

Levitical Lessons

God is impartial—He is no “respector of persons” (as it says in Proverbs 24:23 and Romans 2:11). That is, Yahweh is not impressed with what we have—our power, wealth, talent, or beauty, for these things are but gifts He has bestowed upon us (or, in some cases, things we have seized for ourselves in defiance of His statutes). In our natural state, God sees virtually no distinction between the richest, most powerful man on earth and the humblest slave. He is so far above us that there is no discernable difference between the best of us and the worst—it’s like trying to decide which of these six thousand ants at His picnic are the “good ones.” Who could tell the difference?

But that’s only in our natural state. From cover to cover, God’s Word informs us that He has provided a way for us to become “unnatural,” or if you will, “supernatural.” Yahweh has breathed into our race the “breath of life” (the *neshamah*, Genesis 2:7), something that fundamentally separates mankind from all other living things in His biosphere. We, in short, have a capacity for spiritual life that sets us apart from the animal kingdom. But since the fall of Adam, this capacity is unrealized at our births. As Yahshua put it, **“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit [both of them, is the connotation], he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”** (John 3:5-8) Our natural lives (being “born of the flesh”) get us in the door of human existence, but we aren’t truly “living beings” (in the same sense that Adam was when he received the breath of life) until (and unless) we have been “born from above,” that is, “born of the Spirit.” This, like the wind, is something that can’t be seen directly, but can be unmistakably discerned by the evidence the new birth leaves in its wake. It is at this point that we’ve left the natural state and have become *supernatural*.

Being “born” from above in the Spirit of God implies that we now have spiritual “parents.” Our “Father” in God’s metaphor is Yahweh, and our “Mother” is His Holy Spirit (a fact that lends perspective to the Fifth Commandment—see Exodus 20:12). To his human parents, a child isn’t just a child—one of a generation or a class, a nameless statistic or demographic “bean” to be counted. No, he is an individual, one of the family, the focus of his parents’ love, attention, and support. He has a name, a place in the world, a legacy, an *identity*. To his parents, he’s *somebody*. A “child” born from above of God’s Spirit is like that

too: he (or she) now has an individual identity; he is “known” to his spiritual “parents.” He is no longer just one of the ants at the picnic.

So at this point, it seems no longer strictly true that “God is no respecter of persons,” for in a sense, He “respects” and considers His child constantly and with great affection. But it is still not because of anything the child has brought to the family. He’s totally dependent, can’t do anything useful, cries a lot, and smells funny. Sure, his Father loves it when he smiles in recognition of His face and squeals, “Dada!” But God won’t love him any more when he’s able to solve differential calculus problems and run ninety-yard touchdowns for his high school football team. His love is complete and absolute the day His child is born. A “respecter of persons?” No, Yahweh is a respecter of His own character, something that gets passed on to every child “born” to Him.

Why is it, then, that Yahweh is constantly seen singling out people or groups and imposing destiny upon them, especially in the Torah? He selects a Chaldean nobody named Abram upon which to found his “chosen race,” and our boy takes half a lifetime learning to trust this God. His grandson Jacob turns out to be a scheming scoundrel who (poetically enough) gets tricked into jump starting the nation through means that would be specifically outlawed by his God four and a half centuries later (see Mitzvah #100)—a law delivered through Moses, a stuttering spoiled brat-turned-murderer who runs away from his disastrous screw-ups only to find himself enduring the terminal obscurity of tending somebody else’s sheep for forty years. Only then does Yahweh recruit him to shepherd the biggest flock of all—the nation of Israel. *Then* Yahweh chooses Moses’ brother Aaron as the father of Israel’s priesthood, and his tribe, Levi, as “His special possession,” all apparently for no other reason than that they happened to be related and breathing. It was as if God looked, shrugged, and said, “You’ll do, I guess.”

What was Yahweh *thinkin’*? Did He see some hidden heroic quality in this family, some underlying superiority, some reason to “respect” these people? *Au contraire!* When one looks at the qualifications of the people He chose—without wearing the rose-colored glasses of our traditional religious viewpoint—we find that they’re ordinary, flawed, weak, gullible, and venal—just like you and me. So how did Abram, the timid lad so slow to follow Yahweh’s instructions, become Abraham, universally respected Father of the Faithful? What transformed Jacob, usurper of his brother’s birthright, into Israel, the namesake and patriarch of God’s chosen people? How did Moses morph from outlaw to Emancipator, from

loser to Lawgiver? What makes the Levites special, or the Aaronic priesthood holy? It was nothing they did, I can assure you. It was, rather, what they allowed Yahweh to make of them.

The prophet Jeremiah was once given an object lesson. He went to the potter's workshop and saw him crafting a clay vessel. As he turned it on the wheel, however, it got lopsided and out of shape, so the potter simply smooshed it and started over. No big deal, if you're a potter. So Yahweh said, **"O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter? As the clay is in the potter's hand, so you are in my hand."** (Jeremiah 18:6) Yahweh went on to make the point that since Judah was behaving like a lumpy and lopsided bit of clay, He was perfectly willing to smoosh them and begin again, to make a proper, useful vessel out of them (useful for one thing above all others: the delivery of the Messiah to a lost world). Yahweh had actually been molding and shaping His nation from the very beginning, from the moment he called Abram out of Ur—forming and reforming them for that singular purpose, to be the vehicle for His Messiah.

The potter's art ranges from the mundane to the magnificent. It is found in both palaces and potting sheds, in museums and mud huts. And Yahweh's "pot," Israel, is both utilitarian and decorative. Yes, it was formed with the express purpose of bringing Yahshua to the world, but that doesn't mean the way it looks is of no consequence. On the contrary, God's glaze has been carefully applied and intricately layered. It's clear as crystal in places and practically opaque in others, exquisitely detailed, richly colored, and stunningly beautiful to those with the eyes to perceive its art. This "glaze" is the Law, the Torah. Its depth and meaning are fully appreciated by few of us, if any. But perhaps that's because although Yahweh has been working on this vessel *for eons*, He hasn't finished firing it. It's been in and out of the kiln of adversity for the last two and a half millennia, but the Potter still has one final step planned. The ultimate glaze, Israel's national salvation, will be set by the final—and hottest—firing of all: the Tribulation. That day is almost upon us. The kiln is heating up. A skeptical and envious world has mockingly predicted that Israel won't survive—that it will shatter under the intense heat. But the Master Potter had promised us that it will indeed emerge from the fire the most beautiful example of His art the world has ever seen. And it will "contain" the Messiah, as it was designed to do, for a thousand years.

But the underglaze, as I said, is still a bit hard to see in places. It consists largely of symbols and metaphors, parables and illustrations. Israel itself doesn't yet comprehend why it was formed or what these markings signify. The glaze? They've studied it, of course. They know they've got silica and alumina and a little copper oxide, and they're dazzled by its heavenly blue color. But they don't yet perceive that the glaze spells out a message crucial to their very survival: "Yahshua—Yahweh is Salvation." Those Jews who think about the Torah at all

seem to feel that if God has spent this much time and effort on them, they *must* be special—He surely *seems* partial toward them. But being the center of Yahweh’s attention is not the same thing as being in the center of His will. He’s still working on them because they *aren’t* finished! (The same could be said of us as individual believers, of course, but I’m speaking of Israel’s *national* redemption). If Yahweh seems to be a “respector of persons” in Israel’s case, it’s because of the extraordinary lengths He’s prepared to go to keep His own promises, not because of the intrinsic value of their raw materials.

Let us continue, then, to study what Yahweh the Master Potter has revealed to us through this glaze, the Torah, applied to Israel layer upon layer, precept upon precept, to teach us all what His masterpiece really means. And while we’re at it, let us strive to be pliable, sensitive to the Master’s touch, for we will be of no use to anyone until we have finally become what He meant for us to be.

ATONEMENT FOR PRIESTLY SINS

(767) *Sacrifice a bull to atone for the sins of the priesthood. “If a person sins unintentionally [i.e., through error] against any of the commandments of Yahweh in anything which ought not to be done, and does any of them, if the anointed priest sins, bringing guilt on the people, then let him offer to Yahweh for his sin which he has sinned a young bull without blemish as a sin offering. He shall bring the bull to the door of the tabernacle of meeting before Yahweh, lay his hand on the bull’s head, and kill the bull before Yahweh.”* (Leviticus 4:2-4) We looked at the sin offering, the *chata’t*, back in Mitzvot #491 and #492. Here we see the specific case of a *chata’t* made necessary by the sin of an “anointed priest.” Notice first that the priest’s error was said to “bring guilt on the people.” Why is that? Why not just on himself? It’s because the priest is “anointed,” that is, he has been specially designated by Yahweh to be an intercessor for the people and a conduit of God’s truth to them. If the priests, those charged with communicating God’s Word to the world, are getting it wrong, then the people they are supposed to be serving will fall into falsehood. The congregation will become guilty through their ignorance (see Hosea 4:6), and it will be the *priest’s fault* for having fallen down on the job. Since the priests are a metaphor for all believers, the implications are quite serious.

That explains the sacrificial remedy: a bull was to be offered up, symbolizing our rejection of falsehood. As with all blood sacrifices, the bull’s symbolic function would be ultimately fulfilled in the death of Yahshua the Messiah. The priest’s guilt was to be transferred to the bull through the laying of his hands upon the bull’s head, just as our guilt (as believers) has been transferred to Yahshua. It is He who removes the error

and falsehood from our lives, if only we'll "lay our hands upon His head," that is, willingly acknowledge that we wish to transfer our guilt to Him. Make no mistake: the bull will die either way—with or without receiving our guilt upon himself. The transfer of guilt is not automatic. In fact, it is our prerogative, if we wish, to keep our sins, to attempt to deal with them ourselves through penance, denial, or rebellion. It won't work, you understand, but that doesn't keep the majority of mankind from trying, in their pride, to find another way to deal with the sin they know they bear. "It's too easy," they declare. "There must be a catch." *Of course* there's a catch: it's not easy at all for the bull. Man's sins cost Him his life!

"Then the anointed priest shall take some of the bull's blood and bring it to the tabernacle of meeting. The priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle some of the blood seven times before Yahweh, in front of the veil of the sanctuary."

(Leviticus 4:5-6) The anointed priest (the one for whom the sacrifice was made, and from whom the guilt was transferred) was to take some of the bull's blood (read: life) and take it into the Tabernacle (read: the Plan of God). There he was to sprinkle it seven times before Yahweh. He was to use his own finger to do this, not some inert implement, the point being that he—the priest—was personally, physically involved in the process of removing his own sin, though the blood that had been shed was not his own. No one else could do it for him.

And where was he to do this? In front of the veil. Think back: what stood there? It was the altar of incense—the place of prayer. That is why the spot is described as being "before Yahweh," whose Shekinah manifestation "dwelled" between the two cherubim atop the mercy seat, behind the veil. The whole thing is a non-verbal prayer, which if put into verbal terms would sound something like this: "I have sinned before you, O Yahweh, and I am guilty of leading my people in the wrong direction by my actions and words. Now that I realize my error, I repent of this falsehood and ask for your forgiveness. Innocent blood has been shed on my behalf, and that blood now cries out to You: cleanse your servant of his sin, and restore me to your service and fellowship. My obedient sprinkling of this blood before You seven times tells me that my sin is completely, perfectly forgiven. Thank You, Father Yahweh."

Here's the hard question. When did *you* last realize that you weren't in perfect compliance with God's Word? When's the last time you critically examined your conduct and creed in light of God's revealed Word (as opposed to traditional religious expectation)? Neither the Church nor the rabbis of Orthodox Judaism seem willing to countenance the possibility that they might not be in the center of God's will—and yet they're poles

apart in their belief and practice, not only from each other but also from the scriptures. Something's wrong here.

PRIESTLY DUTIES

(768) *The sons of the High Priest shall oversee the Tabernacle. "The appointed duty of Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest is the oil for the light, the sweet incense, the daily grain offering, the anointing oil, the oversight of all the tabernacle, of all that is in it, with the sanctuary and its furnishings."* (Numbers 4:16) Knowing who the Torah's players represent is essential in figuring out what *our* "appointed duties" are in this world. As we have seen, Aaron the High Priest is a symbolic stand-in for the coming Messiah. His son Eleazar, then, represents Aaron's (i.e., Yahshua's) children, those who follow him—in other words, us. (It should be pointed out that not all of Aaron's sons followed him in truth: Nadab and Abihu represent, in this context, the look-alike forgeries, the "tares" in Yahshua's parable. Eleazar, though, is the real deal.) The things specified by Yahweh as Eleazar's duties should therefore be of great interest to us. Five things have been listed here.

First, he is to take care of the oil for the light. As we shall see in the next couple of Precepts, Aaron was to tend the menorah, but here we see that Eleazar was to be the custodian of the oil his father would use. Olive oil is a common scriptural metaphor for the Holy Spirit—defined perhaps most clearly in Zechariah 4:1-6. Yahshua told His disciples what their relationship with the Spirit would be. He said the Father **"will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, who the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you."** (John 14:16-17) When Yahshua said "He dwells with you," He was referring to the state of affairs existing at that moment: He Himself was the personification of God's Spirit, living there among them. But after His impending crucifixion and resurrection, the Spirit would instead be "in" them—a change of address brought to fruition by the events of Acts 2. (By the way, because the word *Ruach* (Spirit) is a *feminine* noun in Hebrew, I have been referring to the Holy Spirit—Yahweh's *Ruach Qodesh*—as our "heavenly Mother," feminine in symbolic persona. So note that the male personal pronouns describing the Spirit in the John 14 passage are actually *neutral* in gender: God does not call the Spirit "He" or "Him," even in Greek.) Eleazar's first job, then, was to be a host or receptacle for the Holy Spirit of Yahweh. He was to take the oil of the Spirit wherever it needed to go.

Second, Eleazar was to take care of the sweet incense that was to be burned upon the altar of incense in the Holy Place, the small altar that

stood guarding the veil to the Most Holy, where the Shekinah of Yahweh abided between the cherubim. We discussed its exclusive formula in Mitzvah #439. Its five ingredients tell us that our prayers are to be fervent, communicating our most heartfelt pain and bitter sorrow to God, for we have been made righteous and are preserved through His sacrifice, even though we are in fact defiled, unclean creatures. As with the oil for the lamps, Aaron the High Priest (in His role as our Messiah) was to burn the incense upon the altar, and the two things were done together (see Mitzvah #433). So Eleazar kept the incense (as he had the oil) and Aaron presented them before Yahweh; that is, we Spirit-filled believers cry out to Yahweh, and our Intercessor pleads our case before Him on our behalf.

The third “appointed duty” of Eleazar was to take care of the daily grain offering (the *minha*). This, as we learned in Precept #766, was to accompany each lamb offered as an *olah* (burnt offering), morning and evening every day of the year. The *minha* was of fine flour, meaning the husks, the worthless, non-nutritive parts of the grain, had been removed by milling—a process painful for the grain (us) and laborious for the miller (God). The flour was permeated with olive oil, indicative (as usual) of the Holy Spirit. Since the root of the word *minha* means “to give,” it is evident that the grain offering indicates Yahweh’s provision for His people—especially our life (grain is from a living plant), godliness (achieved through the process of milling), and of course the indwelling of His Spirit within us. Is it just me, or do you too find that these aspects of the *minha* fairly scream the truth of which Peter wrote? **“Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.”** (II Peter 1:2-4)

Fourth, Eleazar was to administer the anointing oil, whose ingredients, as we discovered in Mitzvah #436, describe “the Messiah, Yahshua, whose Spirit-filled life was the epitome of love, the standard of holiness, and sweet salvation achieved through bitter suffering.” You may be thinking, “Then shouldn’t Aaron (the type of the Messiah in this context) be taking care of the oil of anointing?” No, for the simple reason that Aaron *was* the anointing oil. Eleazar was charged with making what it represented a present reality, available to the people. To put it bluntly, if we believers do not accurately present Yahshua the Messiah to the world—if we do not “rightly divide the Word of Truth”—then the job won’t get done at all. No pressure or anything.

The fifth and last “appointed duty” of Eleazar the son of Aaron was “the oversight of all the tabernacle, of all that is in it, with the sanctuary and its furnishings.” As we discovered in such exquisite detail in chapter 4 of this volume, the Tabernacle (and “all that is in it”) represents and reveals the Plan of God. Again, Eleazar—a metaphor for Yahweh’s true believers—aren’t in themselves the plan: we do not provide salvation, atonement, or cleansing. But it is nevertheless up to us to make the Plan accessible and comprehensible to the world in which we live. Aaron can’t do it—he’s *the central component* of the plan. Nadab and Abihu can’t do it—they’re clueless as to what the plan means (and besides, they’re dead). Only Eleazar—representing us as believers—can make the Plan of God efficacious and attractive to the people. If we fail in our responsibility, we will have failed people for whom Christ died. I for one don’t want that on my conscience.

One last thought on the subject. Eleazar was appointed five tasks. I’ve observed time and again that five seems to be the number of grace. And here, as expected, communicating God’s grace—revealing to the world Yahweh’s unmerited favor toward us—is the underlying theme of everything Eleazar was told to do.

- (769) *The High Priest shall be in charge of the golden menorah.* **“Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Command the children of Israel that they bring to you pure oil of pressed olives for the light, to make the lamps burn continually. Outside the veil of the Testimony, in the tabernacle of meeting, Aaron shall be in charge of it from evening until morning before Yahweh continually; it shall be a statute forever in your generations. He shall be in charge of the lamps on the pure gold lampstand before Yahweh continually.’”** (Leviticus 24:1-4) In the previous precept, the first thing we learned was that Eleazar (symbolic of true believers) was to be the custodian of the olive oil for the menorah within the Holy Place. Here we see a further division of labor, so to speak. The children of Israel were to bring the pressed oil to Eleazar so Aaron could employ it. While “bring” is a perfectly reasonable translation of the Hebrew verb *laqach*, I should point out that several times in scripture, when applied to a person, it has the connotation of “summoning” him (as when Balak summoned Balaam in Numbers 23:11). So since we know that the oil is a metaphor for the Holy Spirit, the underlying meaning is clear: the children of Israel (representing the whole world) were they who would bring or summon the Spirit of God. How? By pressing, crushing, and beating the Spirit’s source. As Yahshua explained, **“It is to your advantage that I go away [by being beaten, crucified, entombed, and rising again from the dead]; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and**

of righteousness, and of judgment.” (John 16:7-8) Bottom line: it is the world’s sin that made necessary the indwelling of Yahweh’s Spirit in the lives of His people.

The lamps of the menorah were to “burn continually.” They were never to be allowed to go out. Moreover, this was to be something that was to go on forever—“throughout your generations.” The light represents God’s truth, the revelation of His grace, His love, and His mercy—things that were never to be extinguished through neglect or smothered with religious obfuscation. The key to making sure the light was always shining in the world was twofold. First, its fuel was Yahweh’s Messiah, the pure oil of His Spirit having been obtained by His being crushed on our behalf.

The second key is the same, though expressed with a different scriptural metaphor. Aaron (symbolic of Christ) was to **“be in charge of [the lamp] from evening until morning before Yahweh continually.”** Aaron was to make sure the supply of oil (the Spirit) that created the light was never cut off. Whether he fed the lamp himself, or had one of his sons do it, it was Aaron who was “in charge.” Twice in this passage is the fact mentioned that he was to do this “before Yahweh continually.” Our Messiah continuously stands “before Yahweh” because, in point of fact, He *is* Yahweh. When He condescended to take the form of a mortal man for our benefit, He did not relinquish His Spirit. Once again, we need to take a step backward and consider this: it was never inevitable, never to be automatically assumed that God would take personal charge of the dissemination of His truth. In fact, every religion in the world operates as if God has stepped out of the picture and turned over the “business” of faith to his “priests.” But relationship with Yahweh is not a religion, nor has He put mere men in charge of His truth. Christ is the head of this body.

Note also that Aaron was to supervise the lamp **“from evening until morning,”** that is, during the hours of darkness, when God’s light is needed most. The identity of Aaron as a type of Christ is made clear, then, in John’s eloquent observation: **“In [Yahshua] was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend [i.e., overpower, overcome, or gain control over] it.”** (John 1:5) Whereas “men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil,” (John 3:19) the truth of God’s love dispels the darkness. As Yahshua said a moment later, **“He who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.”** (John 3:21) It’s no coincidence that the very first thing God made was light.

(770) *The lamps of the Menorah must cast their light to the front.* “And Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Speak to Aaron, and say to him, When you arrange the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light in front of the lampstand.’ And Aaron did so; he arranged the lamps to face toward the front of the lampstand, as Yahweh commanded Moses. Now this workmanship of the lampstand was hammered gold; from its shaft to its flowers it was hammered work. According to the pattern which Yahweh had shown Moses, so he made the lampstand.” (Numbers 8:1-4)

Although orthodox Jews today realize that the menorah in the Tabernacle had seven branches, you’ll often see a nine-branched candlestick in synagogues today. The reason, as usual, is that Israel has substituted something they sort of understand for something they don’t remotely comprehend. The nine-branched model is designed in commemoration of the eight-day miracle (confused yet?) of the provision of oil when the Maccabees cleansed the Second Temple in 135 B.C., after the pagan Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV Epiphanes had defiled the place by sacrificing a sow on the altar. The center candle, the ninth, is called the *shammus*. It’s there to light the other candles, one night at a time, in the winter month of Kislev. Yahweh’s formula, though, was seven oil lamps, not nine candles. (See Precept #722 for a thorough analysis of the design of the Tabernacle’s menorah.) Once lit, they were to remain lit, for the light of Yahweh’s truth is eternal. The *last* thing Yahweh wanted to commemorate was the temporary triumph of one religion over another.

With candles, of course, there’s no way to arrange them so that the light is in the front—it’s on top, no matter what you do. But oil lamps are another matter, and as usual, the symbology is readily apparent, if we’ll only look for it. Oil lamps are probably the most commonly unearthed artifacts of middle-eastern antiquity—thousands of them have been found. Though they vary widely in style and materials, their function invariably dictates two design features: a reservoir for the olive oil, and a provision (a hole or notch) positioned off to one end to hold a wick. To get a constant and long-lasting light, you wouldn’t just set the oil on fire; rather, you’d let the wick absorb a small but steady supply of oil which would burn at a consistent rate—just like a candle’s wick burns liquefied paraffin at a controlled speed. The picture is that of the Holy Spirit supplying our lives in whatever measure we are prepared to absorb.

So in order to “**arrange the lamps to face toward the front of the lampstand,**” one would simply turn the oil lamps so that their wicks all faced one direction: toward the room, not the wall. The question, as always, is why? Why did Yahweh make such a big deal out of this? Between Exodus and Numbers, he mentioned this requirement at least three times, so it must be important. First, the lamps were to all point in *the same* direction. This

tells us (or at least *me*) that believers are to be unified in their outlook. In Precept #722, I theorized that the format of the menorah indicates that “three branches on one side represent Israel, and the other three represent the ekklesia or Church—all of which grow from, and are dependent upon, the center trunk: Yahshua the Messiah.” The two “sides” of belief in Yahweh, then, pre- and post-Calvary, may approach the world from different perspectives, but they should both be shedding their light in the same direction. And that direction is determined by the orientation of the Center Light, Yahshua the Messiah.

Second, the lights were all to “face” the room, not the wall. What went on in the Holy Place? Directly across from the menorah, the table of showbread commemorated God’s provision for us. And just to its left, positioned before the veil that restricted access to Yahweh’s presence in the Most Holy Place, the altar of incense stood as the venue of prayer. There were no windows in the Tabernacle—the light of the sun and moon were worthless here. The only way to perceive the sustenance and means of divine access provided by God’s Plan was by the light of the menorah—composed of the Messiah, the ekklesia, and Israel, all pointing in the same direction, all illuminating the same space.

REMUNERATION FOR THE PRIESTS

- (771) *Wave offerings, sin offerings, and trespass offerings shall belong to the priests. “And Yahweh spoke to Aaron: ‘Here, I Myself have also given you charge of My heave offerings, all the holy gifts of the children of Israel; I have given them as a portion to you and your sons, as an ordinance forever. This shall be yours of the most holy things reserved from the fire: every offering of theirs, every grain offering and every sin offering and every trespass offering which they render to Me, shall be most holy for you and your sons. In a most holy place you shall eat it; every male shall eat it. It shall be holy to you.’”* (Numbers 18:8-10) In light of today’s religious scams, it’s tempting to view the remuneration of the priests as a get-rich-quick scheme foisted by the ruling religious elite upon a cowed and superstitious populace. But it was nothing of the sort. Remember, the whole tribe of Levi, of which the priests were a subset, were specifically left without inheritance in the Promised Land. In an agricultural society, land for cultivation, grazing, orchards and vineyards was the basis of wealth, and the Levites—by divine definition—didn’t own any. That’s why the tithe was instituted: the people (who owned the land) gave a tenth of their increase to the Levites, who in turn forwarded a tenth of the tithe to the priests. Here we see that principle extended. All offerings that

weren't specifically supposed to be consumed in flame upon the altar (such as the *olah*) were to belong to the priests.

Let's look at this strictly from the point of view of the finances of the priests. Their job was to intercede between God and man—to prepare the offerings brought by the people, burn the incense of prayer, and provide the vehicle for the atonement of the sins of the nation. Their role also included communicating God's word to Israel—guarding and publishing the Torah. If you think about it, then, the better the priests did their job—the more they trained and encouraged their countrymen in the instruction of Yahweh's Word—the more “prosperous” they'd become. Not only would a faithful and holy populace be submitting tithes based upon having been abundantly blessed by God (see Leviticus 26:3-13 and Deuteronomy 28:1-14), but the people's heave offerings, sin offerings, trespass offerings, grain offerings, and peace offerings (all things that contributed to the priests' income) would have been forthcoming as the steady outpouring of a contrite and grateful national spirit attuned and attentive to the leading and admonition of Yahweh's *Ruach Qodesh*.

But what happened? The priesthood became corrupt and ineffectual (see for example, Judges 17:5, I Samuel 2:12-17), and as a result Israel fell into apostasy, a condition that persisted—relieved occasionally by the timely advent of one judge or another—until the time of King David. The financial and political fortunes of Israel were tied directly to the effectiveness and faithfulness of the Aaronic priesthood, for better or worse. And, poetically enough, the priests in turn suffered materially from the declining holiness of the nation. It was a vicious downward spiral, but one that could have been broken at any time by a High Priest who returned with a whole heart and strong hand to the Torah of Yahweh.

The instruction is given that these particular offerings were to be eaten by male descendants of Aaron (who were priests by definition). It's not that Yahweh didn't wish to provide for their wives and daughters; He did, but not with the sin offerings and trespass offerings. These were reserved for the priests themselves, who are a living metaphor for the assembly of true believers under the Messiah. We should therefore examine the symbolic or prophetic component to this precept. I believe the key is this phrase: **“This shall be yours of the most holy things reserved from the fire: every offering of theirs.”**

The world will soon experience Yahweh's judgment—a period of time commonly referred to as “The Tribulation.” During these seven years, God will go about separating the wheat from the chaff, the gold from the dross, the sheep from the goats. And when it's all over no one will be left

standing upon the earth except those who have turned to Yahweh in faith. These survivors, not coincidentally, are specifically called “priests of God and of Christ” in Revelation 20:6. During the Tribulation, a third of the world will burn (see Revelation 8:7) and something upwards of half its population (probably much more) will perish. What the godless of the earth leave behind will be their “sin offering.” And all that will be left standing after the wars and chaos of the Time of Jacob’s Trouble will be what Yahweh has “reserved from the fire.” The priests were instructed to eat their portions “in a most holy place.” That place, it transpires, will ultimately be the earth during King Yahshua’s Millennial reign—cleansed, renewed, and set apart for His glory. It was no pious platitude or sappy sentiment when Yahshua announced, **“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”** (Matthew 5:5)

- (772) *Only those within the priest’s household who are clean may share in the offerings.* **“This also is yours: the heave offering of their gift, with all the wave offerings of the children of Israel; I have given them to you, and your sons and daughters with you, as an ordinance forever. Everyone who is clean in your house may eat it.”** (Numbers 18:11) In a continuation of the previous precept, Yahweh clarifies who is included in the remuneration picture, this time referring to the “heave offering of their gift,” which I take it would center around the *selamim*, or peace offerings brought to Yahweh (see Mitzvah #494). The “priest” himself could eat of these offerings, and his whole household were entitled to them as well, provided they were “clean.” Priests, of course, were defined as males who were descendants of Aaron, but Yahweh didn’t want to leave the impression that women and children were ineligible for salvation or sustenance. On the contrary, the offerings were to be shared with his entire family—those living under his roof related by blood or marriage to the priest. In metaphorical terms, the blood ties refer to Yahshua’s atonement, and marriage indicates our position as “the bride of Christ.” (Although the wife isn’t specifically mentioned here, her inclusion is understood, for she and her husband were considered “one flesh.” See Genesis 2:24. Also, the final description of the recipients was “*Everyone* who is clean in your house.”)

The fact that this ordinance is specifically described as enduring “forever” should be a clue that the symbolic aspect of the priest’s role is still in view. But the explicit inclusion of the priest’s children in the precept leads us to another observation about life in the coming Millennium. The sanctified survivors who enter the Kingdom after the Tribulation won’t be the last generation. Their families will continue for the next thousand years. And it is these mortal progeny that will be eligible to partake of the *selamim* heave offerings—if they are clean. As

we discovered in Chapter 15 of *The Owner's Manual*, there are any number of things that can ritually defile us, making us “unclean.” But they boil down to a common metaphor: contact with the world’s evil. Only Yahshua our Messiah can make us permanently clean—and that includes the mortal Millennial multitudes who will live their lives in His perfect society: they too must be born again, born from above into His Spirit.

- (773) *Firstfruits offerings are to be eaten by the priests. “All the best of the oil, all the best of the new wine and the grain, their firstfruits which they offer to Yahweh, I have given them to you. Whatever first ripe fruit is in their land, which they bring to Yahweh, shall be yours. Everyone who is clean in your house may eat it. Every devoted thing in Israel shall be yours.”* (Numbers 18:12-14) Three times per year, all Israelite males were to gather to appear before Yahweh in celebration. At each of these times, one or more crops were coming into season. At Passover/Unleavened Bread/Firstfruits in the spring, the barley crop would be just about ready. In the early summer, at the feast of Weeks (Pentecost), the wheat harvest was underway. And at the Feast of Tabernacles in the autumn, the bounty of the orchard and vineyard would have been ripening. And at each of these festivals, a sample of the crop was to be brought to Yahweh: **“The first of the firstfruits of your land you shall bring into the house of Yahweh your God.”** (Exodus 23:19)

Not only was the first of the crop offered to God (a sign of thankfulness and trust that Yahweh would bless the remainder of the growing season) but the best (literally, the “fat”) was to be offered up as well. This was to be a sign that the First Commandment (“You shall have no other gods before Me”) was being taken seriously: the Israelite farmer was to honor Yahweh even over himself and his family.

God, of course, doesn’t subsist on fruit, vegetables, and grain. He “needs” but one thing: our loving companionship. And until the advent of the Messiah, the priesthood was to be the vehicle—the conduit—for man’s fellowship with Yahweh (symbolically, at least). So the firstfruits of Israel’s crops that were brought in homage to God were in turn to be eaten by the priests who attended to the spiritual needs of the nation. On a symbolic level, it’s one more clarification of the principle that believers who consider themselves disinherited pilgrims in this world (like the priests and Levites were in Israel—see Precept #775) will not, in the end, be left with nothing. In God’s coming kingdom, His children will receive the best of what the world has to offer, and we’ll receive it first.

- (774) *No time limits or conditions are imposed upon Yahweh’s provision for the priests. “All the heave offerings of the holy things, which the children of Israel offer to Yahweh, I have given to you and your sons and daughters with you as an*

ordinance forever; it is a covenant of salt forever before Yahweh with you and your descendants with you.” (Numbers 18:19) Though we use it primarily as a flavoring agent these days, salt was valued most highly in the ancient world for its properties as a preservative. Curing meat or fish in salt was the only reliable way to extend its “shelf life” in the days before refrigeration. A “covenant of salt,” then, spoke of the agreement’s intended permanence, its binding obligation upon the one making the promise. The phrase is used three times in scripture: (1) here, where God is promising to provide for the priests (read: believers) and their sons and daughters; (2) in Leviticus 2:13, where (as we saw in Mitzvah #478) Yahweh commanded every *minha* or grain offering to be offered with salt—again, the sign predicted and guaranteed Yahweh’s provision for His people; and (3) II Chronicles 13:5, where God’s promise of David’s dominion over Israel forever—clearly a Messianic reference—is recalled. So in every scriptural reference, the “covenant of salt” referred to something Yahweh unilaterally pledged to do for mankind—and in reality, it was all the same thing: the provision of salvation through the sacrifice of His Messiah. It was a binding, permanent, and obligatory pledge, one Yahweh didn’t have to make, but freely did on our behalf.

(775) *God Himself is a gift given in lieu of worldly treasure.* **“Then Yahweh said to Aaron: ‘You shall have no inheritance in their land, nor shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel.’”** (Numbers 18:20) It’s not that God was saying all His children were going to be dirt poor while the rest of humanity prospered. His point is that whatever we have or don’t have in this world, our *real* treasure is Him. Our roots and inheritance are not in or of this world. We are pilgrims here, just passing through. God has promised to supply all our needs, from salvation to supper; all we have to do is trust Him.

Yahshua put it in less symbolic terms for His listeners: **“Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His**

righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” (Matthew 6:25-34)

He’s not saying, “Don’t bother getting up and going to work in the morning, ’cause I’m in charge of providing for you.” Remember, the Israelites in the wilderness still had to go out and gather their manna—it didn’t just jump into their baskets. On the contrary, He’s telling us not to *worry* about obtaining the necessities of life. Trust Yahweh for those things. Sow your seed and trust God to make it grow. (Note that He said nothing about that new 50 inch high-def plasma screen home theater rig you’ve been coveting.) As John put it, **“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.”** (I John 2:15-17) If we realize that we have no “inheritance” in the world, that we’re just passing through, then it all becomes clear. As you drive through the Colorado Rockies, you can admire and appreciate the view, but you can’t own it. The believer (ideally) recognizes that *everything* in this world is just scenery rushing past his window: enjoy it while it’s here, but don’t “love” it, don’t covet it, don’t cling to it. Our “possessions” in this world are like music: they’re here only for the moment, and then they’re gone. Yahweh, on the other hand, is our permanent inheritance.

(776) *What the priests may keep of the burnt offering.* **“And the priest who offers anyone’s burnt offering, that priest shall have for himself the skin of the burnt offering which he has offered.”** (Leviticus 7:8-10) This one sort of slipped through the cracks of Mitzvah #475. There we learned that the *olah*, the voluntary burnt offering made in homage to Yahweh, was killed, skinned, and cut into pieces not by the priest, but by the worshipper. The priest would then sprinkle its blood about the altar and put all of the meat upon the altar to burn it—none of it was to be eaten. We weren’t told then (in Leviticus 1:1-9) what happened to the hide. Here that oversight is rectified. The animal’s skin is given to the priest.

The question, as usual, is *why*? The entire *olah* belonged to Yahweh: it was to be consumed in flames and its blood spilled out onto the ground. Why was the skin to be kept by the priest? I believe the answer goes all the way back to the account of the fall. **“For Adam and his wife Yahweh made tunics of skin, and clothed them.”** (Genesis 2:21) The skins Adam and Eve were given to wear were in a way like *olah* sacrifices. The judgment deserved by the first family was borne instead by an innocent animal—and

the only thing that was made “useful” to mankind from that animal’s sacrifice was its skin. It wasn’t meant to cover the sinners’ shame; the fig leaves they’d sewn together worked fine for that. No, it was to cover their *guilt*—Yahweh knew that innocent blood had to be shed on their behalf. It was the first object lesson our race ever received predicting the substitutionary death of the Messiah. Now a choice had to be made: in order for Adam and Eve to once again be found guiltless before their God, they had to forsake their fig leaf clothes and don the leather tunics Yahweh had provided. They had to admit their guilt and accept the gift that would cover it. Just like us today. The priests, then, received the skins of the *olah* sacrifices as a memorial of the gift that had effected the redemption of our forebears in the Garden—and as a harbinger of the gift that would bring redemption to the entire human race on Calvary, if only we would put it on.

But *wait*, you say. Aren’t our new symbolic garments made of pure, white linen, not animal skins? It’s true that the “Bride of Christ” is pictured wearing “**fine linen, clean and bright...the righteous acts of the saints.**” (Revelation 19:8) For that matter, the priests themselves are seen wearing the same linen symbol (see Precept #743). But remember the layout of the Tabernacle: you can’t get clean at the bronze laver until you’ve first encountered blood atonement at the altar. The “skins” must be put on first; only then will the imputed righteousness of the linen garment be available to us. Or looking at it another way, the skins speak of the cause of our redemption; the linen speaks of the effect. The skins are the journey; the linen is the destination.

- (777) *What the priests may keep of the grain offering.* “**Also every grain offering that is baked in the oven and all that is prepared in the covered pan, or in a pan, shall be the priest’s who offers it. Every grain offering, whether mixed with oil or dry, shall belong to all the sons of Aaron, to one as much as the other.**” (Leviticus 7:9-10) The *minha*, or grain offering, spoke not of atonement (since no blood was shed) but of our sanctification—the process of making us “good.” The milling of the whole grain had removed the husks and chaff—the non-nutritive parts—picturing the removal of the worthless areas of our lives. When raw flour was brought, the portion to be burned upon the altar was to be sprinkled with frankincense, indicating purity attained through sacrifice. The priests were not to eat any of the flour with frankincense on it, for the task of providing our purity through His sacrifice fell to the Messiah. The *minha* offerings were usually made with olive oil, symbolizing the work of the Holy Spirit, and they were always to be salted—a picture of our preservation. In addition to a grain offering of flour, the worshipper had the option of bringing his *minha* in the form of

bread, whether baked in an oven, cooked in a covered pan, or prepared on a griddle. But whatever its form, none of the bread was to be made with leaven, a symbol of the pervasive nature of sin in our lives. (An exception to this was bread offered as part of the *selem*, or peace offering, where leavened bread indicated that we didn't have to wait until we were sinless to offer our thanksgiving and gratitude to Yahweh.)

In the wake of the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, slain because of their do-it-yourself religious presumption, Moses issued further instruction concerning the *minha* to teach the priests who remained the importance of remaining set apart and consecrated to Yahweh as they went about their priestly duties. **“And Moses spoke to Aaron, and to Eleazar and Ithamar, his sons who were left: ‘Take the grain offering that remains of the offerings made by fire to Yahweh, and eat it without leaven beside the altar; for it is most holy. You shall eat it in a holy place, because it is your due and your sons’ due, of the sacrifices made by fire to Yahweh; for so I have been commanded.’”** (Leviticus 10:12-13) They were to eat their grain offerings within the confines of the Tabernacle enclosure, i.e., in a “holy place.” This place was further defined as being “beside the altar,” that is, adjacent to the place of sacrifice. The point is that our sanctification—God’s provision of our holiness as symbolized by the *minha*—is linked to His sacrifice: they are side-by-side concepts. Indeed, the meat of any sacrifice that was the priests’ portion was to be eaten in the same place, in the same meal. Atonement and sanctification are two sides of the same coin: as far as God is concerned, we can’t be saved without being made good; nor can we become virtuous without having been redeemed.

- (778) *What the priests may keep of the wave offerings.* **“The thigh of the heave offering and the breast of the wave offering they shall bring with the offerings of fat made by fire, to offer as a wave offering before Yahweh. And it shall be yours and your sons’ with you, by a statute forever, as Yahweh has commanded.”** (Leviticus 10:15) When something was given to Yahweh as an offering, but was designated in the Torah as food for the priests, the priest was to “wave” or “heave” it toward heaven, that is, lift it in symbolic recognition that it actually belonged to Yahweh—and that it had been subsequently assigned to the priest. Portions of the *asham*, *chata’t*, *selem*, and *minha* offerings, as well as firstfruits offerings, were thus waved before Yahweh before they were enjoyed by the priests and their families (see Precept #772).

Keeping in mind that the priesthood represents the universal body of believers throughout man’s tenure on this planet, we are reminded that nothing we “own” is actually ours. Like the priests, we have no inheritance in this land. Everything that falls to us is in reality a gift from

Yahweh, no matter how hard we may think we've worked for it. So Yahweh made it a "statute forever" that we, His priesthood, should "offer as a wave offering" all of these good things we receive in this life—that is, gratefully acknowledge that they are in fact His, and that He has graciously assigned them to us for our enjoyment and sustenance. We are to gratefully "wave" our temporal blessings heavenward. You can't say we don't need the exercise.

- (779) *Things brought in restitution to Yahweh shall belong to the priests. "Every offering of all the holy things of the children of Israel, which they bring to the priest, shall be his. And every man's holy things shall be his; whatever any man gives the priest shall be his."* (Numbers 5:9-10) God's system of jurisprudence stressed restitution, not retribution. One who had been wronged was to receive back what the perpetrator's act had cost him, plus one fifth of its value. Crime was not to pay in Yahweh's economy; it wasn't even supposed to break even. However, the wronged party wasn't always still around when justice was served. If that was the case, the settlement would go to the victim's heirs. But what if he had no heirs? In that case, as we saw in Mitzvot #533, the six-fifths restitution amount was to belong to Yahweh, for in point of fact, it was He who had been attacked in the original crime anyway—an offense against the child is tantamount to an offense against the Father.

Here (picking up on the context of verse 8) we see that these admittedly rare restitution payments made to God were to be given to the priests in His stead, as was any offering brought to Yahweh that wasn't supposed to be burned on the altar or poured out as an oblation, a symbolic memorial of the Messiah's sacrifice. Yahweh had thus created a mechanism whereby temporal objects could be rendered to a God who was Spirit. Yahweh was saying, "If you want to give Me something, give it to My priests, and I will reckon it as if I had received it from your hand." This isn't some obscure or insignificant point of Jewish ritual law, but a fundamental principle of God's dealings with mankind: the way you treat Yahweh's children is seen as the way you treat *Him*. If you bless them, support them, and help them, God sees your actions as having been done to Him. But if you curse them, suppress them, and hinder them, God takes your hatred personally. As Yahshua told both the "sheep and goats" in His parable concerning their behavior under pressure during the coming Tribulation, "Inasmuch as you did—or did not—do it to one of the least of these, you did—or did not—do it to Me." (Matthew 26:40, 45, blended) Would we treat our brothers and sisters the way we do if we realized that every poke we made at them would be felt by God?

CONSECRATION OF THE LEVITES

(780) *The Levites shall serve the congregation and do the work of the Tabernacle. “And Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Bring the tribe of Levi near, and present them before Aaron the priest, that they may serve him. And they shall attend to his needs and the needs of the whole congregation before the tabernacle of meeting, to do the work of the tabernacle. Also they shall attend to all the furnishings of the tabernacle of meeting, and to the needs of the children of Israel, to do the work of the tabernacle. And you shall give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are given entirely to him from among the children of Israel. So you shall appoint Aaron and his sons, and they shall attend to their priesthood; but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death.’”* (Numbers 3:5-10) Yahweh’s metaphors work on various levels. They aren’t always restricted to precisely the same meaning, and you can’t extrapolate their lessons with impunity. For example, within His symbolic hierarchy of Israel, Yahweh often draws distinctions between one group and another to illustrate some point. So we see that the priesthood (as a group within Israel) normally represents believers in the sense that they—as sons of the High Priest—intercede between God and man. But that doesn’t mean that people outside the priesthood necessarily symbolize non-believers. We must take each example in its own context and on its own terms.

There are other places (as in the precepts rounding out this chapter) where the line of demarcation is drawn at the tribal level: the Levites are seen in the role of believers, leaving non-Levites, “outsiders” who usurp their God-ordained place (as Korah tried to do in Numbers 16), dead where they stand. In still other places, the whole nation of Israel is pictured as being set apart to Yahweh, leaving the world outside to play the role of strangers to God. But remember, these are all only pictures, symbols, or parables designed to teach us about the nature of Yahweh’s plan of redemption. The reality is that anyone, at any time, no matter where his family tree is planted, may become a child of God. The portrayal of the redeemed as priests, Levites, or Israelites merely teaches us different lessons about how we believers are to function within the Kingdom of God. Please don’t confuse God’s symbols with the truths they represent.

Here, then, we see how the Levites, as believers, are to function. Note first that they are “given” to Aaron (who represents the Messiah) to help with the work of the ministry. So who are the ordinary priests in this context? Paul tells us: **“He Himself [Yahshua] gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of**

the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God.” (Ephesians 4:11-13) The priests in this metaphor, then, are the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, and *their* job is to equip the saints (a.k.a. the Levites) to minister. But minister to whom? To the world at large or to the household of faith? It may come as something of a surprise, but both passages speak of ministering only *to other believers*, not necessarily to the world. Paul speaks of “edifying (building up) the body of Christ, that is, the ekklesia or Church. He tells us in this passage to grow up, leave our old corrupt conduct behind, live in truth, understanding, honesty, industry and forgiveness, and “be kind to one another.” Moses, meanwhile, says the Levites are to (1) attend to Aaron’s (read: Yahshua’s) needs; (2) attend to the needs of the whole congregation of Israel—which is by definition set apart to Yahweh; (3) do the work of the Tabernacle by attending to its furnishings (that is, the Plan of God—something we’ll address in more detail as we proceed); and (4) attend to the needs of the priesthood—the apostles, prophets, pastors, and teachers of which Paul wrote.

Does this mean believers shouldn’t participate in “worthy causes” such as soup kitchens, drug rehab clinics, and AIDS relief efforts? Believe it or not, if your only aim is to feed the homeless, get junkies off drugs, and relieve the suffering people have brought upon themselves through their sin, then yes, that’s exactly what it means. Don’t waste your time. If, however, your aim in doing these things is to demonstrate the love of God to people who desperately need Him—if your *modus operandi* is to fulfill the Great Commission by showing compassion to those who need it most, then by all means, proceed. My point is that if you give people food or medicine, you’ve extended their lives for a day. But if you give them God’s salvation, you’ve extended their lives for eternity. Call me heartless, but charity without Christ is a cruel joke, a leaky life raft. Our *primary* instructions as believers are to attend to the needs of other believers. **“A new commandment I [Yahshua] give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”** (John 13:34-35)

- (781) *The Levites belong to Yahweh.* **“Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Now behold, I Myself have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of Israel. Therefore the Levites shall be Mine, because all the firstborn are Mine. On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They shall be Mine: I am Yahweh.’”** (Numbers 3:11-13) Considering the fact that Yahweh, as Creator of the universe, owns everything, He has reserved to Himself very little, it seems—one small

city in all the world, Jerusalem, one nation, Israel, and of that nation, only the firstborn of both man and beast. Here Yahweh explains why. In order to free Israel from bondage in Egypt, He had slain the firstborn of Egypt—both people and livestock (Exodus 12:29-32). So in a manner of speaking, He had purchased the firstborn of Israel at the price of the firstborn of Egypt. Or as it says here, by striking Egypt, He set apart Israel to Himself—He *sanctified* it. In reality, of course, this was all designed to be a symbol of God’s unfolding plan to rescue mankind from our bondage to sin in the world—by sacrificing His own “Firstborn,” Yahshua the Messiah, to purchase our freedom. That’s why Yahweh let his chosen people spend four hundred years in slavery in a foreign land—*before* they had ever rebelled against Him. The picture He was creating would have been incomprehensible if no one could see that Israel was being saved *from* something. Not recognizing their Messiah (yet), it’s *still* incomprehensible to today’s Jews.

So principle number one is that God has claimed Israel’s firstborn for Himself. Principle number two is that He has then *substituted* one tribe out of the twelve, Levi, for Israel’s actual firstborn sons. **“Then Yahweh said to Moses: ‘Number all the firstborn males of the children of Israel from a month old and above, and take the number of their names. And you shall take the Levites for Me—I am Yahweh—instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the livestock of the children of Israel.’”** (Numbers 3:40-41) This tells us beyond the shadow of a doubt that we’re dealing with divine metaphor. Yahweh isn’t really interested in the particular men and beasts that opened the womb. Rather, He’s defining Who would be called upon to sacrifice Himself to secure mankind’s ultimate freedom: His own “Firstborn” (in the sense that His Messiah would be preeminent among men). Yahshua would be substituted as a sacrifice in place of us men who deserved to die for our crimes, just as the tribe of Levi was substituted for the firstborn of Israel. Once again, if you don’t understand the Messianic connection, the whole thing looks like Israel’s God is a manipulative megalomaniac. No wonder so many Jews are functional atheists.

- (782) *Number the Levites.* **“Then Yahweh spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, saying: ‘Number the children of Levi by their fathers’ houses, by their families; you shall number every male from a month old and above.’”** (Numbers 3:14-15) There’s more to this than Yahweh merely wanting to know how many Levites there were (as if He didn’t know). They were to be categorized by their fathers’ houses, their clans. (We’ll see why in a bit.) Why were the males to be numbered from the age of one month, and not from birth? Again, because there’s more to this than numbers. Each male child was to

be circumcised at eight days of age, which is in itself a picture: the barrier that separates us from Yahweh at birth—sin—has been permanently removed, cut off and destroyed. It's a process that involves blood and pain, but one that makes us available for God's use. (See Mitzvah #17.) The child would have been named on the day of his circumcision. From this point on, he had his own identity (as opposed to merely being Yakob and Zibiah's baby boy). As a practical matter, however, the child was still considered vulnerable to a variety of post-natal health hazards until the age of about one month—at which point he was statistically “out of the woods.” A quick survey of each census taken by Moses reveals that baby boys were never counted in a population before the age of one month. In fact, even animals were left uncounted until they had reached the one-month milestone (cf. Numbers 18:16).

The point of all this is that once we belong to Yahweh, He “knows” who we are. He calls us by our names, knows what we're like, who we're related to, and what our background is, and recognizes our accomplishments and potential as well as our past failures and vulnerability. He knows what we want *and* what we need. We're not just a number to Him. We are His children. I have eleven kids, but I know more about my family than merely how large it is. I also know my children's names, their characters, their strengths and weaknesses, their handicaps and potential. I have a pretty good handle on what makes them tick. What kind of father would I be if I only kept track of *how many* children I had?

- (783) *Substitute the firstborn of Israel with Levites.* “**Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites instead of their livestock. The Levites shall be Mine: I am Yahweh. And for the redemption of the two hundred and seventy-three of the firstborn of the children of Israel, who are more than the number of the Levites, you shall take five shekels for each one individually; you shall take them in the currency of the shekel of the sanctuary, the shekel of twenty gerahs. And you shall give the money, with which the excess number of them is redeemed, to Aaron and his sons.’**” (Numbers 3:44-48) Here is indisputable evidence that God's claim upon the “firstborn” of man and beast is symbolic of some greater reality. His command to number the firstborn of Israel, setting them apart for Himself (verse 40) was still hanging in the air when He turned around and said, in effect, “Oh, by the way, I'm not interested in the *actual* firstborn of Israel—only in their number. I want the tribe of Levi to stand in for them.” As it turned out, the number came out pretty close: there were 22,273 firstborn males in Israel at the time, and an even 22,000 Levite men (verse 39). The difference is a little over one percent.

Yahweh then provided a means to transfer “ownership” of even these few “leftovers” to the tribe of Levi. Each of the 273 men was to be “redeemed” by the payment of five shekels (about 1.8 ounces of silver) to the priests. (Five, if you’ll recall, is the number symbolic of grace.) These weren’t specific individuals, you understand. The number was simply a total of the overage, a statistic. The point is that the sacrifice of Yahweh’s firstborn, Yahshua, would be precisely “enough” to redeem *all* of mankind. No one would be left out of the offer because he was “too hard” or “beyond reach.” No one would fall into the cracks, so to speak. Anyone who chose to accept God’s gift of love would find that gift sufficient for his needs.

The percentage of firstborn to be bought back (as opposed to being directly substituted) was, as I said, slightly over one percent of the total. If I may indulge in a little blue-sky speculation, could this indicate the proportion of Israelites living today, as we approach the “time of Jacob’s trouble,” compared to the total population of earth? I honestly don’t know, because not every child of Israel knows his heritage—something that’s been a fact of life since the Assyrian invasion of 722 B.C. The Jews of which we are aware number somewhere in the neighborhood of two-tenths of one percent of the world’s population. So this hypothesis is suggesting that there may actually be *five times* that number. My gut is telling me that Yahweh may be drawing a subtle distinction between their mode of redemption and that of everyone else on the planet. Yes, I know it all boils down to grace through faith in the Messiah’s atoning sacrifice, but let’s face it: the path Israel as a nation will take in finally arriving at this conclusion will be—shall we say—*unusual*. For the gory details, see *Future History*, Chapter 22: “The Great Awakening.”

- (784) *The Levites shall encamp surrounding the Tabernacle. “The children of Israel shall pitch their tents, everyone by his own camp, everyone by his own standard, according to their armies; but the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the Testimony, that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the children of Israel; and the Levites shall keep charge of the tabernacle of the Testimony.”* (Numbers 1:52-53) The Tabernacle, as we have seen, is a detailed picture of the Plan of God for mankind’s salvation. The Israelites were told (in Numbers 2) where they were to encamp—by tribe—in relationship to the Sanctuary, the center of the national encampment. I find it significant that Judah (Yahshua’s tribe) is named first on the eastern side, “guarding” the only entrance to the Tabernacle compound, joined by Issachar and Zebulun. On the south side, Reuben, Simeon, and Gad were to camp. Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin took their places on the west, and Dan, Asher, and Naphtali were stationed on the north side. But the

tribe of Levi was to *surround* the Sanctuary on all four sides, forming a buffer between their brother Israelites and the Tabernacle.

I believe God's point to this arrangement is patently obvious. Wherever you are in the world, you'll need to "go through" Yahweh's true believers (represented here by the Levites) in order to enter and participate in the Plan of God. They functioned like a door or gate, blocking unauthorized entrance but admitting those who wished to enter according to Yahweh's provision. That is, since there was but one entrance to the courtyard, you couldn't just waltz up to the enclosure from any direction and force your way in—cutting through the linen fence or digging underneath it (pictures of heresy and false doctrine)—because the Levites were zealously watching. Rather, they would conduct you to the entrance—the only entrance—which in the long run turns out to be Yahshua the Messiah. Remember, the goal of visiting the Tabernacle was to approach Yahweh, who was metaphorically characterized as dwelling between the cherubim in the Most Holy Place. To get there, one had to first encounter the eastern gate, the altar, the laver, the table of showbread, the seven-branched lamp, and the altar of incense—each indicative of the Messiah's ministry in its own way. It was no flippant off-the-cuff remark when Yahshua told His disciples, **"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."** (John 14:6) The Laws concerning the Tabernacle (like this one) had said exactly the same thing. And how does one "come to the Father through" Christ? By heeding the message of those carrying out the Great Commission, the witnesses of God's saving grace—in other words, by "going through" the Levites who surround the Tabernacle.

- (785) *The priests shall encamp nearest the entrance to the Tabernacle courtyard. **Moreover those who were to camp before the tabernacle on the east, before the tabernacle of meeting, were Moses, Aaron, and his sons, keeping charge of the sanctuary, to meet the needs of the children of Israel; but the outsider who came near was to be put to death.*** (Numbers 3:38) Continuing and refining the thought of the previous precept, we see that the family within the tribe of Levi who were to camp immediately outside the entrance to the Tabernacle, on the east side of the courtyard, were the priests (including Moses). That is, among believers in general tasked with conducting the world's seekers to God's "way, truth, and life," the "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers" whom Yahweh gave to the saints to "equip them for the work of the ministry" (as we saw in Ephesians 4—Precept #780) were to be the gatekeepers of the Plan of God. The priests were appointed—and anointed—for this very

responsibility: “keeping charge of the Sanctuary, to meet the needs of the children of Israel.”

Unfortunately, being seen as God’s gatekeepers has for some brought with it the lure of personal enrichment—the satisfaction of a lust for power or prestige, or even (strangely enough) wealth. So *self-appointed* “priests” of various stripes have, through the years, placed themselves in this role—granting (or so it was claimed) access to “god” on the basis of religious tradition or personal determination instead of the Word of Yahweh. These false priests positioned themselves in between their “Levites” (the laity they were supposed to be equipping) and the Tabernacle of Truth—blocking admission to any soul who didn’t submit to their vision. I’m not singling out any one religion here, but chastising *all of them*: Catholic priests and Protestant clergy, Jewish rabbis and Muslim imams, Buddhist bodhisattvas and Hindu gurus, Communo-fascist dictators, secular-humanist philosophers and technocrats, and a hundred other permutations of this evil. If they aren’t guiding seekers to Yahweh through Yahshua the Messiah—if they’re promoting some alternative solution to man’s hunger for truth, righteousness, and personal fulfillment—then they’re not true “priests.” Remember Yahweh’s order: His priests were not recruited—they were born to the position and anointed for the task. They weren’t merely zealous Israelites; they were sons of Aaron. The priesthood was not a station to be attained; it was a calling to be answered. We dare not ignore the warning to those tempted to usurp the assigned role of Yahweh’s priests: **“the outsider who came near was to be put to death.”**

- (786) *Symbolically cleanse the Levites.* **“Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Take the Levites from among the children of Israel and cleanse them ceremonially.’”** (Numbers 8:5-6) In this permutation of the salvation metaphor, the Levites represent the redeemed, and Israel plays the role of the world at large. First, they are to be separated (read: made holy) from the rest of the congregation. Second, they are to be ritually cleansed. This is a picture of what happens to a seeker after righteousness when he or she embraces the grace of Yahshua’s sacrifice: first, separation from the world, and then cleansing, enabling the worshipper to stand in the very presence of God.

The instructions for the cleansing were quite specific. **“Thus you shall do to them to cleanse them: Sprinkle water of purification on them, and let them shave all their body, and let them wash their clothes, and so make themselves clean....”** This isn’t an anointing, such as the priests underwent in Precepts #751-#762. Although the same ultimate group (the redeemed) are being pictured, a different set of images is being employed to point out a different lesson about them. What struck me immediately was that the

cleansing of the Levites was a great deal like the cleansing of lepers, especially as we saw in Mitzvot #577 and #579. The sprinkling of their bodies with the water of purification and the washing of their clothes are often-used metaphors for a believer's spiritual cleansing in the sight of a holy God, so there's no surprise there. But the idea of completely shaving one's body is unexpected, if not shocking. As we learned in the case of the cleansed leper, however, it is indicative of ridding ourselves of the things—usually *religious* things—that tend to cloud or obscure the true nature of our relationship with Yahweh. In the case of the leper, the shaving was done subsequent to receiving the cure, but prior to having been pronounced clean by the priest. The point, here as there, is that religious practice, if it exists at all in a believer's life, is to grow naturally from his relationship with Yahweh and his fellowship with his spiritual brothers and sisters. This relationship is never the *result* of religious ritual observance.

The instructions continue. **“Then let them take a young bull with its grain offering of fine flour mixed with oil, and you shall take another young bull as a sin offering.”** The first bull, as will be made clear in verse 12, was to be an *olah*, that is, a burnt offering made in homage to Yahweh. **“And you shall bring the Levites before the tabernacle of meeting, and you shall gather together the whole congregation of the children of Israel. So you shall bring the Levites before Yahweh, and the children of Israel shall lay their hands on the Levites.”** (Numbers 8:7-10) The laying on of hands indicates a purposeful transference of something, as in the conveyance of the sins of a man or a nation onto the head of a sacrificial animal. So what is being transferred here from Israel (symbolic of the world) to the Levites (the redeemed)? As we'll see in the very next verse, the Levites were to “perform the work of Yahweh.” I believe what's being said here is something quite profound: the unredeemed world *cannot* “perform the work of Yahweh.” That capacity and privilege has been transferred to true believers—exclusively. Good works done by non-believers are of no value in the eternal scheme of things. They earn the do-gooder neither a pat on the back from Yahweh (since such intimate contact would kill him in his natural state), nor lay up for him treasures in heaven (since that's not his eternal home, and he doesn't have an account at that bank). I must reiterate that these are only *pictures* God is painting. He's not saying that the Levites are saved and that everybody else is damned. But in this particular drama, Israel plays the clueless villain, and the Levites are playing the hero. Note that all this happened “before Yahweh.” He is the audience (and we're right there with Him).

(787) *Offer up the Levites as a wave offering to Yahweh.* **“And Aaron shall offer the Levites before Yahweh like a wave offering from the children of Israel, that they may perform the work of Yahweh. Then the Levites shall lay their hands on the heads of the young bulls, and you shall offer one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering to Yahweh, to make atonement for the Levites. And you shall stand the Levites before Aaron and his sons, and then offer them like a wave offering to Yahweh. Thus you shall separate the Levites from among the children of Israel, and the Levites shall be Mine.”** (Numbers 8:11-14) A wave, or “heave,” offering was a symbolic way of “giving” to Yahweh that which wasn’t physically going to be transferred to Him. For example, the grain offerings that were to be eaten by the priests were first waved before Yahweh in dedication to Him. So although Aaron couldn’t literally pick up the Levites and wave them before Yahweh like a sheaf of wheat, the principle was the same: the Levites could be of use to the priests in the service of the Tabernacle only because they had first been dedicated to God.

The Feast of Firstfruits puts this into perspective for us. At that time, the first sheaves of the spring barley harvest were waved before Yahweh in thankfulness and anticipation of the harvest that would eventually follow. The miqra is thus prophetic of the presentation of the risen Yahshua before the Father on resurrection Sunday (following the crucifixion on Passover and the removal of our sin by His sojourn in the tomb on the Feast of Unleavened Bread). If Yahshua was the Firstfruits, the “firstborn from the dead” (compare Colossians 1:18 to I Corinthians 15:20), then we who follow Him in faith comprise the harvest that follows. And just as He was presented as a wave offering, so too are we—dedicated for the work of the ministry of the Tabernacle, the working out of the Plan of God in this world.

“After that the Levites shall go in to service the tabernacle of meeting. So you shall cleanse them and offer them like a wave offering. For they are wholly given to Me from among the children of Israel.” Again, service starts only after cleansing and dedication. It is pointless to “work for God” in our own strength or in pursuit of our own agenda. Alms, penance, and abstinence from evildoing are only of value after one is cleansed. These things have no efficacy at all in *making* a person clean or sanctified.

Yahweh now reiterates who the Levites represent, and why He wants them. **I have taken them for Myself instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the children of Israel. For all the firstborn among the children of Israel are Mine, both man and beast; on the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them to Myself. I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn of the children of Israel. And I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and**

his sons from among the children of Israel, to do the work for the children of Israel in the tabernacle of meeting.” So far, this is no surprise; we’ve seen these truths before. But hold onto your hat: “...and to make atonement for the children of Israel, that there be no plague among the children of Israel when the children of Israel come near the sanctuary.” (Numbers 8:15-19) Whoa! Wait a minute! What does He mean by saying the Levites are given as a gift to Aaron to make atonement for the others? What about the bulls and goats of the Day of Atonement (as in Leviticus 16)? What about the altar, with all those burnt offerings and sin offerings?

Actually, all of these things are pictures of the same reality—the atoning work of the coming Messiah. Perhaps we should review what it means to “atone.” The Hebrew word is *kaphar*, a verb that means to cover (as with pitch), to purge, make reconciliation, pacify, or appease. The *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains* also defines it as to “ransom, i.e., pay an amount of money as a gift, with a *quid pro quo* of so being allowed to keep one’s freedom.” The phrase *kaphar paneh* means to “pacify, give a gift, formally, cover the face, i.e., give a gift of tribute which will establish some level of relationship, possibly implying reconciliation.” So “atonement” is far less technical a concept than we ordinarily make of it. At its heart, it’s an action, prompted by a gift, that brings two parties together who were formerly estranged. Both parties have to agree on the terms of the arrangement; otherwise reconciliation would not result. The fascinating thing in the spiritual context is who is atoning for whom. Ordinarily, an act of *kaphar* would entail the exercise of humility: the weaker party would apply to the stronger, bringing a gift he hopes will cover the old animosity. But what do we see in scripture? Yahweh, the almighty, omnipotent Creator of the whole universe, is seen providing the gift He hopes will be accepted by us! Though we have estranged ourselves from God, He stands ready to heal the breach we have caused. It is He who seeks reconciliation with us (mostly ’cause we’re too dumb to know we need it, I think). I wonder what the Hebrew word for “Wow” is.

The ultimate expression of the *kaphar* gift, of course, is Yahshua’s sacrifice on Calvary. So returning to our original conundrum, what is the meaning of the Levites being given as a gift to Aaron to make atonement for the children of Israel? Yahweh, as it turns out, had explained it (sort of) in His recap of events earlier in the same paragraph. In order to extricate Israel from bondage in the world, He had “sacrificed” Egypt’s firstborn, both man and beast. Just as bulls and goats became symbolic substitutes for the reality to follow, God’s purchase price of Israel—the firstborn of Egypt—was substituted, first for the firstborn of Israel, and

then in turn for the tribe of Levi. But who was the ultimate firstborn son? Who did all of these illustrations point toward? To Yahshua the Messiah: Yahweh's symbolic "Firstborn" Son, the *kaphar* gift presented to humanity by God to reconcile us to Himself. That's right: the Levites in this context represent Christ. They are both defined as **"performing the work of Yahweh,"** and doing **"the work for the children of Israel in the Tabernacle of Meeting,"** in other words, doing the work on behalf of the people of the world in the Plan of God.

And what happens if Yahshua the Messiah is rejected, if Christ is not entrusted in our lives with the work of the Tabernacle? The Levites were put in place so **"that there [would] be no plague among the children of Israel when the children of Israel come near the sanctuary."** The only way into the Plan of God (for the umpteenth time) is through Christ. The alternative is a "plague."

- (788) *The Levites shall serve only between the ages of twenty-five and fifty.* **"Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, 'This is what pertains to the Levites: From twenty-five years old and above one may enter to perform service in the work of the tabernacle of meeting; and at the age of fifty years they must cease performing this work, and shall work no more. They may minister with their brethren in the tabernacle of meeting, to attend to needs, but they themselves shall do no work. Thus you shall do to the Levites regarding their duties.'**" (Numbers 8:23-26)
- Aside from being a practical rule to restrict the heavy lifting required in Tabernacle maintenance to men in their prime, I believe this is also a Messianic prophecy. As we saw in the previous precept, the Levites in their role as workers in the Tabernacle are metaphorical of Yahshua the Messiah, "performing the work of Yahweh" there. I believe we are being given subtle clues as to the outer limits of the Messiah's age during the years of His earthly ministry. From this precept, we know that He would be at least twenty-five when beginning His work, and He would have completed it before He turned fifty. And so we read the confirmation in the gospels. **"Now Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age."** (Luke 3:23) In a backhanded confirmation, we read in Numbers 4 that the first census of Levites (See Precepts #789-#798) would include only those men who had reached the age of thirty. Apparently, twenty-five year olds were still considered too green for this work unless supervised by their fathers. (On the other hand, you were considered old enough to fight Canaanites the day you turned twenty.)

And the upper limit? Yahshua's adversaries, disputing His timelessness (not to mention His deity), confirmed that he was within the requisite age parameters. **"Then the Jews said to Him, 'You are not yet fifty years**

old, and have You seen Abraham?” (John 8:57) In Yahshua’s case, His earthly ministry lasted only about three and a half years. He was born in His mortal manifestation in the fall of 2 B.C., began His public ministry (putting pieces of the Plan of God into place) “about thirty” years later, in the fall of 29 A.D., and died three and a half years later, in the spring of 33, having declared, “It is finished.”

What were Levites supposed to do after they turned fifty? Retire, kick back, boss the younger guys? No, actually. They were to “minister” to the needs of the younger, stronger men. The Hebrew word is *sharat*, meaning to serve, to attend, to render assistance, the implication being to assume a lower status than the one being served. I can relate to this. I’ve been involved in worship music in some capacity or other since I was a youngster, and I assumed a leadership role in my thirties (or thereabouts—at my advanced age, I can’t remember, exactly). But when I hit my fifties, I took a back seat, so to speak: I began to *sharat* for younger musicians instead of leading worship myself. And now I can really see the wisdom in this precept. I no longer get wrapped up in the logistics of corporate worship, in the heavy lifting of preparation and execution. Now I just show up to worship, sing, and play my fingers off. I’m really *loving* this phase of my life. Of course, I didn’t realize until now that the Torah had been instructing me what to do all along. Sigh.

DUTIES OF THE LEVITES: KOHATH

- (789) *Number the working Kohathites.* “Then Yahweh spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ‘Take a census of the sons of Kohath from among the children of Levi, by their families, by their fathers’ house, from thirty years old and above, even to fifty years old, all who enter the service to do the work in the tabernacle of meeting.’”

(Numbers 4:1-3) The work of the Tabernacle was further divided according to Levitical clan. The descendants of each of the three sons of Levi (Gershon, Kohath, and Merari) had separate job descriptions. In customary defiance of human wisdom, Yahweh lists Levi’s second son first. Kohath was the clan from which Moses and Aaron descended, so it was the family from which the priests would come. The census revealed that there were 2,750 Kohathites who fit the profile.

The name Kohath (Hebrew: *Qehath* or *Qahat*) is from an unused root meaning to ally oneself, and the name means “assembly.” To put things in perspective, a related word (*qahal* = assembly or congregation) is usually translated as *ekklesia* in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Covenant scriptures), which in turn invariably shows up in our English translations as “church.” In other words, the entity we know as the

“church” (and actually means “assembly”) is reflected in the name of Kohath. Reinforcing the thought, Kohath’s father’s name, Levi, means “joined to.” We too are an assembly, joined to Yahweh through faith in Yahshua.

- (790) *The Kohathites must wait for the priests to do their work before they can do theirs.* **“This is the service of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of meeting, relating to the most holy things: When the camp prepares to journey, Aaron and his sons shall come, and they shall take down the covering veil and cover the ark of the Testimony with it. Then they shall put on it a covering of badger [actually, porpoise] skins, and spread over that a cloth entirely of blue; and they shall insert its poles.”** (Numbers 4:4-6) When it came time to move the Tabernacle, the Kohathites were charged with the transport of the furnishings, fixtures, and implements employed there (a fact we’ll develop further in the following Precept). We begin with instructions concerning the most important thing they were to move—the ark of the covenant.

What was the first thing the Kohathites were supposed to do? They were told to *wait*. Before they could do their jobs, the priests (Aaron and his sons) had to prepare the way. Because the ark of the covenant with its two cherubim atop the mercy seat was the place where Yahweh’s Spirit—the glorious Shekinah—was said to dwell, it had to be handled with the utmost care and respect. You didn’t just throw it in the back of a pickup truck and drive off. It was to be carried by four Levites using poles that ran through four golden rings. First, the priests removed from its four pillars the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy (see Precept #723). They then covered the ark with it, or perhaps “wrapped” might be a better description, for the veil measured ten cubits (about fifteen feet) square all together. The ark was then covered with two more layers, first one of porpoise skin (as in the outer layer of the Tabernacle curtain—see Precept #714), and then one of solid royal blue (*tekelet*) cloth.

The remark about “inserting the poles” is counter to something we already know about them: these staves were *never* to be removed from their golden rings. (See Mitzvah #429, which explores Exodus 25:15, for the amazing reason.) We’ve run afoul of a Hebrew idiom here, something that, frankly, is so esoteric I can’t fault the translators for missing it. I checked at least a dozen English versions, and none of them caught it. The verb translated here as “insert” is the Hebrew *suwm*, which means to put, place, set, appoint, make, direct, determine, establish, or to set or make for a sign. According to the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, the word is used of placing something in a location, appointing people to

positions, establishing a new relationship, assigning something to someone, to bring about a change, or to set aside something for a special purpose. So except for the fact that it makes scripture contradictory, rendering *suwm* “insert” makes perfectly good sense. But what it really means is that the poles, which were already in place (and which, if you’ll recall, represent the redeemed), were to be “established,” or invested with the nature of a sign, by the High Priest—ultimately, by Yahshua. It is He who appoints and directs us.

That’s why the Kohathites had to wait. Their (our) work is pointless and even dangerous if we “run ahead” of what our Messiah has established as our proper course of action. Since our strength—our ability to do good things in the world—is derived solely from Yahweh, we would be well advised to “Rest in Yahweh, and wait patiently for Him.... For evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait on Yahweh, they shall inherit the earth.... Wait on Yahweh, and keep His way, and He shall exalt you to inherit the land.” (Psalm 37:7, 9, 34)

- (791) *The Kohathites shall attend to the furnishings within the Tabernacle.* “On the table of showbread they [Aaron and His sons] shall spread a blue cloth, and put on it the dishes, the pans, the bowls, and the pitchers for pouring; and the showbread shall be on it. They shall spread over them a scarlet cloth, and cover the same with a covering of badger [porpoise] skins; and they shall insert its poles. And they shall take a blue cloth and cover the lampstand of the light, with its lamps, its wick-trimmers, its trays, and all its oil vessels, with which they service it. Then they shall put it with all its utensils in a covering of badger [porpoise] skins, and put it on a carrying beam. Over the golden altar they shall spread a blue cloth, and cover it with a covering of badger [porpoise] skins; and they shall insert its poles. Then they shall take all the utensils of service with which they minister in the sanctuary, put them in a blue cloth, cover them with a covering of badger [porpoise] skins, and put them on a carrying beam.” (Numbers 4:7-12) We’re still in the passage defined by the command, “**This is the service of the sons of Kohath in the tabernacle of meeting, relating to the most holy things.**” Again, the first thing the Kohathites were to do was wait for Aaron and his sons to properly prepare the Sanctuary furnishings for travel, which they, the Kohathites, would then transport. Each piece within the Holy Place was to be packed with the integral components that pertained to it. The “utensils of service” were to be packed in a similar way by themselves. Because all these things were considered “most holy,” nothing was to be picked up and carried “by hand.” Nor was it to be put on a cart or wagon for shipping. Rather, carrying poles like the ones used to transport the ark of the covenant were to be used. The bronze altar, the table of showbread, and the altar of incense all had rings through which these poles could be

inserted, but even the menorah was to be “put on a carrying beam” for transport.

All these things were to be covered, not only for their protection, but also to keep them from being seen by curious “outsiders.” All the ordinary Israelite would see as they traveled would be nondescript gray bundles being carried on poles by groups of Levites. The porpoise-skin coverings served the same purpose here as in the Tabernacle itself. They hid from profane view that which was reserved for the benefit of the redeemed: (1) the provision of Yahweh, represented by the table of showbread; (2) the access to God through prayer, symbolized by the altar of incense; and (3) the light provided through the Messiah, Israel, and the church by the Spirit of Yahweh, indicated by the golden lampstand.

The one exception (sort of) was the ark of the covenant, which, after being covered with the customary porpoise skins, was to be covered with an outer layer of blue-dyed cloth. This, of course, is because the ark and integral mercy seat was the place where the blood of atonement was sprinkled—salvation, after all, is not reserved for the saved; the doctor is sent to heal the sick, not the whole. So the blue covering indicated that among all the furnishings of the Tabernacle, this one piece was worthy of special attention. The royal blue covering indicated that this was the object—above all others—that represented the Messiah’s right to rule over Israel. This was where mankind could be reconciled to Yahweh, if only we would recognize His sovereignty.

- (792) *The Kohathites shall attend to the altar. “Also they [the priests] shall take away the ashes from the altar, and spread a purple cloth over it. They shall put on it all its implements with which they minister there—the firepans, the forks, the shovels, the basins, and all the utensils of the altar—and they shall spread on it a covering of badger [porpoise] skins, and insert its poles.”* (Numbers 4:13-14)
The bronze altar of sacrifice, the largest single item in the inventory, was to be prepared for transport in the same way, even though it was ordinarily standing in plain view in the Tabernacle courtyard. Covered first with purple (*argaman*—red-purple, a reminder of the exceedingly precious commodity that was spent here: the life-blood of innocence—not *tekelet* royal blue) the altar then received the usual porpoise-skin covering (which, if you’ll recall, indicates Yahweh’s provision for life’s journey). As with the other large pieces, the altar was equipped with rings at the corners, through which poles were inserted as a means to carry it from place to place.

“And when Aaron and his sons have finished covering the sanctuary and all the furnishings of the sanctuary, when the camp is set to go, then the sons of Kohath

shall come to carry them; but they shall not touch any holy thing, lest they die. These are the things in the tabernacle of meeting which the sons of Kohath are to carry.” (Numbers 4:15) I’m not sure why, but the bronze laver was not mentioned in this passage. I think it’s a safe assumption that the Kohathites were to carry this piece as well (since they were to carry “*all* of the furnishings of the sanctuary”). I presume the laver would have been prepared for transport by the priests in the same way—covered with porpoise skins and then carried upon the shoulders of the Kohathites with the use of poles. But we aren’t told. At any rate, it is clear that the safety of the Kohathites depended upon the priests (the pastors, teachers, etc.) having done their job correctly. If the Tabernacle furnishings had not been properly covered, wrapped, and equipped with their carrying poles, the Kohathites could inadvertently perish through accidental contact. In fact, just such an incident is recorded in II Samuel 6. We dare not handle the holy things of Yahweh in an irreverent manner. And I’m *not* just talking about furniture.

- (793) *Protect the Kohathites.* **“Then Yahweh spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: ‘Do not cut off the tribe of the families of the Kohathites from among the Levites; but do this in regard to them, that they may live and not die when they approach the most holy things: Aaron and his sons shall go in and appoint each of them to his service and his task. But they shall not go in to watch while the holy things are being covered, lest they die.’”** (Numbers 4:17-20) Being a Levite of the house of Kohath brought with it honor and responsibility, but it also brought potential danger, for no one in Israel had more intimate contact with the holy things of the Tabernacle except for their cousins, the priests. Yahweh made it clear that if the Kohathites did their jobs improperly—either by usurping the role of Aaron and his sons or doing their own jobs in an unworthy manner—they might die.

The same two-edged sword confronts every believer today. On the one hand, we are not to presume to do the things God has reserved for Himself. “Saving people” is not our prerogative. We can’t drag recalcitrant sinners kicking and screaming to the throne of grace and expect anything good to result from our efforts. We can’t legislate morality and then expect people’s good behavior to magically blossom into eternal life. We can’t play the role of inquisitors—“conversion enforcers”—and expect our victims to do anything but curse the God we say we serve. We can’t invent religions and traditions and expect them to have any efficacy in releasing our fellow man from his bondage to sin. We can’t decide what a holy God should or should not accept as an atoning sacrifice. When we prescribe penance, when we designate saints or angels as intermediaries, when we invest manmade rules with the power to

impress and placate God, we have overstepped our mandate—we have killed the Kohathites.

On the other hand, we are not to take our God-given responsibilities lightly, either. We are to revere Yahweh. We are to love one another. We are to be witnesses of God's saving grace at home and abroad. We are to rejoice always, remain watchful, be filled with Yahweh's Spirit, live in humility, pray without ceasing, search the scriptures, and trust Yahshua with every fiber of our being. If (or is it when?) we slide into apathy toward Yahweh, ambivalence toward our fellow man, distrust of God's willingness or ability to provide our needs, when we succumb to fear, isolation, laziness, or selfishness, we are once again guilty of killing Kohath.

DUTIES OF THE LEVITES: GERSHON

- (794) *Number the working Gershonites.* **“Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Also take a census of the sons of Gershon, by their fathers’ house, by their families. From thirty years old and above, even to fifty years old, you shall number them, all who enter to perform the service, to do the work in the tabernacle of meeting.’”** (Numbers 4:21-23) As with the Kohathites, their brothers the sons of Gershon were to work in the service of the Tabernacle between the ages of twenty-five and fifty, though only those who had reached the age of thirty would be numbered. There were 2,630 of them in this inaugural generation, just a few less than there were Kohathites.

The meaning of Gershon's name may come as a surprise if you're expecting something encouraging and affirming about the life of a believer (like Kohath—meaning “assembly”—was). Gershon means “Exile.” It's based on the verb *garash*, meaning to drive out, expel, or drive away. If this seems like an odd moniker for people who “enter to perform the service,” and who “do the work of the Tabernacle,” remember that **“Friendship with the world is enmity with God.”** (James 4:4) David, on the run from a murderous King Saul, asked, **“Why does my lord [Saul] thus pursue his servant? For what have I done, or what evil is in my hand? Now therefore, please, let my lord the king hear the words of his servant: If Yahweh has stirred you up against me, let Him accept an offering. But if it is the children of men, may they be cursed before Yahweh, for they have driven me out [*garash*] this day from sharing in the inheritance of Yahweh.”** (I Samuel 26:18-19) We too need to constantly consider whether the “exile” we endure in this world is because we are *not* at enmity with God—making outsiders uncomfortable—or whether there actually *is* “evil in our hands” from which we need to repent. In our mortal walk, we believers will invariably be held to a stricter standard than the

unredeemed—by both God and man. But believers should never forget that we are but pilgrims here, exiles in a world that irrationally hates us because they hate the God we serve.

- (795) *The Gershonites shall attend to the “soft parts” of the Tabernacle. “This is the service of the families of the Gershonites, in serving and carrying: They shall carry the curtains of the tabernacle and the tabernacle of meeting with its covering, the covering of [porpoise] skins that is on it, the screen for the door of the tabernacle of meeting, the screen for the door of the gate of the court, the hangings of the court which are around the tabernacle and altar, and their cords, all the furnishings for their service and all that is made for these things: so shall they serve.”* (Numbers 4:24-26) The Levites in the family of Gershon were assigned the task of transporting the fabric and leather components of the Tabernacle and its courtyard. If you’ll recall, the Tabernacle proper had four layers of coverings, each layer consisting of either ten or eleven strips of embroidered linen, heavy woven goat-hair cloth, ram skins, or porpoise hides, six feet wide and up to forty-five feet long. Then, the linen panels making up the “fence” around the Tabernacle courtyard—fifty-six of them—each measured about seven and a half feet square. There were also substantial curtains at the entrances to the courtyard and the Holy Place. This all added up to thousands of square yards of heavy cloth or leather that had to be secured, packed, loaded, and transported—plus hundreds of gold and bronze clasps that held the curtains together at strategic places.

If you’ve ever packed up your closet to move, you may have some idea of what the Gershonites were up against every time Yahweh said, “Let’s go.” Even with almost three thousand guys, it was a big job. It was doable, but only if everyone pitched in and did his part. I can’t help but reflect that fulfilling the Great Commission (“**Go into all the world and preach the gospel.**” Mark 16:15) is (or at least *was*) also doable in the power of the Holy Spirit, if only every believer had done what he or she was supposed to be doing—if we had all been as faithful as the pilgrim exiles of Gershon were. Put another way, if the Gershonites had done their job like most “Christians” do these days, the Israelites would *still* be camped out there in Kadesh Barnea.

DUTIES OF THE LEVITES: MERARI

- (796) *Number the working sons of Merari. “As for the sons of Merari, you shall number them by their families and by their fathers’ house. From thirty years old and above, even to fifty years old, you shall number them, everyone who enters the service to do the work of the tabernacle of meeting.”* (Numbers 4:29-30) Slightly more numerous than the Kohathites and Gershonites were the

third and last Levite family, the sons of Merari. Their numbers totaled 3,200 men between thirty and fifty. If you were dismayed by the “negative” connotation of Gershon’s name, then take a deep breath: Merari’s is even worse. It means “bitterness,” but with a twist. Its root verb, *marar*, means “to be or make bitter, to show bitterness,” but it carries with it the connotation of having been strengthened through the trial. Thus Job says in the midst of his distress, **“As God lives, who has taken away my justice, and the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter [*marar*], as long as my breath is in me, and the breath of God in my nostrils, my lips will not speak wickedness, nor my tongue utter deceit.”** (Job 27:2-4) One gets the distinct feeling that Job wouldn’t have been quite so determined to honor God—so attuned to the issue—if he hadn’t been subjected to such tribulation. His adversity had brought his priorities into sharper focus. As the saying goes, “No pain, no gain.”

Contrary to some silly preaching that goes on today, Yahshua never promised us a bed of roses in this life. Rather, He said, **“In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”** (John 16:33) Paul reminded the believers at Corinth that a life lived centered on Christ could be “bitter”: **“To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless. And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now. I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you.”** (I Corinthians 4:11-14) Paul’s not complaining, mind you. He’s merely telling the truth about living a life honoring to Yahweh. It can be rough, but the adversity we endure has the potential to make us stronger. As he reminded the Romans, **“Tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”** (Romans 5:4-5) The sons of Merari, as we shall see, had some heavy lifting to do. But the “bitterness” of their task produced strength. Their path led from tribulation to perseverance to character to hope—and finally to love.

- (797) *The sons of Merari shall attend to the “hard parts” of the Tabernacle. “And this is what they must carry as all their service for the tabernacle of meeting: the boards of the tabernacle, its bars, its pillars, its sockets, and the pillars around the court with their sockets, pegs, and cords, with all their furnishings and all their service; and you shall assign to each man by name the items he must carry.”* (Numbers 4:31-32) If Gershon was faced with a big job, Merari’s was huge. The tonnage was daunting: the foundation sockets alone—ninety-six silver bases, a massive one talent each, plus fifty-six bronze pillars and

foundation pieces for the outer fence—weighed in together at almost seven tons. And the boards, bars, and pillars, made of dense, close-grained Acacia wood, would have been heavy as well. Unlike the Kohathites, however, the Gershonites and sons of Merari didn't have to physically carry their loads from place to place. When the children of Israel had donated their gifts for the building of the Sanctuary, they brought them to Moses and Aaron on six carts or wagons pulled by teams of oxen. **“Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Accept these from them, that they may be used in doing the work of the tabernacle of meeting; and you shall give them to the Levites, to every man according to his service.’ So Moses took the carts and the oxen, and gave them to the Levites. Two carts and four oxen he gave to the sons of Gershon, according to their service; and four carts and eight oxen he gave to the sons of Merari, according to their service.... But to the sons of Kohath he gave none, because theirs was the service of the holy things, which they carried on their shoulders.”** (Numbers 7:4-9)

God knows the limits of our strength. Having made us, He is all too aware that we are not omnipotent. So, as we see here with the Levites, He provides help for us—in proportion to the weight of the load with which we're faced. He doesn't do the work Himself (though He could), for He wants us to have the joy and satisfaction of having participated, of having made a real contribution. But if we'll supply the willingness, He'll provide the strength. As David observed, **“I will love You, O Yahweh, my strength. Yahweh is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I will call upon Yahweh, who is worthy to be praised; So shall I be saved from my enemies.”** (Psalm 18:1-3) Your “enemy” might be the ninety-pound silver socket you're supposed to schlep from Kadesh to Mount Hor. It might be the economic pinch you're finding so hard to overcome. It might be the apathy, despair, or uncertainty you feel, or your frustration with the godlessness of the world you have to live in. It might even be the constant and unrelenting temptation you face. But even there, Yahweh provides help. **“No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.”** (I Corinthians 10:13)

It bears repeating that there is one thing Yahweh never asks us to carry—the burden of our own sin. That job was done for us at Calvary. It is finished. Now when we're told to “pick up our crosses” and follow Yahshua, the objective is to live as if we're dead to sin, but alive to God. The work we do in this life is supposed to be *in response* to our salvation, for no amount of work is sufficient to achieve it.

(798) *The Gershonites and sons of Merari shall be under the supervision of Ithamar the priest.* “Aaron and his sons shall assign all the service of the sons of the Gershonites, all their tasks and all their service. And you shall appoint to them all their tasks as their duty. This is the service of the families of the sons of Gershon in the tabernacle of meeting. And their duties shall be under the authority of Ithamar the son of Aaron the priest.” (Numbers 4:27-28) “This is the service of the families of the sons of Merari, as all their service for the tabernacle of meeting, under the authority of Ithamar the son of Aaron the priest.” (Numbers 4:33) As we saw in Precept #768, Eleazar, Aaron’s oldest surviving son (and future High Priest) was tasked with “the oversight of all the tabernacle, of all that is in it, with the sanctuary and its furnishings.” That means that it would naturally fall to him to supervise the Kohathites in their duties concerning the transportation of the Tabernacle’s furnishings—it’s “holy things.” Here we see that Eleazar’s brother, Ithamar, was to similarly supervise the Gershonites and the sons of Merari. As a practical matter, this division of labor made perfectly good organizational sense—two brothers supervising separate groups of Levites, working in harmony under the supervision of their father and their uncle, who in turn answered to Yahweh. But there may be more to it.

An implied symbolic distinction exists between Eleazar and Ithamar, and we need to figure out what this distinction is, for it affects our walk in this world. The Levites—who were given to Aaron (read: Yahshua) for the work of the Tabernacle (i.e., the Plan of God)—represent believers in Yahweh. And the priests (Eleazar and Ithamar) symbolize the pastors, teachers, evangelists, apostles, and prophets (see Ephesians 4:11-13, Precept #780) who would be given by Yahshua to these believers, to equip them for the work of the ministry. Eleazar, who was in charge of the operation of the Tabernacle, supervised the Kohathites. His duties, and theirs, were focused on the Tabernacle furnishings: the altar, laver, table of showbread, menorah, altar of incense, and the ark of the covenant. All of these things, in their own way, spoke of the means by which man could approach God. And they spoke as well of Yahweh’s response—atonement, cleansing, provision, illumination, communication, and ultimately, His personal presence in our lives. Eleazar, then, represents the relationship that exists between God and His believing children. Not coincidentally, Eleazar’s name means “God has helped.”

But if that’s true, who or what does Ithamar represent? His function was to supervise the Levites of the families of Gershon and Merari, whose job was concerned with the Tabernacle infrastructure—the “tent,” its walls, the foundation sockets, the pillars, veils, and the courtyard fence.

Taken together, these components describe the interface between believers and the world in which they live.

Looking in from the wilderness of the world, unredeemed man first encounters a barrier of righteousness (the linen fence) supported by bronze pillars—symbolic of judgment, the distinction between good from evil. Not only is he barred because he isn't righteous, he finds that his objective (reconciliation with God) can be approached from only one direction—it's a narrow, exclusive approach, one against which his innate fallen nature instinctively rebels. So he peeks over the fence, hoping to get a glimpse of the peace he craves. All he sees is a dull, gray tent. However, if he consults with someone who knows how the tent is constructed—Ithamar or a son of Gershon or Merari—he will learn that this is only the outside of *four* layers comprising the plan of God for his life. These porpoise skins tell him that God has provided shelter for him, if only he's willing to trust Yahweh by entering the Tabernacle through the Way He's provided. Beneath this layer, the seeker is told, is one of red-dyed ram skins: innocent blood has been shed on his behalf. Beneath that, a layer of goat's hair fabric indicates that this innocent blood has atoned for his sin—it has *already* been accepted as the sin offering Yahweh requires. And the result of this atonement is the inner layer—the one that can only be seen if the seeker enters through the narrow gate, makes his way past the altar and laver of cleansing, enters the Sanctuary, and looks up. This last layer is the pure, white linen of imputed righteousness, embroidered with images of the mighty cherubim Yahweh has tasked with our provision, protection, and correction.

Who is Ithamar, then? He represents the relationship we believers have with the lost world, just as Eleazar represents the relationship we share with God. As we have learned by studying his team, the Gershonites and sons of Merari, this is the “dirty job” of a believer's existence, but as they say of all dirty jobs, *somebody* has to do it. Somebody has to do the heavy lifting, get his hands dirty, take out the trash. Sure, we'd all like to sit around and bask in the glory of Yahweh's presence twenty-four/seven. And the day is coming when we'll all get to do that. But we haven't reached the promised land yet. So for now, Ithamar supervises Gershon (the exiles) and directs Merari (the bitterly oppressed) among Yahweh's children. Without their (our) faithful service in this world, an unredeemed but searching race will never comprehend God's love, grace, plan, or provision.

And what does the name Ithamar mean? It means “an island of palm trees,” or less literally, “an oasis.” *Huh?* Consulting the imagery of

scripture, we find that this isn't as weird as it sounds at first. Consider this: **"The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree [*tamar*]; He shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those who are planted in the house of Yahweh shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bear fruit in old age; They shall be fresh and flourishing, to declare that Yahweh is upright; He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him."** (Psalm 92:12-15) The "bitterness" and "exile" of a life of faith and service in this world are but temporary hiccups. We who are "planted in the house of Yahweh" will flourish forever in the courts of our God.