



Parashat Vezot HaBrakha
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Parashat Vezot Haberakha records the blessings Moshe wished upon each tribe (with the exception of Shimon) before his death. In his blessing to the tribe of Levi, he beseeches God, “*Barekh Hashem cheilo*” (33:11), which most commentators translate as, “Bless, O Lord, his wealth.” (See, for example, *Targum Onkelos*, who translates the word *cheilo* as *nikhshohi* – “his possessions.”) The word *chayil* indeed appears in a number of contexts in reference to wealth and material prosperity. For example, the Torah speaks of *Benei Yisrael* looting the *chayil* of Midyan during battle (Bamidbar 31:9), clearly referring to material possessions. Likewise, Moshe earlier in the Book of Devarim (8:18) urges the people to always remember that it is God who enables them “to make *chayil*,” and it is clear from context that he speaks of wealth and assets.

Maimonides, however, adopts a different reading of this verse, as evident from his famous remarks toward the end of Hilkhos Shemita Ve-yovel (13:12):

And why didn’t the tribe of Levi earn a share in the Land of Israel and its spoils together with its brethren? Because it was set apart to serve God, to minister before Him and to teach His upright ways and righteous statutes to the public... Therefore, they were separated from the ways of the world: they do not wage battle like the rest of Israel, they do not inherit [a share in the land] and do not earn for themselves through their own efforts. Rather, they are the army of God, as it says, “*Barekh Hashem cheilo*.” And He...grants it to them...

Maimonides here draws proof to Levi’s stature as “the army of God” from this verse, “*Barekh Hashem cheilo*.” Rav Shemuel Salant, in his *Birkei Yosef*, cites his father as observing the exegetical implications of Maimonides’ comments. Namely, he read this phrase to mean, “May the Lord bless His army.” Moshe here petitions God to bless not the wealth of the tribe of Levi, but rather the tribe of Levi itself, inasmuch as the Levites serve as His “army.” Just as a king hires a royal guard and supports them honorably in order to defend him, similarly, the Almighty assigned the *Leviyim* as His personal “guard,” the ones who devote themselves to His service. They do not receive agricultural lands to support themselves, because the King, the Almighty Himself, provides for them, in the form of the gifts that *Benei Yisrael* must bring to the *kohanim* and *Leviyim*. Moshe thus turns to God and asks that He always bless His faithful “troops,” the tribe that withdraws from professional and commercial enterprises to devote itself to the Almighty’s service. The Levites’ status as *cheilo*, the “army” of God, requires that God always ensure that they are cared for and adequately supported, as befitting His closest servants.

On a larger scale, of course, all *Am Yisrael* are enjoined to serve as a *mamlekheth kohanim*, a “kingdom of priests” (Shemot 19:6). While in practice the other eleven tribes indeed engage in professional pursuits, on one level or another we must all see ourselves as God’s “army,” as a nation unwaveringly committed to His service. Even though we must “till the land” to earn a livelihood, we must always view the service of God as our highest priority. Likewise, we, like the tribe of Levi, must recognize that we receive our “share” from the Almighty, that even when we reap the fruits of our work and creativity, it is in truth through God’s grace and kindness that we receive all that we have. And, finally, we, like Moshe, pray that the Almighty should always bless “His army,” and provide His loyal “troops” with the strength, health and prosperity we need to continue serving Him and dedicating our lives to the laws and ideals of His Torah.