**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**midrash on the *Parasha*:**

**Dr. Tziporah Lifshitz**

***Parashat Korach:***

**“I Am Your Portion and Your Inheritance”**

**The *Sifrei* and the Tannaitic Period**

Over the course of our study of rabbinic midrash throughout the year, we have touched upon *Bereishit Rabba* on the Book of *Bereishit*, the *Tanchuma* literature on the Book of *Shemot*, *Vayikra Rabba* on the Book of *Vayikra*, and the *Sifrei* on the Book of *Bamidbar*, comparing the book under study with other sources in rabbinic literature dealing with the same issues. In this way, we have acquired an ever-expanding perspective on the methodology of *Chazal* in Midrashic literature in general, and in each work in particular.

Based on our study of the *Sifrei* on four *parashiyot* in the Book of *Bamidbar* (*Naso*, *Beha'alotekha*, *Shelach* and *Korach*)*,* we may point to several characteristics of the aggadic material appearing in them.

The Tannaitic aggada does not twist, play with and deconstruct the words as in the *derashot* of the Amoraim. It seems that as we proceed chronologically in the world of the Midrash, the deconstruction of words into letters and other combinations expands and branches out. In contrast, the Tannaitic aggada deals with an issue, a theme. As such, the Tannaitic aggada is more ideological and bears a clear message that passes through its entire length (e.g., the greatness of peace, the miraculous nature of the manna, and the like). Amoraic Midrash also has themes and messages, but they are not apparent on the surface, and we must work hard to reveal them.

The Tannaitic aggada in the *Sifrei* appears at times after the halakhic *derashot* of the verses, and centers around one main idea connected to the *mitzva* under discussion. Another place where aggada appears in the *Sifrei* is in the expansion upon the narrative section of the Torah in the order of the verses. Let us examine this table, which presents the main aggadic collections found in the *Sifrei* on the first half of the Book of *Bamidbar*:[[1]](#footnote-1)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **The theme in the biblical text** | **The nature of the theme's appearance in the biblical text** | **The theme in the *Sifrei*** |
| Sending the impure out of the camp (*Bamidbar* 5:1-4) | Halakhic | Precious are Israel even when they are impure; norms among the people of Israel in ideal times and in a state of sin  |
| The priestly blessing (*Bamidbar* 6:22-27) | Halakhic | Conceptual discussion of the content of the blessingThe essential nature of the blessing, closeness to God, peace |
| The dedication of the *Mishkan* (*Bamidbar* 6:22-27) | Narrative | The chronology of events on the day of the dedication of the *Mishkan* |
| The offerings of the tribal princes (*Bamidbar* 7) | Narrative | The relations between the princes, with no jealousy or competition |
| The departure of Yitro (*Bamidbar* 10:29-34) | Narrative | Yitro's descendants and the people of Israel, conversion |
| The beginning of the journey to Eretz Israel (*Bamidbar* 10:33) | Narrative | The people's joy before the journey |
| The pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire"And it came to pass, when the ark journeyed" (*Bamidbar* 10:33-36) | Narrative | God is Israel's shieldThose who hate Israel hate GodThe *Shekhina* goes into exile with IsraelThe spiritual meaning of thousands and ten thousands of Israel |
| The murmurers (*Bamidbar* 11) | Narrative | The nature of the sinThe virtues of the mannaThe Sanhedrin |
| The sin of Miriam (*Bamidbar* 12:1-16) | Narrative | The beauty of TzipporaMoshe's prophecyThe interpersonal behavior that may be learned from this *parasha*Measure for measure for good |
| *Tzitzit* (*Bamidbar* 15:37-41) | Halakhic | The meaning of "that you go not about after your own heart and your own eyes"Israel's commitment to the covenant with God is eternalThe story of the Torah scholar, the prostitute and *tzitzit* |
| The priestly gifts (*Bamidbar* 18:1-20) | Halakhic | A clarification of the rank of the priesthoodA clarification of the relationship between priesthood, kingship and Torah |

This table raises a question regarding the *Sifrei's* choice of topics for expanded discussion: do they have a common denominator? Regarding the narrative section, the question becomes sharper in light of the fact that no attention is given to key stories, such as the Sin of the Spies and Korach's rebellion.[[2]](#footnote-2)

An examination of the content of these *derashot* indicates that the themes appearing in them are classical issues relating to Jewish life in every generation: holiness ("that you go not about after"), the Chosen People, the attitude toward the nations of the world, interpersonal relations, and others. Further study reveals that many of the *derashot* deal with questions or issues of particular relevance during the Tannaitic period. We will note these issues, and spell out the point that is characteristic of that period:

* God's love for Israel despite their impurity — Most of the Tannaitic period takes place after the destruction of the Second Temple. Without the Temple, there is no way to observe the laws of purity and impurity. The assertion that the people of Israel are precious to God even when they are impure gives hope and room for a connection between God and Israel even in a world without a Temple.
* The priestly blessing — The priestly blessing in the *Amida* is a unique feature of synagogue prayer that is taken from the world of the Temple, and therefore it has special importance for the generations that closely follow the destruction.
* Interpersonal relations — The unstable social situation leads to Jerusalem's surrender to Rome and the Destruction of the Temple, and the disciples of Rabbi Akiva who do not treat each other respectfully turn this issue into an existential one.
* Israel's timeless commitment to the covenant with God — The *derasha* brings the verses from *Yechezkel* 20 in which the elders say to the prophet that now that God has destroyed His house (the First Temple) and the people of Israel have gone into exile, they are not obligated to follow the covenant. This message is exceedingly critical in light of the religious doubts that arise among the people in the wake of the Destruction of the Second Temple and the failure of the Bar Kokhba Rebellion.
* Conversion — The phenomenon of conversion to Judaism continues to develop throughout the Tannaitic period, especially in the generation of Rabbi Akiva, and the Sages view it favorably.
* The Sanhedrin — Following the destruction of the Temple, the Torah scholars lead the people in accordance with Torah law. The Sanhedrin wanders from Judea to the Galilee, until it is dissolved at the end of the Amoraic period.
* The meaning of the hatred of Israel — The crises of the Destruction of the Temple and of the failure of the Bar Kokhba Rebellion make it necessary to deal with fundamental questions relating to the role of the Jewish nation and its place in relation to the nations of the world.

The appearance of one or two issues that accord with this period do not constitute sufficient basis for the argument presented here. However, the correspondence of so many issues to the period under discussion justifies continued thinking in this direction.

We will now discuss the *derasha* brought in the *Sifrei* on *Parashat Korach* regarding the priestly gifts. We will examine it, asking whether it strengthens the argument proposed above or not.

**The Priestly Gifts**

The section in the Torah which spells out the gifts given to the priests who serve in the Temple concludes with the general statement: "I am your portion and your inheritance among the Israelites" (*Bamidbar* 18:20). This section consists of a command regarding the nature of the service of the priests and Levites, a detailing of the priestly gifts, and the announcement that the priests will not receive an inheritance in Eretz Israel.

The command regarding the nature of the service of the priests and Levites in the Temple reads as follows:

And the Lord said to Aharon: You and your sons and your fathers' house with you shall bear the iniquity of the sanctuary; and you and your sons with you shall bear the iniquity of your priesthood.

And your brothers also, the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, bring you near with you, that they may be joined (*ve-yilavu*) to you, and minister to you, you and your sons with you being before the tent of the testimony. And they shall keep your charge, and the charge of all the tent; only they shall not come near to the holy furniture and to the altar, that they die not, neither they, nor you. And they shall be joined (*venilvu*) to you, and keep the charge of the tent of meeting, whatsoever the service of the tent may be; but a commoner shall not draw near to you. And you shall keep the charge of the holy things, and the charge of the altar, that there be wrath no more upon the Israelites. And I, behold, I have taken your brothers the Levites from among the Israelites; for you they are given as a gift to the Lord, to do the service of the tent of meeting.

And you and your sons with you shall keep your priesthood in everything that pertains to the altar, and to that within the veil; and you shall serve; I give you the priesthood as a service of gift; and the commoner that draws near shall be put to death.

The Torah then lists the priestly gifts:

And the Lord spoke to Aaron: And I, behold, I have given you the charge of My heave-offerings; even of all the hallowed things of the Israelites to you have I given them for a consecrated portion, and to your sons, as a due forever. This shall be yours of the most holy things…

Then we are told they will not receive a portion in Eretz Israel:

And the Lord said to Aharon: You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the Israelites. (*Bamidbar* 18:1-20)

According to the plain meaning of the verse, "I am your portion and your Inheritance," is a "spiritual" explanation for their not receiving a portion and an inheritance in the land: "And the Lord said to Aharon: You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the Israelites."

However, the Tannaim and the classical biblical commentators see these words as relating to the entire section:

"I am your portion and your inheritance among the Israelites” — You have of what is raised up for the sake of My name in the amount of your inheritance in the land, and in the amount of your portion in the plunder of the Canaanites. (*Sifrei Zuta,* *Vayikra* 18, 20)

"I am your portion," as it was translated by Onkelos, the gifts that I have given you [= the twenty-four priestly gifts], and by way of this you will be free to keep My charge, as you will not have to engage in any business or in any other work. (*Chizkuni*, ad loc.)

Rav S. R. Hirsch (ad loc.) expands the meaning of these words and understands that they express the spiritual mission of the priests to the people, as it finds expression in two separate channels throughout the *parasha*: in the act of connecting and raising the material to the spiritual by way of the priestly gifts, and in their making the Torah the inheritance of the people.

The relation to God of all these national foundations of the people’s lives is to be their office and task in the nation; the progressive blossoming of this relationship in understanding and realization is to be their portion, their participation in the achievements of the nation in all times; and looking after and handing down these spiritual achievements of the parents to the children is to be their inheritance, their spiritual legacy, and both at the same time to be the basis of their material living and prosperity. In the second half of the verse, it is significant that “portion” comes first, because in the second line, the spiritual harvest of the work of every contemporary generation of priests is proclaimed: “I am your portion.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

The *Sifrei* in our *parasha* expands upon the matter by way of *derashot* that carry us far away from the linguistic context of the text:

I.

"I am your portion and your inheritance" (*Bamidbar* 18:20)…

Twenty-four priestly gifts were given to the priests, twelve in the Temple and twelve outside the Temple…

II.

Aharon had great joy on the day when a covenant was made with him regarding the gifts.

Rabbi Yishmael said:

A popular adage says: It was to my benefit that my cow broke its leg.

It was to Aharon's benefit that Korach came and protested against him about the priesthood.

To what may this be likened?

To a king of flesh and blood who had an attendant, to whom he gave a field as a gift.

But he did not write, nor sign, nor register it.

Therefore this section was placed next to Korach.

"To be a memorial to the Israelites" (*Bamidbar* 17:5).

We learn [from this] that Korach was among those who were swallowed [by the earth] and those who were burned [by the heavenly fire].

III.

Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar said:

From where do you say that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed Ya’akov our father the Temple built and the sacrifices offered and the priests ministering and the *Shekhina* departing?

As it is stated: "And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set upon the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it" (*Bereishit* 28:12).

Every dream has its interpretation.

"And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set upon the earth" — this is the Temple.

"And the top of it reached to heaven" — these are the offered sacrifices, the savor of which goes up to heaven.

"And behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it" — these are the ministering priests who ascend and descend on the ramp.

"And, behold, the Lord stood beside him” — "I saw the Lord standing beside the altar" (*Amos* 9:1).

IV.

Precious are Israel,

For when He designates, He does so only as priests,

As it is stated: "But you shall be named the priests of the Lord, men shall call you the ministers of our God; you shall eat the wealth of the nations, and in their splendor shall you revel" (*Yeshayahu* 61:6).

Precious are the priests,

For when he designates, he does so only as ministering angels,

As it is stated: "For the priest's lips should keep knowledge, and they should seek the law at his mouth; for he is the angel of the Lord of hosts" (*Malakhi* 2:7).

When the Torah issues forth from his mouth, he is like the ministering angels.

And if not, he is like a beast or animal that does not recognize its owner.

Precious is the Torah,

For when David, king of Israel, asked [for something], he asked only for Torah,

As it is stated: "You are good, and do good; teach me Your statutes" (*Tehillim* 119:68). Your goodness is ample toward all those entering the world; let Your goodness be ample towards me, and teach me Your statutes.

And it is stated: "Support You me, and I shall be saved; and I will occupy myself with Your statutes continually" (*Tehillim* 119:117).

That I shall not study Torah and forget it,

That I shall not study and my evil inclination will not allow me to review,

Or perhaps I will render impure that which is pure and render pure that which is impure, and find myself ashamed in the World to Come,

Or perhaps I will be asked by the nations of the earth and the families of the world, and I will know not how to answer them, and find myself ashamed before them.

And similarly it is stated: "I will also speak of Your testimonies before kings, and will not be ashamed" (*Tehillim* 119:46).

And it is stated: "Your statutes have been my songs" (*Tehillim* 119:54).

I might understand: when my soul is at peace?

Therefore the verse states: "in the house of my fear [*megurai*]" (ibid.), in caves and in forts.

And similarly it is stated: "When he fled from Shaul, in the cave" (*Tehillim* 57:1).

And similarly it is stated: "My soul is continually in my hand; yet have I not forgotten Your law" (*Tehillim* 119:109).

But when David studied the law and got used to it, what does it say?

"The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver" (*Tehillim* 119:72).

For gold and silver remove a person from this world and from the World to Come,

whereas the Torah brings a person to life in this world and to life in the World to Come.

As it is stated (*Tehillim* 139:17): "How weighty also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How great is the sum of them!”

And it is stated: "And this is the law of man, O Lord God" (II *Shemuel* 7:19).

V.

Thus you say: There are three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood and the crown of royalty.

The crown of priesthood, Aharon merited it and he took it.

The crown of royalty, David merited it and he took it.

But the crown of Torah rests in place, in order not to give those entering the world an opening to say:

Had the crown of priesthood or the crown of royalty rested in place, I would have merited and taken them.

The crown of Torah is a rebuke to all those entering the world,

For anyone who merits it, I account it to him as if the three of them rested in place and he merited all of them.

And anyone who does not merit it, I account it to him as if the three of them rested in place, and he merited none of them.

VI.

You might ask: Which is the greater of the two?[[4]](#footnote-4)

Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar would say:
Who is greater? He who appoints to rulership or he who reigns? Say: He who appoints to rulership.

He who appoints officers or he who acts with authority? Say: He who appoints officers.

All the power of both of these crowns comes only from the power of Torah.

As it is stated: "By me kings reign… by me princes rule" (*Mishlei* 8:15-16).

VII.

Greater is the covenant that was made with Aharon than the covenant made with David.

Aharon acquired for descendants who are righteous and wicked; whereas David acquired for the righteous, but not for the wicked.

And so it is stated:
"If your children keep My covenant and My testimony that I shall teach them, their children also forever shall sit upon your throne" (*Tehillim* 132:12).

And it is stated: "The end of the matter, all having been heard: fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole man" (*Kohelet* 12:13).

VIII.

All of the commandmentsof the priesthood were stated with joy at Mount Sinai, and this was stated first; these are the words of Rabbi Yoshiya.

Rabbi Yonatan said: This too was stated with joy, as it is stated: "And to the children of Levi, behold, I have given" (*Bamidbar* 18:21).

"Behold" means with joy, as it is stated: "And also, behold, [Aharon] comes forth to meet you; and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart" (*Shemot* 4:14).

All of the commandments of the priesthood, God acquired them and gave them to the priesthood; this is "in return for their service" (*Bamidbar* 18:31); these are the words of Rabbi Yoshiya…

(*Sifrei Korach* 119)

This *derasha* consists of eight different midrashic units. The first one lists the twenty-four priestly gifts, explaining "your portion and your inheritance" as the priest's portion of the gifts given to God in the Temple. The second *derasha* focuses on the material "gain" and "security," as it were, of the priestly gifts spelled out in the wake of Korach's challenge, that his attack on the priesthood of Aharon leads to its being strengthened.

Then comes the third *derasha,* which surprisingly points to an aspect of the Temple service that continued without the resting of the *Shekhina*. The verse that is cited here from the Book of *Amos* (9:1):

I saw the Lord standing beside the altar; and He said: Smite the capitals, that the posts may shake, and break them in pieces on the head of all of them; and I will slay the residue of them with the sword; there shall not one of them flee away, and there shall not one of them escape.

This relates to an earthquake occurring in Jerusalem and on the Temple Mount, and it appears in the tradition of Eretz Israel as a station in the departure of the *Shekhina* from Jerusalem at the time of the destruction of the Temple.[[5]](#footnote-5)

These three *derashot* relate to the outer shell of the priesthood: the physical reality of the priesthood, and the perversions that may rise out of it. These are embedded in the image of the Temple service that continues as usual while its inner essence — He Who is supposed to dwell in the Temple — is missing.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth *derashot* move from the priesthood to the Torah, each *derasha* adding to the virtues of the Torah. The fourth *derasha* sets them at the same level, together with Israel; both of them are "precious," and each of them is connected to what follows. Thus, the Israelites are precious as they are called priests, and the priests are like angels when the Torah is in their mouths. The fifth *derasha* explicitly sets the three crowns — priesthood, royalty and Torah — one against the other, pointing to the two advantages of the crown of Torah, on the practical level and on the moral level: it is open to all, and it serves as "rebuke" to all those entering the world:

For anyone who merits it, I account it to him as if the three of them rested in place and he merited all of them. And anyone who does not merit it, I account it to him as if the three of them rested in place, and he merited none of them.

 The sixth *derasha* brings this course to its climax, and presents the Torah as the source of the two other crowns, "All the power of both of these crowns comes only from the power of Torah."

Thus, these three *derashot* are the heart of the unit and its primary objective: setting occupation with Torah as the most important "crown" that stands before every individual in Israel who wishes to take it. The Torah replaces the priesthood; responsibility passes not to the representative of the people before God, nor to God's representative to His people — but rather to each and every person in his or her own right.

The last two *derashot* return to the priesthood. The seventh *derasha* notes the fact that the covenant of priesthood, as opposed to that of royalty, does not depend on human action (as follows explicitly from *Tanakh*). However, this independence emphasizes the gap that exists at times between the title borne by a person and one’s inner being. The last *derasha* emphasizes God's joy in the reality of the priesthood, despite the gap that exists at times between the ideal of Divine order and its realization in the world.

Our study indicates that the *derasha* emphasizes the dangers inherent in the institution of the priesthood: the priest's overconcentrating on what is "due" him; emptying the Temple service of its content; glorying in the title and status even when they do not match the inner being of the person bearing them. Torah study, which does not have a social-hierarchical system that is dictated from the outset, is presented as an alternative.

The fourth *derasha* presents the difficulties and problems associated with Torah study. In the area of study, mention is made of forgetfulness, neglecting review, the fear of issuing erroneous rulings and the inability to deal with questions raised by members of other cultures. On the personal level, there are the circumstances of a person's life with the spirituals worries and dangers that go along with them: wanderings and troubles, becoming established in life and being drawn after materialism. Despite all of these, a person who understands the value of Torah that "brings a person to life in this world and to life in the World to Come," will not set this crown down, but rather such a person will desire it.

The eight *derashot* form a symmetrical 3-3-2 structure; the three *derashot* bearing the main message regarding the Torah are in the middle, while on both sides there are *derashot* that point to the problems that are liable to arise in the institution of the priesthood.

Does this *derasha* express a position on an existential issue typical of the Tannaitic period? Without a doubt! The standing of the priesthood, which to a great extent fails to fulfill its mission, and the gap created between the title and the spiritual-religious level of those who bear it, are clear markers of the Second Temple Era. The Destruction of the Temple, the transition from priests to sages, the study hall’s new status as the nerve center of the people and the seat of power — these phenomena all raise real questions regarding leadership and conduct, worldviews and identity during the Tannaitic period. To what should a Jew strive? How can a Jewish world be built without the Temple? The unitbefore us makes a clear statement.

Thus, the unit the *Sifrei* regarding the priestly gifts in *Parashat Korach* strengthens the argument presented earlier that the aggadic *derashot* in the *Sifrei* relate to the concrete religious needs of the Jewish people during the Tannaitic period.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**A portion and inheritance in God by way of the Torah**

According to what we have seen, "I am your portion and your inheritance" in the unit of *derashot* appearing in the *Sifrei* expresses a direct channel of connection to God, which during most of the Jewish people's history is practically the only channel. During the long period during which the nation of Israel loses its other crowns, one crown remains within reach.

Almost a thousand years after the Tannaitic period, the famous remarks of the Rambam in his *Mishneh Torah* testify to the full acceptance of the spiritual direction that we see in the *Sifrei* as the foundational concept in the development and existence of the people:[[7]](#footnote-7)

Not only the tribe of Levi, but any one of the inhabitants of the worldwhose spirit generously motivates him; so that he understands with his wisdom to set himself aside and stand before God to serve Him and minister to Him and to know God; proceeding justly as God has made him, and removing from his neck the yoke of the many calculations which people seek — he is sanctified as holy of holies. God will be His portion and inheritance forever and will provide what is sufficient for him in this world, as He has provided for the priests and the Levites. (*Hilkhot Shemitta Ve-yovel* 13:13)

Nowadays, we are witnessing the beginnings of a fascinating transformation taking place before our eyes in the attitude of segments of the people to the Temple. May the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of royalty reappear together in our land.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The *derashot* marked by color are long *derashot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The *Mekhilta* as well is silent about the Sin of the Golden Calf and the sections dealing with the *Mishkan.* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is not clear to me how Rav Hirsch defines "portion" and "inheritance." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Vilna Gaon emends the text here to read: "of the three." See ed. Horowitz, p. 144, note 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, Version A, Chap. 34. The presentation of the Ya’akov's dream as the vision of a harsh future spiritual reality is interesting, but this is not the forum in which to expand upon the matter. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The sages who appear in the *derasha* by name are Tannaim: Rabbi Yishmael, third generation of Tannaim in Yavneh; Rabbi Elazar Ha-kappar and Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar, Tannaim of the fifth generation, the generation of Rabbi Yehuda Ha-nasi. There is also a Tanna named Rabbi Yoshiya. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In contrast to the *Sifrei*, the Rambam does not emphasize the observance and study of Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)