

After detailing the tasks of the B'nei Kehas (Children of Kehas) in transporting the Mishkan, the Torah concludes this week's parsha with a warning that the B'nei Kehas not gaze upon the most holy Keilim (Mishkan Vessels) which they carry when these Keilim are packed by the Kohanim before travel. (V. Rashi on Bamidbar 4:5 and 4:20.) The Keilim borne by the B'nei Kehas included the Aron, Menorah, Shulchan, Mizbechos (Altars) and their implements; only after being covered for travel could the B'nei Kehas approach these Keilim.

Why should the B'nei Kehas not gaze upon the Keilim as they are being packed? After all, the Mizbach Ha-Nechoshes (Copper Altar) was in public view in the Chazter (Courtyard) of the Mishkan at all times; why should B'nei Kehas not see something being packed which they can see exposed at any time?

It may be suggested that the issue here is not the viewing of the Keilim per se; rather, the sight of the Keilim being packed up, similar to luggage, is what the Torah enjoins. The Mishkan and its Vessels represent the manifestation of the Shechinah. It is for this reason that the Mishkan engenders extreme awe and reverence, and there are numerous halachos as to how one must comport himself in and near the Mikdash. For one to observe the awe-inspiring, most holy Keilim being packed up like luggage can do harm to his perception of the Mishkan. This is why the Torah commands that the B'nei Kehas stay away until the Keilim are fully covered.

We find a similar concept regarding the honor due to talmidei chachamim (Torah scholars) and the Melech (King). The halacha is that one may not enter a bathhouse with his rebbe, nor may he witness the King getting his hair cut. (V. Hil. Talmud Torah 2:3 and Hil. Melachim 5:6.) Again, although one's rebbe bathes and the King gets his hair cut as do all people, one's sense of reverence diminishes upon perceiving the rebbe and Melech in such a state.

With a deep understanding of people's inner reactions and attitudes, the Torah thus warns that B'nei Kehas need to remain out of sight as the most holy Keilim are packed and covered up, so that the crucial sense of reverence and encounter with the Shechinah which falls upon a person in the presence of these Keilim not be jeopardized.