



**Maimonides On:  
When There Aren't Enough *Kohanim* to Go Around**  
By Rabbi David Silverberg

In Parashat Eikev, Moshe recalls the designation of the tribe of Levi for the job of tending to the *aron* (ark) and other duties: “At that time, the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the ark of the covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to serve him and to bless in His name...” (10:8).

Maimonides, in his *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* (asei 34), discusses the Torah’s command concerning the transportation of the ark, particularly the provision that the ark be transported by shoulder, rather than with wagons. In the context of this *halakha*, Maimonides mentions that the responsibility of transporting the ark – when this becomes necessary – is assigned, in principle, specifically to the *kohanim*. During the period of *Benei Yisrael*’s travel through the wilderness, as we know from the Book of Bamidbar (1:50 and elsewhere), the entire Levite tribe bore the responsibility of transporting the *Mishkan*, and the job of carrying the ark was assigned to the Levite family of Kehat (see Bamidbar 4:1-16). However, according to Maimonides, this was only a temporary measure borne out of necessity. Essentially, it was only the *kohanim* who were to fulfill the task of transporting the ark. During this particular period, however, there were simply not enough *kohanim* to share this responsibility. The only *kohanim* at the time were Aharon, the *kohen gadol*, his two sons – Elazar and Itamar – and the sons born to those two subsequent to their consecration as *kohanim*. God therefore extended this duty to the entire family of Kehat. As the population of *kohanim* grew, Maimonides writes, it became possible to return to the strict, fundamental definition of this *mitzva*, requiring only the *kohanim* to transport the ark when this became necessary. Maimonides indeed notes a number of occasions later in Tanakh when we find specifically the *kohanim* transporting the *aron*.

A number of writers suggested that Maimonides inferred his position from the verse cited above from Parashat Eikev. Although the verse speaks generically of “the tribe of Levi” as the ones assigned the task of carrying the ark, the verse’s concluding clause appears to prove that it refers specifically to the *kohanim*: “and to bless in His name.” The straightforward reading of this phrase suggests that it refers to the obligation of *birkat kohanim*, the priestly blessing with which the *kohanim* were commanded to bless the rest of the nation (Bamidbar 6:22-27). Clearly, this *mitzva* is assigned only to the *kohanim*, and not to the other members of the Levite tribe. We might therefore conclude that Moshe refers here only to the *kohanim*, and thus it was they, and not the entire Levite tribe, who were assigned the task of carrying the ark – even though circumstances required sharing this responsibility with the other *Leviyim* during the period of desert travel.

The *halakha* requiring the transporters to carry the ark by shoulder, rather than make use of the convenience afforded by wagons, likely symbolizes the hard work and exertion that is often required in “bearing the burden” of Torah life. *Mitzva* observance is not always convenient. Some *mitzvot*, like the ark, must be carried in all their weight upon the individual’s shoulders, without the assistance of shortcuts or an “easy way out.” And, as in the case of the ark in the wilderness, there is often a shortage of manpower to bear the burden of *mitzva* responsibility. Formally appointed community servants are not always sufficient to complete the necessary tasks of establishing and maintaining the nation’s spiritual infrastructure. When this happens, the people around them must join in bearing this burden and assisting the formally designated “*kohanim*” in their mission to ensure the successful “transportation” of Torah from one generation to the next.