. They would be so proud." Hopefully, you've heard that joke before. But take a moment to consider its implications. There is nothing one can do to become a Kohen. There is no amount of money, no halakhic ingenuity, no synagogue committee or task force that can make you a Kohen. It is just about your birth. If your grandfather was a Kohen, and if your father was a Kohen, then you are a Kohen. Mazel tov—you inherited a privilege. As Jews in America, many of us benefit from an inherited privilege, and with that privilege comes an obligation to our fellow Americans.

Parshat B'haalotcha teaches us about how the Levites came to be the attendants of the Tabernacle, responsible for dismantling it, transporting it, erecting it, and guarding it. God instructs Moses,

וְאָקַח אֶת־הַלְוִיִּים תַּחַת כָּל־בְּכוֹר בְּבִנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

Now I take the Levites instead of every first-born of the Israelites;

וְאֶתְנָה אֶת־הַלְוִיִּים נְתַנִּים לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְעַבְדֹת אֶת־עֲבֹדַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַהֲלֵ מוֹעֵד

and from among the Israelites I formally assign the Levites to Aaron and his sons, to perform

the service for the Israelites in the Tent of Meeting...(Numbers 8:18-19).

Initially, God consecrated each first-born to be of service to God. Now, however, we learn that God will instead take the Levites, the members of one particular tribe, to serve God in the Tabernacle instead of the first-borns. Rashi explains that the first-borns were consecrated to God during the Tenth Plague, when God protected them from the Angel of Death. However, those same first-borns who benefited from God's Divine protection participated in the sin of the Molten Calf, and in so doing they forfeited their status. The Levites are thus elevated to the position of God's consecrated attendants in the Tabernacle simply because they were not amongst those who sinned with the Molten Calf. In other words, that generation of Levites who departed from Egypt earned this special status by omission, by abstaining from participation in the Molten Calf. As a result, all subsequent generations of Levites inherited this privilege; it was not earned, and it was not offered as an option. The Levites of all later generations are privileged simply by nature of their birth, through no willful action of their own.

This privilege does not come without obligations. The Levites, as God's chosen attendants, did enjoy the privilege of serving God directly, of living in close proximity to the

Tabernacle as they journeyed through the wilderness. In later generation they became the performers in the Temple, singing and playing music to accompany the sacrificial service of the Kohanim. Even today, they are privileged to enjoy the second aliyah after a Kohen has been called for the first, and before any of us Israelites are invited to come forward for an honor. But with this privilege come burdens and obligations. The Levites of ancient Israel were holy “schleppers,” literally burdened with the task of carrying the Tabernacle’s accoutrements from place to place in the wilderness. When they arrived in the Land of Israel, they were not granted any landholding of their own, but rather lived in enclaves amongst each tribe. They were obligated to maintain certain levels of purity and to serve in the Temple. In the words of Peter Parker’s uncle Ben, “With great power, comes great responsibility.” For the Levites of ancient Israel, with privilege, comes obligation.

This notion of privilege and obligation going hand-in-hand is not for Levites alone. It is a reminder for us all that the privileges we enjoy come with a price, with an obligation to do for others. I have distinct memories from my childhood of new friends asking me, “Are you Italian?” I would shake my head, “No, I am not Italian.” “So you must be Jewish, right?” Certainly, Jews and Italians have things in common, such as our love for food and family. But that is not what they noticed. What they noticed was my dark hair and olive complexion. They noticed something about my appearance that allowed me to pass as a typical white American with European ancestry. Even as a Jew, I was able to, and still can, blend in with the privileged majority. This is a long way of saying that, even as a Jew, I do reap the benefits of white privilege. I know that American Jews are not *all* white, and therefore I do not speak on behalf of

every American Jew. But I do speak on behalf of a large majority of us who, even as an oft-persecuted minority, do regularly enjoy the benefits of white privilege.

In a recent [opinion piece published by JTA](#), Hannah Lebovits, a PhD candidate in Urban Studies and Public Affairs at Cleveland State University, makes an important claim:

The Jewish community...does not live in fear of how we conduct ourselves in our streets. We can dance with a new Sefer Torah from one end of the neighborhood to the next with a police escort in tow. Our holy sites are often protected — not threatened — by police presence. Public services are extended and enhanced for us when our holidays occur. No one calls the cops when our kumsitzes go late or we sing from our sukkahs. Outside of small, snide interpersonal comments, there aren't any major structural efforts limiting our ability to be publicly Jewish without significant pushback.

In her article, she astutely demonstrates the systemic racism in housing and zoning policies, and how this systemic racism has prevented many in the black community from enjoying the benefits experienced by most Jews of European descent. She calls upon us in the Jewish community to “recognize our spatial privilege and advocate for change. Demand systemic shifts, not policy Band-Aids.” As European Jews in America, we have white privilege, and with that privilege comes a responsibility, an obligation, to make a *tikkun*, a correction to the systemic racism and inequality that permeates so many aspects of our society. Like the Levites of ancient Israel, our privilege is accompanied by sacred obligations. We must do our part. First, we must acknowledge this embarrassing, even painful reality. And then we must do what we can to fulfill the words of the Aleinu prayer, *l'taken olam b'malchut Shaddai*, to repair the world in the realm of God.

I know that not all of you will agree with my assertions. I know that some of you might be uncomfortable with the idea that, generally speaking, Jews in this country benefit from white privilege. But I want you to reflect upon it, let it percolate in your mind. Open your heart

and mind to hearing the narratives of others, and think about how they compare to your personal experiences. Let me be clear: I am not suggesting that there is no antisemitism in this country—there is plenty, and we must fight against it regardless of from where it comes. I am not suggesting that Jews have not experienced pain, suffering, and systemic antisemitism—that is a part of our past that we should never forget. What I am saying is that we must not ignore the pain and suffering of others—לֹא תַעֲמֹד עַל־דַּם רֵעֶךָ, “Do not stand idly by the blood of your fellow” (Leviticus 19:16). We must hear their narratives. We must listen to their stories. We must acknowledge that, generally speaking, we do enjoy the benefits of white privilege in America today. And we must then accept the sacred obligation to do something about it. No, we do not need to apologize that we were born with white skin. But yes, we must acknowledge the privilege of our community, and we must do more to build bridges with Americans of color, especially our neighbors in the black community. We must support them in their pursuit of the justice and equality that they too deserve, for with our inherited privilege comes sacred responsibility.