



The final section of Parashat Bamidbar begins the Torah's discussion of the procedure *Benei Yisrael* were to follow in preparing the *Mishkan* for transport during their sojourn in the wilderness. The *Mishkan* and its appurtenances were distributed among the three families of *Levi'im*, with the family of Kehat assigned the most sacred articles – the ark, the altars, the *menora* and the table. Before the Kehatites would come to lift these articles, the *kohanim* would first cover each item in its designated covering. God issues a special warning to the *kohanim* to exercise care in this regard, so that the Kehatites would not die as a result of beholding the sacred articles before they are covered. The closing verse of the *parasha* reads, "They [the Kehatites] shall not come to see the sacred [articles] exposed, lest they die."

Maimonides cites this verse in his introduction to *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* (*shoresh* 2), as an example of a Biblical command that bore practical relevance only during the period of *Benei Yisrael's* sojourn in the wilderness. He asserts that when the Sages spoke of 613 Biblical commands, they referred only to those commands that are fundamentally applicable for all time (even if external conditions – such as the absence of the *Mikdash* – may render a given command temporarily unfeasible). They do not include in this list commands that God issued for the specific context of *Benei Yisrael's* travels. Among the examples he cites is this verse, which warns the *Levi'im* not to look upon the sacred articles as they are being prepared for travel until their coverings are placed.

The question arises as to why this command did not bear relevance for all time, even after *Benei Yisrael's* entry into Canaan and the construction of the permanent *Beit Ha-mikdash*. Although the *Mikdash* indeed marks the final site of the *Shekhina* such that there should be no need to transport the sacred articles, Maimonides nevertheless lists as one of the 613 Biblical commands the obligation to carry the ark by shoulder (*mitzvat asef* 34). Apparently, he felt that the Torah's commands concerning the transportation of the sacred articles bear relevance for all time in situations where such transportation becomes necessary – despite the fact that the Temple was intended as the final, permanent sanctuary. Why, then, does Maimonides not include as well the prohibition against seeing the sacred articles as they are prepared for travel? (This question was addressed by Maimonides' son, Rabbi Avraham Ben Ha-Rambam, in his work *Ma'aseh Nissim*, in which he responds to the challenges posed against Maimonides' views by Rabbi Daniel Ha-bavli.)

In truth, Maimonides' comments concerning this prohibition have a clear basis in the Talmud, in a passage in *Masekhet Yoma* (54a). The Gemara there records that during

the three pilgrimage festivals, the *kohanim* would open the curtain in front of the ark to allow *Benei Yisrael* to behold the image of the *keruvim* (cherubs) embracing on top of the ark. As the Gemara notes, this practice appears, at first glance, to have violated the admonition in this verse, in which the Torah strictly forbids gazing at the sacred articles. The Gemara responds with an analogy to a bride and groom: during the period of betrothal, the bride acts bashfully in the presence of her fiancé; once, however, the couple has married and lives together, she conducts herself far more naturally and comfortably around her husband. Similarly, during *Benei Yisrael's* travels in the wilderness, when their relationship to God was still in its "betrothal" stage, they had to conduct themselves with a degree of distance and uneasiness with regard to the sacred articles. Once the *Beit Ha-mikdash* was built, however, they were allowed to look upon the ark.

The Gemara thus clearly attributes this prohibition to the particular context of the incipient stages of the nation's relationship with the Almighty. Before the *Levi'im* or other members of *Benei Yisrael* could look upon the sacred articles – particularly the ark – and bask in the radiance and glory of God's presence, they had to first build and cultivate their relationship with Him by demonstrating their commitment and loyalty to Him. Only then were they entitled to feel "at ease" in the *Shekhina's* presence, and experience the delight and euphoria of seeing the cherubim's embrace, symbolizing God's love and affection for His people.