

Bamidbar - Rabbi Lerner - May 20, 2012

The Levite Family of Kohas

4:18-20: *Do not allow the Shevet of the families of Kohas to be cut off from amongst the Leviyim. This is what you need to do for them so that they will live and not die; when they draw close to the Kodesh Hakadashim, Aharon and his sons have to first come and assign each man his work and his burden (Al Avodaso Ve'El Masa'oh). But they should not come and look as the holy is inserted (Kebalah) lest they die.* Kohas had the job of carrying the holy vessels. They are being warned here that they need to take special precautions.

Rashi: You should not be the cause of their deaths. You have to be careful with covering each of the holy vessels; each one of them has its own special covering and is wrapped in a particular way; each precious vessel has a cover which we see from the previous section, beginning with 4:5 - *When the camp is to journey, Aharon and his sons will remove the Paroches (inner curtain) and use it to cover the Aron Kodesh* (this was the curtain that prevented the people from seeing the Aron when the Mishkan was erected, and it was used to cover the Aron). In 4:6-14 we see that all of the other vessels had a sealskin covering as the most outer layer of covering, except the Aron which had a garment of Techailles covering the outside. Each vessel had symbolism (the shulchan for malchus, the Mizbeach was avodah; the Aron was Hashem Himself). The Aron was different than all of the others because the Techailles represented the notion of Hakodosh Baruch Hu (the color reminds us of the heavens above where Hashem resides). All of the other vessels, except the Aron, followed a natural law; the Aron, however, floated; it was above nature - you really felt you could feel God's presence - the Techailles on the outside alludes to this. Only after Aharon covered the vessels do the Kohasim come in to carry things. Aharon must pack up things first, lest the Kohasim see the vessels.

Meshech Chachmah: 4:18 - why does it say save the *Shevet* of Kohas? It is not a Shevet, a tribe - it is just a family? The Torah uses the word Shevet because the family of Kohas was the equivalent of a Shevet - there is a famous tradition that the shevatim cannot be destroyed; at the end of times, the 10 tribes will return; all of klal yisrael is based on the principle of 12 shevatim - it is a critical number (which is why Yaacov cried when he thought Yosef was lost - it rocked the entire foundation of Klal Yisrael). The Kohasim had a high risk job, and therefore, Hashem calls them a Shevet to say that in His eyes they are like a Shevet - they are indestructible and will survive the grave dangers involved and will last for all time.

Kohas was carrying the Aron using poles, *badim*. Why does it say they are placed on their job (Al Avodaso) and to their burden - El Masa'oh? And why does it say you shall place them - *vesamu*? **Sforno:** don't allow this journey and carrying be done on a first come first served basis; if that's what happens, they will be rushing and jostling each other, and that will be a Chilul Hashem; it will make Hashem angry and He will cut them off. This happened with the Terumas Hadeshen in the Bais Hamikdash, where they were so eager to be the first to get there and do the Avodah, that they would run up the ramp, they would push each other off, and once one kohen stabbed another. What is being told to Moshe and Aharon is not just that the leviyim shouldn't see the vessels, but they should assign the work to make sure there is proper *derech erez*.

Oznayim LaTorah: there is another whole aspect to the Aron Kodesh and the Badim - the poles were on the shoulders of the Leviyim - they were the source of sparks of fire that came out to destroy any enemies in front of them, like flame throwers. There was a problem with this - it presented a problem for those carrying them, with the people in front in mortal danger, some of them getting killed. The race amongst the leviyim was to carry the Aron from the back, facing

forward, and not the front, which was the most dangerous job. That is why it says *Ve'el Ma'asa'oh* - they carry it awkwardly so as not to get harmed - they must always face the Aron Kodesh, so the ones in front walk backwards while the poles can be shooting out fire. It was very dangerous, and the job with instructions had to be assigned carefully in detail.

The Leviyim could not come in while the Kohanim were covering the Aron. **Rashi**: the Aron was completely covered so that it was not visible - it was prohibited for the Leviyim to see the Aron Kodesh - they and Bnei Yisrael did not get to see it. It was completely covered up, and if they do see it they could die - seeing the Aron Kodesh was harmful. **Rashbam**: when they take down the Paroches, the Aron is revealed - if the Leviyim see it, they would instantly die. We see this in Shmuel when the Aron was brought to Bet Shemesh by the Pelishtim. When the wheat was being cut and the Jews saw the Pelishtim coming with the Aron, they saw the Aron and rejoiced in being able to have the Aron once again. And then Hashem smote the people of Bet Shemesh because they looked at the Aron - 50,070 people were killed - there were 70 elders and 50,000 commoners - they all died on this day because they gazed at the Aron Kodesh. From here is proof that the Leviyim could not come in until the Kohanim covered the Aron.

This danger may just be pertinent to the Leviyim - the Kohanim may not have been allowed to see the Aron as well. **Netziv**: the Leviyim have to be told that it was their job; they also had to know that all of the vessels were covered up, so they have to be told which vessel was which; they could not lift the covers to peek - even one second of a look at the Aron is lethal. The word *Balah* means swallowing whole - an instantaneous punishment for a single look. **Oznayim LaTorah**: the concern is not just for the Leviyim - Aharon's sons never get to see the Aron, and Aharon only on Yom Kippur - they had special permission here because there is a general halachah that if something in the Bais Hamikdash needed repair, workmen could enter and make the repairs, even in the Kodesh Hakadashim. So, Aharon and his children were like workmen here - it was part of their work, their craft. When the Mishkan is set up and functioning in its usual way, then no one can enter; but when moving things, they were like workmen who could enter.

Abarbanel has a different peshat: when the Torah warns that one who enters will die, it means that Aharon and his own children should not see it when they go in. If they cover it in a regular way, they will die. **Nachshoni**: this was an old debate, as to whether this prohibition applied to Aharon and his kids, as well as the Leviyim. The Midrash says that when they took down the paroches they used poles to lift the paroches slowly, and walk with this as a curtain in front of them and slowly place it above the Aron to cover it - otherwise they too would die. No one was allowed to see the Aron, because it is like viewing Hashem. Aharon normally only sees it through a cloud. But there is another Midrash that contradicts this, and says that Aharon and his children could go in as workmen.

Rav Shimshon Refael Hirsch: we know that humans cannot see God and live. It would create a false impression that we could look at the ultimate depths of spirituality in this physical way, and give us a simplistic view of Hashem; we do not want to have a physical impression of God; we cannot have a tangible way of looking at holiness; we cannot relate to holiness in a physical manner, by knowing its dimensions and touching it. We must always look at holiness in a way that was beyond our five senses.

The language using the word Shevet for Kohanim uses the word *Hakohasi*, adding the letters Yud and Hey around their name - they are adding Hashem's name. If they do not reduce Hashem to some physical entity, then Hashem wraps Himself around us to protect them.