

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Terumah

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of

Leib *ben* Meir *a"h*

a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

Who are the Leviim?

The Rambam famously states that (in some sense, at least) membership in that select class of elevated Jews known as “Leviim” is not necessarily restricted to those of Levite lineage. After providing a laudatory description of the Leviim’s status – how they are excluded from receiving an inheritance in Eretz Yisroel so that they will be completely immersed in Hashem’s service and in the preservation and teaching of His Laws to the nation – the Rambam clarifies to whom else this designation is applied:

“And it is not the Tribe of Levi alone, but any person... who is moved by his expansive spirit... to entirely dedicate himself to Hashem’s Service... and study of His Word... and casts off from himself the yoke of the pursuit of the masses... such an individual becomes sanctified... Hashem will be his portion and inheritance for eternity and will ensure that even in this world he will be granted sufficient sustenance, just as He apportioned gifts (such as tithes) to the Kohanim and Leviim” (*Hilchos Shemitah V’yoveil* 13:13).

Bearers of the *Aron Kodesh* (Holy Ark)

The Chofetz Chaim picks up this thread. This week’s *parshah* spells out the details of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) and the arrangement of its various components and areas. The outer perimeter area, known as the *Chatzer* (courtyard), surrounded the *Mishkan*. The *Mishkan* itself, of more sacred quality, was comprised mainly of the *Heichal* (sanctuary), which led to the most restricted area – the *Kodesh Hakodashim* (“Holy of Holies”). This most sacred chamber housed the *Aron Hakodesh*, within which resided the very Word of Hashem, inscribed on the *Luchos* (stone tablets handed to Moshe on Har Sinai). It was the Leviim’s charge to protect the sanctity of these areas from unauthorized entry (especially the Holy Ark in the innermost chamber), and, of course, from any ritual defilement. Thus, the Leviim were conferred with the prestigious title of שומרי מִשְׁמֶרֶת הַקֹּדֶשׁ – “Keepers of the Sacred Charge” (*Bamidbar* 3:28).

So, too, there are individuals who serve as modern-day שומרי מִשְׁמֶרֶת הַקֹּדֶשׁ. These are the *talmidei chachamim*, whose dedication to the Torah – its teachings and principles – places them in the position of preserving its sanctity and dignity. They stand in the vanguard against those who seek to defile, dilute or distort its sacred words. In fact, in some respects, they are even greater than the original Leviim. The Leviim had the coveted task of Bearers of the *Aron Hakodesh*; but this was at a time when Hashem’s Sanctuary was in full function, and His Glory was openly revealed and acknowledged. Today, with the absence of a *Mikdash* and the concealment of Hashem’s Presence in the world, the *talmidei chachamim*’s job is that much harder. They seek to defend the Torah’s honor within a climate of cynicism, often encountering much hostility in the process. Thus, the Chofetz Chaim asserts, they should not view themselves as objects worthy of scorn, *chas v’shalom*; rather, they are today’s Bearers of the *Aron Hakodesh*, occupying a place of esteem rivaling that of the Leviim of the Temple (*Shem Olam, Sha’ar Hischazkus, ch. 2, 2nd footnote*).

Delicate Balance

Indeed, those who dedicate themselves to a life of Torah study must perform a delicate balancing act. As we have just seen, they truly stand at the forefront of the nation and should consider themselves as such. On the other hand, the amassment of great stores of Torah knowledge should not be a stumbling block to conceit. While appreciating the magnitude of his value and position, the proper Torah scholar is careful that his accomplishments do not “go to his head.” As the Mishnah states so succinctly (*Pirkei Avos* 2:9):

אם למדת תורה הרבה, אל תתזיק טובה לעצמך, כי לכה נוצרת.

“If you have learned much Torah, do not attribute undue greatness to yourself, because (you are merely fulfilling the mission) for which you were created.”

This concept is manifest as well in one of the most remarkable features of the *Aron Hakodesh*. The *Aron* was $2\frac{1}{2}$ cubits long. It was placed in the middle of the Holy of Holies, which had a width of 20 cubits. Thus, if one were to measure from either side of the *Aron* to the side walls of the Holy of Holies, he should obtain a reading of $8\frac{3}{4}$ cubits ($20 - 2\frac{1}{2} = 17\frac{1}{2} \div 2 = 8\frac{3}{4}$). But, the *Gemara* tells us, if one would actually perform this measuring exercise, he would find that there were exactly 10 cubits on each side! In other words, while it was $2\frac{1}{2}$ cubits long, the *Aron Hakodesh* actually took up *no physical space* (*Yoma* 21a and *Rashi* there). (We hope to elaborate more on this concept in the coming weeks, *Be'ezras Hashem*).

What was said so far concerned the *Aron Hakodesh*; what about the *Luchos* themselves, which rested inside? One may have assumed that this quality surely applied to them as well. If the *Aron Hakodesh*, the vessel that housed the *Luchos*, was itself so “spiritual” that it would not register on the physical scale, then certainly the tablets themselves, which were even more sacred, would be beyond the range of physical tracking.

Yet, this was not the case. This is apparent from the *Gemara* in *Bava Basra* (14a), which makes precise calculations concerning how the *Luchos* fit and rested within the confines of the *Aron*.

To what can we attribute this phenomenon, by which the *Aron* was not constricted by space, but the *Luchos* themselves were subject to physical properties? R' Moshe Feinstein (*Darash Moshe*) sees therein a poignant lesson, along the lines of our discussion above:

A *talmid chacham* must conduct himself like the *Aron Hakodesh*; that is, just as the *Aron* contained Hashem's teachings (inscribed on the *Luchos*), so, too, the Torah scholar is responsible for housing Hashem's Torah within himself. As such, he must be fluent in the entirety of Torah, to the extent that he is *completely filled* with Torah knowledge, which permeates every area of his being. Any portion of the breadth and depth of Torah that he neglects to attain represents “wasted space” and unused capacity.

At the same time, however, he cannot be goaded to undue haughtiness because of his singular achievements. As a holding vessel for the Torah, he is a living *Aron Hakodesh*. A surefire way to retain ample humility would be to bear in mind what the *Gemara* in *Yoma* reveals about the Ark's properties: אֲרוֹן אֵינוֹ מֵן הַמֶּדָּה – “The *Aron* has no dimensions” (in terms of taking up space). This is a stark reminder for the ideal way in which to conduct oneself – keeping small, as if one has no dimensions at all.