

# CHEVRAH TORAH 5778...Seeking ✨ Spirituality

## Shabbat KORACH

NUMBERS 18:1-7

### KEY KOSHI:

#### HOW is understanding

*“I give you your Priesthood AVODAT MATANAH—The Service of Gift”*

The key to sacred Spiritual Leadership?

HOW does this frame our vision in affirming/ approaching the Sacred?

P'SHAT—AWARENESS... The beginning of knowing about God is simply paying attention, being fully present where you are

18:1] The Lord said to Aaron: You and your sons and the ancestral house under your charge shall bear any guilt connected with the sanctuary; you and your sons alone shall bear any guilt connected with your priesthood. 2] You shall also associate with yourself your kinsmen the tribe of Levi, your ancestral tribe, to be attached to you and to minister to you, while you and your sons under your charge are before the Tent of the Pact. 3] They shall discharge their duties to you and to the Tent as a whole, but they must not have any contact with the furnishings of the Shrine or with the altar, lest both they and you die. 4] They shall be attached to you and discharge the duties of the Tent of Meeting, all the service of the Tent; but no outsider shall intrude upon you 5] as you discharge the duties connected with the Shrine and the altar, that wrath may not again strike the Israelites.

6] I hereby take your fellow Levites from among the Israelites; they are assigned to you in dedication to the Lord, to do the work of the Tent of Meeting; 7] while you and your sons shall be careful to perform your priestly duties in everything pertaining to the altar and to what is behind the curtain. I make your priesthood a service of dedication; any outside who encroaches shall be put to death.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־אַהֲרֹן אַתָּה וּבָנֶיךָ<sup>1</sup>  
וּבֵית־אָבִיךָ אֲתָדָּתְשִׂאוּ אֶת־עֹוֹן  
הַמִּקְדָּשׁ וְאֶתָּה וּבָנֶיךָ אֲתָדָּתְשִׂאוּ  
אֶת־עֹוֹן כְּהֵנִתְכֶם :<sup>2</sup> וְגַם אֶת־אֲחִיךָ  
מִטֵּה לְוִי יִשָּׁבֵט אָבִיךָ הַקָּרֵב אֲתָדָּתְ  
וְיָלוּ עֲלֶיךָ וְיִשְׁרְתוּךָ וְאֶתָּה וּבָנֶיךָ  
אֲתָדָּתְ לִפְנֵי אֹהֶל הָעֵדֻת :<sup>3</sup> וְשִׁמְרוּ  
מִשְׁמֵרְתְּךָ וּמִשְׁמֵרֵת כָּל־הָאֹהֶל אֲדָּתְ  
אֶל־כִּלֵּי הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְאֶל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ לֹא  
יִקְרְבוּ וְלֹא־יִמְתּוּ גַם־הֵם גַּם־אַתֶּם :  
וְיָלוּ עֲלֶיךָ וְשִׁמְרוּ אֶת־מִשְׁמֵרֵת  
אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד לְכָל עֲבֹדַת הָאֹהֶל וְזָר  
לֹא־יִקְרַב אֲלֵיכֶם :<sup>5</sup> וְשִׁמְרֵתֶם אֶת  
מִשְׁמֵרֵת הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְאֶת מִשְׁמֵרֵת  
הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה עוֹד קָצֹף עַל־בְּנֵי  
יִשְׂרָאֵל :<sup>6</sup> וְאֲנִי הִנֵּה לְקַחְתִּי אֶת־  
אֲחֵיכֶם הַלְוִיִּם מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
לְכֶם מִתְּנָה נִתְּנִים לַיהוָה לְעֹבֵד אֶת־  
עֲבֹדַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד :<sup>7</sup> וְאֶתָּה וּבָנֶיךָ  
אֲתָדָּתְ תִּשְׁמְרוּ אֶת־כְּהֵנִתְכֶם לְכָל־דָּבָר  
הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וּלְמִבֵּית לְפָרֶכֶת וְעֲבֹדַתֶם  
עֲבֹדַת מִתְּנָה אֲתָן אֶת־כְּהֵנִתְכֶם  
וְהָזָר הַקָּרֵב יוּמָת :

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו וְצִוֵּנוּ לְעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.

Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'ztivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.

Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

## REMEZ—UN-SELF-AWARENESS...

- v.1 The Lord said to Aaron: You & your sons and the ancestral house under your charge shall bear any guilt connected with the Mik'dash; you & your sons alone shall bear any guilt connected with your Priestly Service. **RASHI**...That is, he had told Moses to say this to Aaron, warning him about preventing the Israelites from entering the Sanctuary. We do not find that the Lord spoke to Aaron alone except in Lev 10:8...  
**IBN EZRA**...Via Moses..or..Perhaps this is to be taken literally, for Aaron was a Prophet too! As leader of the tribe of Levi, Aaron is responsible for making sure that the Levites do not stumble...“Avon K'Hunat'chem”—If you are not careful in making sure the Priestly tasks are carried out, the guilt is on you.  
**RASHBAM**..Here, and in verses 4 & 7, I prohibit any outsider from encroaching on the Tabernacle..From this time forth, they need not worry that “everyone who so much as ventures near the Lord's Tabernacle must die,” [17:28] for I have forbidden them to encroach and warned them through My commandments.  
**R.ALTER**...This whole series of instructions highlights the intrinsic danger of the sacred zone, where any misstep can trigger divine “fury” [v.5]. Hence, the need to protect the Mik'Dash from the intrusion of any unfit person [Zar] The logic of placing these laws immediately after the story of Korach's rebellion is manifest.
- v. 6 I hereby take your fellow Levites from among the Children of Israel, for they are given as a gift unto the Lord, to do the Service of the Tent of Meeting...  
**HERTZ**... “Bring the tribe of Levi near..And you shall give the Levites unto Aaron and his sons, for they are wholly given...” [Num 3:9] Literally, they are “given, given.” The repetition is emphatic and expresses the Levites complete surrender.  
**RASHI**... “you shall see it and recall” One might think the Priests could use them for any purpose, but the phrase continues, “N'Toonim L'Adonai”—they are to be used for the Lord's tasks alone.
- v. 7 You and your sons shall keep your Priesthood to all pertaining to the Altar and that which is behind the Curtain. I give you the Priesthood as a Service of Dedication; any outside who encroaches shall be put to death...  
**RASHI**...Rather, “a Service of Gift.” It is a gift I have given you.  
**RAMBAN**... “Avodat Matanah” This means, the Priesthood shall be to you as a gift. This is RASHI's understanding, that it is given as a complete gift. To such an extent, any non-priest who approaches shall be liable..by the hand of Heaven. The correct interpretation appears to me that he is saying: You shall perform the service of the Priesthood, but it is not to be regarded as a burdensome task, like that imposed on servants by the king. Rather, have I given you this Service “for glory and splendor...” [Ex 28:2]  
**HAKTAV v'HAKABBALAH**..This means that the Temple Service performed by the Priests, something assigned exclusively to them, contains elements which are in the nature of giving..It is the gift of serving through giving.  
**R'J. MILGROM**..[Footnotes] The rendering here follows SPEISER, but fails on three counts..Additional but equally unsatisfactory solutions have been proposed. Some commentaries have proposed: “You shall perform the labor” but then “matanah” is left hanging...The origin of this clause “AVODAT MATANAH ETEYN...” could be explained as a gloss to anticipate the priests gifts, rather than “dedication.” This would mean that the Priests are rewarded with gifts [vv.9-20] for incurring mortal dangers in their Avodah of guarding the inner sancta, just as the Levites are rewarded with tithes [vv.21-24] for their hazardous Avodah in transporting the Tabernacle. The crux remains unresolved.

## D'RASH—READING BETWEEN THE WORDS...

## **RABBI SHAI HELD**, [President & Dean of Mechon Hadar]...

After a fire breaks out and consumes 250 rebellious chieftains (Num. 16:35), the people are terrified: They will not come near the Mishkan (tabernacle), lest they die as punishment for encroaching upon the sacred (17:27-28). God seeks to allay their fears: From now on, God tells Aaron, the priests (kohanim) and the Levites will bear primary responsibility for encroachment on Israel's part. God then describes the work of the priests in five opaque words that have vexed interpreters for generations: *Avodat matanah eten et kehunatkhem*, "I will make your priesthood a service of dedication"; NSRV, in contrast, offers "I give your priesthood as a gift" (18:7)...

..The very elusiveness of the words opens up fascinating interpretive possibilities and enables us to ask: Just how is priestly service (avodah) connected to gifts and giving (matanah)? And what might we learn from all this about service and leadership..?

RASHI (1040-1105) explains that the priestly service "is a gift I have given to you." Rashi's simple words are subtly subversive of the ways we often think of responsibility and obligation. Many of us find ourselves at times longing to be unencumbered by duties and obligations. Perhaps we feel that we have too many obligations. In those moments we tend to think of responsibility as an unbearable burden—and sometimes it is, in fact, just that. But the opposite extreme would be no better and would likely be far worse: A life without responsibility would be a life devoid of meaning or purpose. Rashi's comments reminds us that obligation is a privilege. From a theological perspective, to be summoned to serve is an immense gift.

..To serve God is thus considered a privilege and a delight.

Interpreting Rashi somewhat differently, R. Hezekiah b. Manoah, HIZKUNI (13<sup>th</sup> cent) places the emphasis less on the word gift (matanah)...On the heels of a devastating revolt in which rebellious leaders insisted that Moses and Aaron were "going too far" in "raising themselves above" the rest of the people (Num. 16:3), God reminds the priests—and by extension the Israelites as a whole—that their elevated status is divinely bestowed.

But perhaps it is not only the people who need such a reminder. Those chosen to serve can all too often come to believe that the status they have achieved—or, as in this case, been granted—is a function of their incomparable virtue. Accordingly, God reminds the priests that they have done nothing to earn their prominence. "It is possible," R. Aryeh Leib Tzintz (1768-1833) writes, "that [the purpose of God's words] is that the priests, who are God's servants, not grow haughty." Their status is a gift, a consequence of divine grace alone.

..The Torah is only too keenly aware that belief in divine election can easily give way to triumphalism and self-congratulation—and even worse, to the conviction that God has given Israel a moral blank check. Do not delude yourselves, says Deuteronomy; God chose you through no merit of your own. Similarly, the priests must bear in mind at all times that their elevation flows from divine grace rather than human achievement.

**SOD—The SELF of the UNIVERSE...** God's "I am" has the psycho-theological force not of dissolving individual selves but of reminding us that we were never individual selves in the first place...Our selfhood endures by virtue of its participation in some greater Self,

**HELD.** In labeling the priesthood a gift, then, God teaches a crucial double lesson: The people are reminded that the priests were chosen by God, while the priests themselves are challenged to remember that God's choice bespeaks no special merit on their part.

..But the words *avodat matanah* may suggest something else entirely—not that service is a gift but that service must itself be oriented toward giving..R. Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) writes that the priestly service is “characterized as a gift, of giving oneself, of devotion. All the acts performed in the Sanctuary reach their height in the concept of *matanah*, of giving oneself up, of devotion..The Sanctuary has the purpose of teaching us to give of ourselves and to give all the gifts that we receive from God up to God..”  
..Why do the priests need this reminder?

R. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-72) sharply distinguishes between two ways of being—“the way of expediency”, on the one hand, and “the way of wonder.” In the former, our eye is always on how we can get what we want; in the latter, our focus is on how we can serve. As R. Heschel puts it, when we are driven by expediency, “we accumulate information in order to dominate”; when we are animated by wonder, in contrast, “we deepen our appreciation in order to respond.” We are, all of us, pulled by two opposing forces, “the impulse to acquire, to enjoy, to possess and the urge to respond, to yield, to give.”

In a similar (but simpler) vein, R. Eliyahu Dessler (1892-1953) argues that every human being faces a fundamental choice, whether to be a giver (*notein*) or a taker (*noteil*). To be created in the image of God is to have the capacity to imitate God's own generosity; in giving we become like God, the Ultimate Giver..On Dessler's account, all of our character traits and actions derive from this fundamental choice of orientation—the decision to be givers or takers.

Why do the priests in particular need to be reminded about being givers rather than takers?  
..Consider the realm of politics: Our culture is saturated with stories of people who start out genuinely wanting to serve but quickly grow intoxicated by the power, privilege and prestige of office. What begins as a yearning to give ends as a sense of entitlement to take. Religious leaders are, sadly, not exempt from such temptations.

To take this one step further: The people are obligated to give gifts to the priests on a regular basis. In labeling their work *avodat matanah* God reminds the priests not to be seduced by the gifts that they receive on account of their status.

Dessler emphasizes that we should not confuse taking with receiving...Accordingly, what God goes on to tell the priests is, in essence: Do not be like Korach; do not be seduced by the trappings of religious authority; do not be ensnared by the many opportunities you will have to take. A true leader is a giver. A leader who is at bottom a taker is a fraudulent leader.

Service oriented to giving is in many ways itself a profound gift, a revolutionary alternative to the preoccupation with taking, acquiring, and consuming that is so powerful and pervasive in our world. As “a kingdom of priests a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6), we are all summoned to be Kohanim—given the gift of being asked to become givers.