

Take a census (lit. raise the heads) of the sons of Gershon, them as well (after counting Kehas). (4:22)

Shlomo *Ha'melech* writes, *Yekarah hee mi'peninim v'chol chafa'tzecha lo yishvu bah*, "It (the Torah) is dearer (more precious) than pearls, and all your desires cannot compare to it" (*Mishlei* 3:15). Following the census of the Jewish People, Hashem asked Moshe *Rabbeinu* to count *Shevet Levi* separately. Their count was carried out according to their sequence at birth: Gershon, Kehas, Merari. However, after their tasks within the *Bais HaMikdash* were designated, the sequence changed – Kehas, as the bearer of the *Aron Kodesh*, preceded Gershon, who carried the Curtains. The *Midrash* establishes the order of the counting of the *Leviim* according to the appointment of tasks: A *talmid chacham*, Torah scholar, precedes an unlearned *Kohen Gadol*. This is alluded to by the *pasuk* in *Mishlei* quoted above: *Yekarah hee mi'peninim*, "It (the Torah) is dearer than pearls." The word *peninim* is now understood as "before," a derivative of the word *lifanim* [based on *v'zos lifanim b'Yisrael*, "This was done (the custom) **before**/formerly in *Yisrael*" (*Rus* 4:7)]. This refers to Kehas and Gershon. Gershon was the firstborn and as such, he should have been given the "pole" position of being counted first. Nevertheless, since Kehas carried the *Aron Kodesh*, which was the repository of the Torah, the *pasuk* lists his name first.

Studying Torah places a man on a level higher than that of a firstborn or even a *Kohen Gadol*. Torah study is the ideal vocation; it is our lifeblood. If so, why is a Torah scholar not accorded the same privilege as the *Kohen Gadol*? Why can the *Talmid Chacham* not enter *Lifnai v'Lifnim*, into the Holy of Holies, as does the *Kohen Gadol*? The *Sefas Emes* explains that the difference lies in understanding the nature of Torah and what can be achieved by Torah study.

The *Sefas Emes* distinguishes between learning Torah and serving Hashem through worship. Anyone may study Torah; there are no eligibility qualifications. As far as worship in the *Bais HaMikdash* is concerned, the Torah limits who may serve. Distinct guidelines govern the involvement of the *Kohen*, *Levi* and *Yisrael*. The place in which the *avodah*, service, is carried out – whether it is in the Courtyard, Sanctuary, or *Kodesh Kodoshim* – also has parameters. In other words, the Temple service is restrictive. Only a select few may serve in specific places.

This does not mean, explains the *Sefas Emes*, that the place in which the individual serves is indicative of his having achieved a higher spiritual status than that of his peer who is serving elsewhere. He compares the situation to a king who has both children and servants. A servant's level is determined and manifested by his proximity to the king. While a high level minister may speak face to face with the monarch almost at any time, the lowly servant stationed at a faraway post – working in the basement somewhere – may never come in contact with the king. Not so the prince, who always maintains an intimate, loving relationship with his father, regardless of his proximity – be it in the palace or in a far-off country. He always remains the son of the king.

One who learns Torah is Hashem our King's son. There is really no more precise way to describe

this relationship. The *ben Torah* who delves in Hashem's gift to *Am Yisrael* experiences a spiritual existence, even while he is in the physical dimension of this world. He is so far from the King – yet so close. Our Sages compare this world to a corridor that leads into a palace.

The *Midrash* quoted above, which delineates between Torah study and spiritual worship, is teaching us that a Jew who studies Torah in the “corridor” is dearer to Hashem than even the one who enters the palace proper. The *Kohanim* who serve in the *Bais HaMikdash* are like servants who stand before the King. Their privileged position in such close proximity to the *Melech Malchei Ha'melachim*, King of Kings, allows them but a mere taste of the reward to come in *Olam Habba*, the World to Come. Their full reward is reserved for the future, when they are divested of their mortal selves and have entered into *Gan Eden*.

Man has one primary purpose in this world: to study Torah and perform its *mitzvos*. As such, nothing is dearer to him than Torah study. This precludes all physical and spiritual pursuits. Torah is “it” – as *Mishlei* states: “All your desires cannot compare to it.” *Chazal* teach that “desires” here refers to spiritual aspirations, such as performing *mitzvos* and *maasim tovim*, good deeds. Yet, such magnificent aspirations cannot compare to even one word of Torah.