



THE PERSON

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB

OU Executive Vice President, Emeritus

IN THE PARSHA

You Too Can Be a Levite

The world is indeed a stage, and we all play many roles in our lives. Some of these roles are assigned to us, leaving us with little choice but to fill them. Other roles, however, are freely chosen.

For example, we are all born as children to parents. As such, we have ethical and religious responsibilities towards them. We are in the roles of children, often for much of our lives, whether we like that role or not.

On the other hand, there are other roles which we seek out intentionally, and often with great effort. For example, our professional roles as doctors or lawyers or teachers are roles which we chose freely and which we work towards diligently.

Sociologists thus distinguish between ascribed roles and achieved roles. The

former are those assigned to us by society or circumstance. The latter are the ones we choose, and for which we hope to qualify.

In this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Bamidbar*, we read of the roles ascribed to the Levite. Persons born to the tribe of Levi were assigned certain privileges and certain responsibilities at birth. There were no special qualifications to be met and no titles or certificates to be earned.

One who was not born into the tribe of Levi could not attain any of those privileges no matter how hard he tried. Nor could he assume the responsibilities of the Levite even if he sought to do so with commitment and fervor.

The Torah outlines the special duties of the Levites at length and in great detail in this week's *parsha*, *Numbers* chapters 3 and 4. Later on in the *Book of Numbers*, particularly in chapter 18, we read of the benefits due to them.

The twelve other tribes of Israel are not



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neglected in this week's Torah portion. Quite the contrary; they are listed, and their stations in the wilderness encampment and march are delineated very specifically.

But the roles of the tens of thousands of members of these tribes are not specified at all. It is almost as if the Torah was telling us that, unlike the Levites, they had no ascribed roles, but were to pursue and achieve roles according to their individual motivations, ambitions, and personal predilections.

Thus, the community of Israelites in the wilderness was one in which one tribe had predetermined tasks which it did not choose and could not shirk, whereas the great majority of people had great freedom of choice as to which roles in life to choose.

This situation continued for many centuries, at least until the destruction of the second Temple. Even today, specialized roles for the descendants of Levi persist, albeit in a reduced and limited way.

Maimonides (the Rambam), however, offers an entirely different vision of the matter. He offers us an innovative idea which opens up the ascribed and predetermined roles of the Levite to everyone.

In his masterwork *Mishneh Torah* (*Hilchot Shemita v'Yovel* chapter 13), Maimonides describes the lot of the Levite in rich and graphic detail. He stresses that although the Levites had no equal portion in the land of Israel, they did have their own towns and villages there. He even

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offers his personal opinion that should the Jewish people come to possess land outside the perimeters of biblical Israel, the Levites will share equally in those lands.

He explains to us that the Levite is ascribed a limited social and economic role in order that he be freed to assume a greater spiritual role. It is incumbent upon him to serve God in the Temple service and to teach God's laws to the greater community.

Maimonides then makes an original, dramatic, and often quoted statement which challenges the entire distinction of ascribed versus achieved roles. He writes, "It is not only the tribe of Levi, but rather every individual in the entire world, who, if the spirit moves him to have achieved understanding, and who wishes to separate himself from others and to stand before God and worship Him, to shed from his neck the yoke of everyday concerns, and to become imbued with extreme

sanctity so that God becomes his lot and inheritance forever and ever."

Maimonides, as it were, opens up the closed society of the Levites. He offers a vision, and notes that it is a vision for all humanity, of the possibility to transcend the limits defined in this week's Torah portion. He suggests that each of us can potentially become a Levite, even if we are born to parents of other tribes.

What is, strictly speaking, an ascribed role becomes for Maimonides a role which can be achieved by anyone. This is a drastic, almost revolutionary, statement.

But it is one which challenges every one of us and offers each of us an opportunity. It is not only the biblical Levite who can attain closeness to God and spiritual sublimity. We all can.

But to do so, we need the motivation to assume greater responsibility, to suffer solitude, to be absolutely just and righteous, to teach others who might not wish to be taught. Then we all can achieve the benefits which were the due of the ancient tribe of Levi.

We can then each say, as Maimonides concludes, quoting King David in Psalms, "God, You are my portion and cup.

You uphold my destiny!" ■

Aliya LaKever on the 6th Yahrzeit of
Rabbi Yaakov Yechiel
Mechel (Mel) Heftler ז"ל

will take place b'ezrat Hashem on
Tuesday, Rosh Chodesh Sivan (May 31)
at 9:30am in Eretz Hachayim Cemetery,
Beit Shemesh Gush 1, Chelka 7

Transportation from Beit Tovei Ha'ir
(Malchei Yisrael 36) at 8:25am promptly

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