

CENTER FOR MODERN TORAH LEADERSHIP



THE SONS OF GERSHON, KEHAT & MERARI AND THE TENSION BETWEEN MERITORCRACY AND SOCIAL-STATUS STABILITY

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נשא את ראש בני גרשון גם הם

Lift up the head of the Sons of Gershon - them too

Presumably this means that the Sons of Gershon should have their heads lifted up, i.e. counted, in the same way as the previous group, namely the Sons of Kehat.

But Clans are usually presented in the birth order of their founders – Gershon, then Kehat, then Merari. Why does Kehat precede Gershon here, with the phrase “them too” emphasizing the latter’s subordination?

Furthermore: Why is a wholly different verb, “*pakod*,” rather than “lift the head of,” used to mandate counting the Sons of Merari?

Midrash Rabbah suggests that Clan Kehat’s work, specifically carrying the Ark, was grander than that of Clan Gershon, and so took precedence. Clan Gershon was still distinguished as firstborn, however, and so his ‘head was lifted up’. Clan Merari was lastborn and had work no greater than Clan Gershon’s—in other words, it had no feature positively distinguishing it from its brethren—and so was merely *nifkad*.

This suggestion captures an authentic tension within Jewish tradition between meritocracy and social-status stability, both of which are seen as authentic political values. This is counterintuitive in the United States, where social mobility is generally valorized as an unalloyed moral good and practical necessity. We are deeply aware that birth-driven societies can turn a permanent underclass into a seething cauldron of frustrated ambition.

To some extent, the US attitude is developed circularly; we deliberately undermine and delegitimize all claims based on birth, and thus leave no psychologically viable basis for accepting social-status stability. But I freely concede that this seems to me an excellent moral strategy for a pluralistic society.

At the same time, I think it is worth noting that meritocracy can be dangerously destabilizing, because it is dynamic and because evaluation is often radically subjective. This is why it so easily degenerates into government by prejudice. England has a hybrid model developed by trial and error over centuries. *Midrash Rabbah*’s proposed interpretation suggests that an analogue was built into Judaism from its inception.

But [Keli Yakar](#) points out that the tension here seems artificial, as the Torah could simply have given the firstborn Gershon the grander work of carrying the Ark. He therefore argues that the Torah deliberately creates the tension in order to demonstrate that merit outweighs birth.

והקרוב אלי לומר בזה

שרצה הקדוש ברוך הוא להראות שכבוד חכמים ינחלו
 כדי ללמד דעת את העם שיכבדו את לומדי התורה
 ולקרוא לקדוש ה' מכובד לקדשו בכל דבר שבקדושה
 כדרך שמנה את קהת תחילה בעבור משא דבר ה' אשר אתו
 ואילו היה נותן הארון לגרשון הבכור
 הייתי אומר שבעבור הבכורה מנאו תחיל
 ה ולא הייתי תולה החשיבות במשא הארון
 על כן מסר הארון אל קהת ומנאו תחילה
 וידעו הכל ליתן כבוד לתורה וללומדיה

What seems most correct to me to say about this

The mission of the Center for Modern Torah Leadership is to foster a vision of fully committed halakhic Judaism that embraces the intellectual and moral challenges of modernity as spiritual opportunities to create authentic leaders. The Center carries out its mission through the Summer Beit Midrash program, the Rabbis and Educators Professional Development Institute, the Campus and Community Education Institutes, weekly Divrei Torah and our website, www.torahleadership.org, which houses hundreds of articles and audio lectures.

*is that the Holy Blessed One wished to demonstrate that honor is the legacy of Sages
so as to teach the people that they should honor those who learn Torah
and call G-d's sacred ones honored, and sanctify them via all sacred means
just as He counted Kehat first because of their carrying of G-d's word
Had he given the Ark to Gershon the firstborn
I would have said that he was counted him first because he was firstborn,
and I would not have realized that his importance was dependent on the
carrying of the Ark
Therefore He gave the Ark to Kehat and counted him first
and everyone knew to give honor to the Torah and those who learn it.*

I find this approach problematically ironic. In Keli Yakar's telling, Kehat's association with Torah is arbitrary, and that arbitrary choice is intended to teach us that we should honor the achieved merit of Torah study more than inherited status. In that case, I suggest that the task of carrying the Ark should have been given to Merari, which would have made Keli Yakar's point more strongly.

Perhaps the task is given to Kehat, rather than Merari, in order to leave Gershon preceding Merari, and thus to demonstrate that social-status stability remains an authentic if subordinate Jewish value. Yet I would overall prefer not to accept that G-d assigns hierarchically ordered sacred tasks arbitrarily, but not in rotation.

Unfortunately, the only approach I have seen which affirmatively explains the role of each clan is in the Izhbitzer Rebbe's *Mei haShiloach*. I say unfortunately because I generally lack the context to properly understand the work, and in this particular section cannot adequately translate at least two key terms, תקופות *tekufot* and סבלנות *savlanut*. So please read on with caution. I hope that in this one instance the psycho-religious insight can survive outside its kabbalistic womb, and that the literary strategies will stimulate more accessible interpretive approaches. Corrections and addenda are of course welcome, either via email or as comments on the [CMTL Facebook page](#).

Mei Hashiloach begins by reading "them too" as implying similarity rather than identity, and understanding "lifted his head up" as a reference to an elevation of consciousness. So Kehat and Gershom achieve separate but equal elevations.

Clan Kehat's elevation, symbolized by not receiving wagons, results from their willingness to enter fully into the vicissitudes of religious life: "doubts and trials." They can endure much, "בכתף ישא" = bear on their shoulders," because

they are confident that G-d has given them the strength of character not to stray from His will.

Clan Gershon's elevation develops in almost precisely the opposite way. They seek security in everything, and are elevated by their unwillingness to take risks or entertain doubts when they encounter potential sources of spiritual uncertainty.

In contemporary language, both engagement with and radical rejection of modernity can be sources of spiritual elevation, and Modern Orthodoxy and Charedism each have a place.

Mei HaShiloach parts ways with contemporary academic thought, however, by arguing that there is a third path which is not affected by and does not react at all to social context. Clan Merari live in the world of action rather than thought. As such, they never encounter doubt, but simply have faith that their actions fulfill G-d's will. Thus the specific nature of their work is irrelevant, and accomplishes no more and no less than the actions performed by non-Levites on the same basis, and provides them no unique "elevation."

Mei HaShiloach then notes that Kehat and Merari's work are specifically linked to Mosheh, whom he identifies as symbolizing clarified Torah and intent for the sake of Heaven, whereas Gershon's is not. He uses this to make a claim that I find astonishing and powerful.

Engagement with doubt and the avoidance of theology can each produce certainty. But refusal to take risks entrenches uncertainty! For example: A Gershonite confronted by the possibility that an act is prohibited will refuse to perform it. But how can he ever know that G-d wished him to be passive rather than active?! It is too late for him to retreat to pure Merarite instinct. Only by engaging with the question can he emerge with certainty that he has fulfilled the will of G-d, rather than merely avoiding a legal violation.

Of course, he may never emerge at all. *Mei HaShiloach* identifies Clan Gershon with the attribute of Fear of G-d, and notes that Clan Gershon is included with the others in a summary collective relationship to Mosheh; perhaps Clan Kehat could survive its bold spiritual adventures only so long as it remains in contact with Gershon and Merari. In other words: The beginning of wisdom is the fear of G-d, even if the end is Modern Orthodoxy, and there are no shortcuts. *Shabbat Shalom!*

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