

## Parshat Bamidbar, Rabbi David Mahler

Nearly a decade ago, on April 18 2011 a vicious assault took place at a McDonald's in Rosedale, Maryland where 22 year-old Chrissy Lee Polis was attacked by two teenagers who punched her in the face with their fists, pulling her hair, dragging her across the store and kicking her until she had a seizure. The assault received national attention because one of the McDonald's employees, Vernon Hackett, recorded the entire incident on his phone and posted it on his YouTube page where it was seen by millions of people. Mr. Hackett did nothing to help Ms. Polis.

What would Judaism say about this situation?

At the beginning of *Sefer Bamidbar*, *Hashem* commands Moshe to take a census of the Jewish nation. Each male over twenty from every tribe was to be counted. The *Torah* enumerates each tribe's leader and tally for every respected tribe.

Interestingly, there was one exception. *Shevet Levi* was singled out to remain uncounted in the national census. *Levi* was indeed counted, separately and differently. Its children were counted from a month old as opposed to twenty years old.

Why did the tribe of *Levi* merit such distinctive treatment? Isn't this discriminating between one tribe and another? Why don't we include their number with the rest of the community?

The *Midrash* and *Rashi* explain that *Hashem* specially designated them as the *Legion shel Melech*, the "King's special legion," the Royal Army of G-d. During the tragic event of *Chet HaEgel*, when so many of their fellow Jews served the idol, the tribe of *Levi* was stalwart in its opposition. Therefore, *Levi* was chosen to serve in the *Mishkan* and *Beit HaMikdash* in the place of the first-borns, who were originally designated to perform the service. The *Midrash* remarks that the *Levi'im* made themselves close to *Hashem*, and He made Himself close to them.

The *Chidushei HaRim*, the first Gerrer Rebbe, was perturbed by this explanation. Surely there were some other Jews who did not serve the Golden Calf. Not everyone served the idol. In fact, it was only around 3,000. Why, then, was only the entire tribe singled out to serve as the royal army? Why didn't *Hashem* select anyone who did not serve the *egel* regardless the tribe? Why base it on tribe, rather than on personal virtue?

The answer is simple, yet timeless. *Shevet Levi* did much more than passively not serve the *egel*. When Moshe, in the aftermath of the creation and worship of the Golden Calf, cried out, "Who is for G-d? Let them gather to me!" The *Torah* testifies that "all the children of *Levi* gathered to him. The only collective group who responded were the *Levi'im*."

Many Jews may have refrained from worshipping the *egel* but when Moshe proclaimed "Who is for G- d? Let them gather to me!" they remained silent. They were ready to do the right thing, but they were not ready to stand up and fight for the right thing. They were ready to be good – silently and privately, but they were not ready to take a stand and declare their vitriol against idolatry and adultery (alluded to by *Rashi*). Only those who stood up and protested against the

heinous crimes committed during the debacle of Golden Calf were capable of becoming spiritual leaders of the nation, the ambassadors of the *Ribono shel Olam*.

This was not a punishment for the other tribes. It was a demonstration of reality. To be a leader you cannot only choose to do the right thing in the privacy of your own domain; you must be ready to stand up and cry out against injustice. You need to be ready and willing to fight publicly for truth. If not, you are not capable of leadership.

In Western society, there is a concept of an “innocent bystander.” In Jewish law, if you just stand by, you are not innocent at all. In *halacha* and *hashkafa*, you’re guilty for doing nothing! Remaining passive or neutral is simply not an option.

It was only *Shevet Levi* that received the privilege of representing *kedusha* in the *Mishkan* and *Beit HaMikdash*. While silence may sometimes remove the cloak of culpability from your shoulders, it will never crown you with the strength of leadership.

Shabbat Shalom!