

When the Tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down, and when the Tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up; any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death. The Israelites shall encamp troop by troop, each man with his division and each under his standard. The Levites, however, shall camp around the Tabernacle of the Pact, that wrath may not strike the Israelite community; the Levites shall stand guard around [other translations: 'charged with maintaining...'] the Tabernacle of the Pact. (Numbers 1:51-53)

וּבְנֹסַע הַמִּשְׁכָּן יוֹרִידוּ אֹתוֹ הַלְוִיִּם וּבְחֻזַּת הַמִּשְׁכָּן יִקְיִמוּ אֹתוֹ הַלְוִיִּם וְהָזָר הַקָּרֵב יוּמָת׃
וְחָנּוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ עַל־מִחְנֵהוּ וְאִישׁ עַל־דְּגָלוֹ לְצַבָּאתָם׃

וְהַלְוִיִּם יִחָנּוּ סָבִיב לְמִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדוּת וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה קֶצֶף עַל־עֵצַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְשָׁמְרוּ הַלְוִיִּם אֶת־מִשְׁמַרְתּוֹ מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדוּת׃

Adonai spoke to Moses, saying: Advance the tribe of Levi and place its [men] in attendance upon Aaron the priest to serve him. They shall perform duties for him and for the whole community before the Tent of Meeting, doing the work of the Tabernacle. They shall take charge of all the furnishings of the Tent of Meeting—a duty on behalf of the Israelites—doing the work of the Tabernacle. You shall assign the Levites to Aaron and to his sons: they are formally assigned to him from among the Israelites. You shall make Aaron and his sons responsible for observing their priestly duties; and any outsider who encroaches shall be put to death.

Adonai spoke to Moses, saying: I hereby take the Levites from among the Israelites *in place of all the male first-born*, the first issue of the womb among the Israelites: the Levites shall be Mine. *For every male first-born is Mine*: at the time that I smote every [male] first-born in the land of Egypt, I consecrated every male first-born in Israel, human and beast, to Myself, to be Mine, Adonai's. (Numbers 3:5-13)

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר׃

הַקָּרֵב אֶת־מִטָּה לְוִי וְהַעֲמַדְתָּ אֹתוֹ לְפָנַי אֶהְיֶה הַכֹּהֵן וְשָׂרְתוּ אִתּוֹ׃

וְשָׁמְרוּ אֶת־מִשְׁמַרְתּוֹ וְאֶת־מִשְׁמַרְתּוֹ כָּל־הָעֵדוּה לְפָנַי אֶהְיֶה מוֹעֵד לַעֲבֹד אֶת־עֲבֹדַת הַמִּשְׁכָּן׃

וְשָׁמְרוּ אֶת־כָּל־כְּלֵי אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְאֶת־מִשְׁמַרְתּוֹ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲבֹד אֶת־עֲבֹדַת הַמִּשְׁכָּן׃

וְנִתְמַהֵל אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו נְתוּנִם נְתוּנִם הֵמָּה לְוִי מֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל׃

וְאֶת־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶת־בָּנָיו תִּפְקְדוּ וְשָׁמְרוּ אֶת־כְּהֻנַּתָּם וְהָזָר הַקָּרֵב יוּמָת׃

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר׃

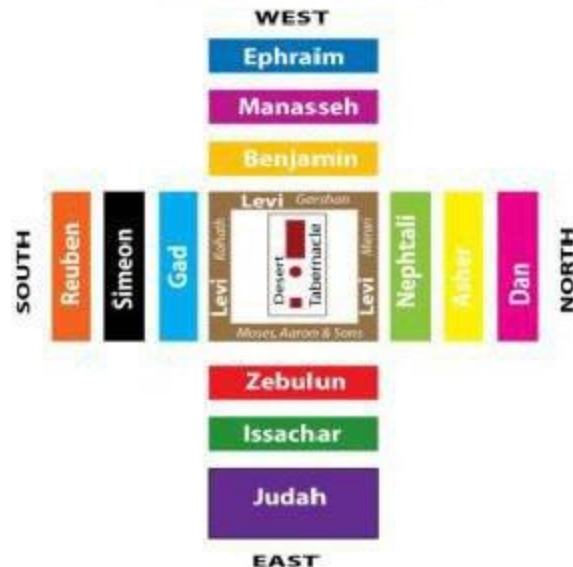
וְאִנִּי הִנֵּה לֹקַחְתִּי אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תַּחַת כָּל־בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָיוּ לִי הַלְוִיִּם׃

כִּי לִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּיוֹם הַכֹּתִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם הַקֹּדֶשֶׁתִי לִי כָל־בְּכוֹר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֲדָם עַד־בְּהֵמָה לִי יִהְיוּ אֲנִי

יְהוָה׃

Encampment of the Tribes

Numbers 2:1-34 & 3:21-38



1. ...in the case of a non-priest who performs the Temple service [= “an outsider that comes too near will be executed”], the reference is to death at the hand of Heaven [i.e., from God, and not by a human court]. (Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 84A)
 - Contrast: “This biblical phrase [*ve-ha-zar ha-karev yu-mat*/the outsider who draws near shall be put to death’] mandates capital punishment.” (Baruch Levine, *Anchor Bible Numbers*)
 - Contrast: Hebrew *karev* [is not ‘approach’] but either a prohibition not to ‘encroach’ or a requirement to ‘qualify.’ Elsewhere in the Torah crimes against the sanctuary are punishable by God alone...Only here is a crime against the sanctuary punishable by human agency. Illicit contact with holy things produces divine wrath, a threat to the entire community...An intruder must be stopped. The sanctuary guards (the Levites) must cut down the intruder lest God cut down the entire community. (Jacob Milgrom, *JPS Commentary to Numbers*).

2. “and an outsider that comes too near will be executed.” Levites are also considered “outsiders” in this respect. They may not enter these holy precincts once the Tabernacle had been reassembled. Assembling or disassembling did not require their entering, and when the Tabernacle had been taken apart, the site it had stood on was no longer considered as a holy site. (Chizkuni - Rabbi Hezekiah ben Manoah, mid-13th century, France)
 - Contrast: “The term *zar* (“alien” or “outsider” or “unauthorized persons”) has [differing] connotations that depend on context. In [some Torah texts] it designates non-priests [i.e., “Israelites” rather than Kohen or Levi people]. Here it likely means “unconsecrated” Israelites and non-Israelites.” (Baruch Levine, *Anchor Bible Numbers*)

3. “Any unauthorised person entering these domains will be legally executed” (if he did it deliberately after due warning). (Seforno - Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, Italy, 1475 -1550)

Levites Take the Place of the First-Born

4. “The replacement of the first-born by the Levites implies that the first-born originally held a sacred status...the replacement may reflect the establishment of a professional, inherited priestly class. (Jacob Milgrom, JPS Commentary to Numbers)
 - [Milgrom also suggests displacement/replacement may be an artifact of a biblical polemic against ancestor worship, which was a common practice among other populations in the ancient near eastern world around the land of Israel, and in which the first-born played a prominent role in inheritance rights, as well as officiation privileges at rituals devoted to ancestor worship. And possibly connects later to the practice of reciting *kaddish* by children for deceased parents.]
5. “The Aaronide priests (*kohanim*) bear collective responsibility for the duties assigned to their group whereas the Levites are merely subordinate to the priesthood; the Levites were assigned to the priests and placed under their charge.”
(Baruch Levine, Anchor Bible Numbers)
6. Chizkuni: “in place of every first-born;” these first-borns also had not been intended to inherit ancestral fields, ever, as they were meant to be the priests in their respective families. When the Levites were appointed to perform the tasks previously meant to be performed by the first-born, they forfeited their claim to ancestral heritage in the Land of Israel, and the first-borns, after redemption, could then lay claim to ancestral territory as did all the non-first-born.
7. Rashi: Whence do “I” [God] claim the right on them from among the children of Israel, for My service? It is through the firstborn — to whom I surely have a title — that I have a claim on them (the Levites) and so I take them in their (the firstborns’) stead. For originally the service (the priestly functions) was performed by the firstborn, but when they (the Israelites and among them their firstborn too) sinned by worshipping the golden calf they became disqualified, and the Levites who had not worshipped the idol were chosen in their stead.

8. At one time firstborn sons were actually devoted to cultic service as temple slaves, Nazirites, and the like; subsequently other arrangements were made for supplying cultic personnel while the erstwhile sanctity of the firstborn was lifted through “redemption” This underlies the priestly traditions of the history of the Levites and their selection for cultic service. The sanctity of the firstborn is retained in his birthright and in the religious regulations specific to him, such as the *pidyon ha-ben* ceremony and the obligation to fast on the eve of [that is, the day before] Pesach.
9. *Pidyon haben* is more commonly practiced among Orthodox and Conservative Jews; many Reform families also observe this ritual. However, Reform Judaism does not recognize any special status for priests (known as Kohanim and considered to be direct male descendents of Aaron) or Levites (members of the tribe descended from Jacob's son Levi). When performed in Reform circles, *pidyon haben* is a symbol of a tradition and a tie to the past.

10. PIDYON HABEN:

The ceremony is held on the 30th day following birth. If the 30th day falls on Shabbat, a fast day, or a festival, the ceremony is delayed for 24 hours. The ritual is a home celebration.

The parents hand their son to a Kohein, the priest, who symbolically represents the ancient priesthood. They recite a formula in Hebrew meaning: "This is our first-born son, and the Holy One, blessed be God, has commanded us to redeem him."

The Kohein asks the parents: "Which would you rather do-give me your first-born son, the first-born of his mother, or redeem him for five shekels, as you are obligated to give according to the Torah?"

The parents respond: "We prefer to redeem our son. And here is his redemption price, which we must give according to the Torah."

The parents then give the Kohein a sum of money, usually \$5. The Kohein takes the money and hands the baby back to his parents.

The parents recite two blessings, one regarding the mitzvah of *pidyon haben* the other the *Shehecheyanu*, to thank God for bringing them to this occasion.

The Kohein places the money on the child's head and says: "This for that, this in commutation of that, this in remission of that." He then invokes a blessing, wishing the child a life filled with Torah, a happy marriage, and performance of good deeds. The Priestly Benediction and the Kiddush over the wine, then conclude the ceremony.

<https://reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/lifecycle-rituals/birth-rituals/what-pidyon-haben>