

Leadership through Separation • Parshat Beha'alotekha

In Judaism, holiness is achieved through separation. We ritualize separations between holy and profane time, holy and profane foods and objects, and holy and profane behaviors. Separation, in this sense, requires conscious and deliberative choices to move away from or to move towards, to divide or to segment experiences through constant awareness and vigilance.

In our Torah reading for this week, *Beha'alotekha*, Moses is told to separate the Levites for special service: "You shall place the Levites in attendance upon Aaron and his sons and designate them as an elevation offering to God" (Num. 8:13). In their service to the priests who offer sacrifices, the Levites themselves become a sacrifice. Through this service, they elevate themselves as offerings. Sacrifices come in a lot of forms. Gifts on the altar are one form of service. People also sacrifice time, money, thought, and attention.

As the chapter continues, we see the special regard with which God holds the Levites:

Thus, you shall set the Levites apart from the Israelites, and the Levites shall be Mine. Thereafter the Levites shall be qualified for the service of the Tent of Meeting, once you have purified them and designated them as an elevation offering. For they are formally assigned to Me from among the Israelites: I have

taken them for Myself in place of all the first issue of the womb...(Num. 8:14-16)

In his commentary *Ha-emek Davar*, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (1816-1893) explains that Moses was to command the Levites "to distinguish and separate themselves in their conduct for God's sake." Moses could articulate the rules and even set them apart to fulfill their duties, but it was up to the Levites themselves to make an internal decision to see themselves as different and separate

God elevated the Levites so that they could elevate the boards, curtains, table, menorah and all the constituent parts of the *Mishkan*. This was not only a job that required great strength. It required immensity of spirit and righteousness. Let no Israelite feel that those who carried the representation of God in the world be anything less than outstanding ambassadors of holiness.

It is at this point, on Numbers 8:15, that Rabbi Berlin explains the challenge. The Levites had to be fastidious about keeping themselves pure of thought because those who are designated or designate themselves for special service run the risk of stumbling because of pride. "Anyone