

Parshas Bamidbar commences with a general census of B'nei Yisroel, as commanded by Hashem. Hashem also commanded that the Levi'im not be included in the general census; the Levi'im had a separate census, as featured later in the parshah. Rashi (1:49), quoting Medrash Tanchuma, explains that the Levi'im were the *Ligyon shel Melech* ("Legion of the King" – Hashem's close servants) and hence were to be counted separately.

Since the Levi'im enjoyed the elevated status of *Ligyon shel Melech*, why were they not counted first? Similar to Parshas Shoftim, where the Torah presents the mitzvos pertaining to various public figures, the Sanhedrin is featured first, due to the prominence in Torah represented by the Sanhedrin, one would expect the Levi'im to be counted first among the Shevatim (Tribes) in Parshas Bamidbar. Why is this not the case?

The sequencing of the general census and that of the Levi'im conveys a very important message. Although the Levi'im merited a special, close role in the service of Hashem, this merit did not exist in a vacuum. If not for the spiritual growth afforded the Levi'im by being part of the larger congregation of B'nei Yisroel, the Levi'im would not have attained their special status. Had they not been part of the overall community, which experienced the Geulah (Redemption) with all its miracles, which witnessed Keriya Yam Suf (The Splitting of the Sea), and which stood at Sinai to hear the voice of Hashem and stand in His presence, the Levi'im could not have fully developed into whom they were. And even in Mitzrayim, where the Levi'im already exhibited an extraordinary uniqueness (more on this later), they would not have had the opportunity to spiritually excel and distinguish themselves had they not been part of the larger congregation of B'nei Yisroel, whose sojourn in Mitzrayim was prepared and fortified by the teachings and influence of the Avos and Imahos (Patriarchs and Matriarchs), as well as by the actions and examples of Yosef, Yehuda and the other brothers.

The Levi'im's special status was achievable only because they were part of the greater Jewish nation, to whom an all-encompassing environment and experience of spiritual nourishment and cultivation were provided. Although the Levi'im excelled independently, it would not have been possible had the Levi'im not been part of the larger Jewish People. As such, the general census of B'nei Yisroel came first, for without the K'lal (the general community), there could be no *Ligyon shel Melech*.

Hence did the Levi'im travel and reside in the center of the Seder Ha-Machanos (Order of Encampment in the Desert), directly surrounding the Mishkan. One would perhaps expect that the *Ligyon shel Melech*, positioned around the Mishkan, would form an independent, elite unit that would travel and encamp ahead of the other Shevatim. On the contrary - the position of the Levi'im in the very center of B'nei Yisroel evidences that the *Ligyon shel Melech* derives its spiritual connection from the general community and is an inseparable component thereof.

The command for the census of the Levi'im is preceded by an enumeration of the progeny of Aharon. The Torah begins this enumeration with the words, "And these are

the generations of Aharon and Moshe" (3:1), yet Moshe's descendants are not included in the enumeration. Rashi explains this omission, based on the Gemara (Sanhedrin 19b), that since Moshe taught Torah to Aharon's progeny, it is considered as if this progeny were the children of Moshe, for one who teaches Torah to the son of his fellow is considered as if he gave birth to him.

One might think that the explanation provided by Rashi creates a larger question: Why is the fact that Moshe taught Torah to the progeny of Aharon relevant here? The truth is that the relevance is quite significant.

The Levi'im were counted independently because they were the *Ligyon shel Melech*; however, the factor which made the Levi'im the *Ligyon shel Melech* needed to be presented. By introducing the special census of the Levi'im through depicting their background as *talmidim* (Torah students) of Moshe Rabbeinu, the Torah establishes that it is the Levi'im's commitment to Torah that was at the core of their elevated status and the need for their independent census. This firm dedication and identification with Torah is what made the Levi'im the *Ligyon shel Melech*. Yes, the Levi'im displaced the *Bechorim* (Firstborns) in terms of performing *Avodah* (Divine Service) due to the Levi'im refusing to participate in the *Chet Ha-Egel* (Sin of the Calf – v. Rashi on *Bamidbar* 3:12 ), but this meritorious and brave conduct of the Levi'im was merely a manifestation of their already-established identity as the guardians and promulgators of Torah.

How did the Levi'im establish this identity?

The *Chizkuni* (on *Shemos* 6:14) cites an aggadic source that Yaakov Avinu presented the entirety of the Torah to Levi, and that Levi and his progeny established *yeshivos* in Egypt and dedicated themselves fully to Torah study, resulting in *Shevet Levi's* exemption from Egyptian slavery. The *Ramban*, on *Shemos* *ibid.*, explains that the Torah enumerates there not only the sons of Levi, but also the grandchildren of Levi (in contrast with Reuven and Shimon, whose sons' names only are recorded), along with their longevities, due to the fact that each of these descendants of Levi was of exceptional righteousness. (V. also *Bamidbar Rabba* 3:7.) The *Seforno* (on *Shemos* *ibid.*) explains that Levi, due to his great longevity, personally taught and guided his grandchildren in Torah, such that they and their families developed into an entire group of extraordinary spiritual leadership.

The message here is that although every individual has the potential to achieve spiritual greatness, such greatness, in particular when manifest by a group, is typically a reflection of a sustained, proactive and rigorous process of cultivation. The Torah eminence of Moshe, Aharon, and the entirety of *Shevet Levi*, did not arise on its own. It was, rather, the result of a long-term, intensive and concerted effort by their progenitors, and it was necessary to actively continue this same process in order for the spiritual uniqueness of *Shevet Levi* to be retained.

Torah greatness rarely emerges in a vacuum. Membership in a solidly committed

community, and proactive, hands-on and extremely focused cultivation, are indispensable.

May we continue to fortify and be active participants in Torah communities, may we appreciate the great importance of being part of such communities, and may we vigorously nurture our progeny and brethren toward an intensive dedication to Torah.