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Mutual Obligations

18: 1-32

**The responsibilities of the priests and Levites,
the responsibilities of the people,
and the responsibility of ADONAI.**

The atmosphere of the last several chapters in **Numbers** has gradually shifted. We began in **Numbers 16** with **250 leaders** offering strange fire that **cost them their lives** (to see link click [Cr](#) - **The Response of God**). The test of the tribal staffs in **Numbers 17** was much calmer and ended with **Aaron's priesthood** being firmly established once-and-for-all (see [Cu](#) - **Aaron's Staff Budded**). As we move into **Numbers 18**, that narrative pauses for a time as first **Aaron**, and then **Moshe**, receive further mitzvot regarding **the priesthood**, which has been the main point of contention starting with the rebellion of **Korah** (see [Co](#) - **The Rebellion of Korah**). The mitzvot include mutual obligations of **the people** towards **the priests** and **Levites**. Because **the people** realized, more than ever, the necessity of a truly faithful **priesthood**, **they** were then ready, at least for the present time, to listen and be taught.

Numbers 18 begins with the words: **ADONAI said to Aaron (18:1)**. The phrase occurs again twice in **18:8** and **18:20**. In every other case in the Torah except in (**Leviticus 10:8**), **God** never spoke to **Aaron** directly, but always through **Moses**. In this case, **YHVH** gives **Aaron** the benefit of personal communication as a further sign of **His** special relationship to **God**. This, and the other events of preceding chapters, confirms **Aaron's** status as **high priest**, a status that was under question ever since **Miryam** and **Aaron's rebellion** against **Moshe** (see [Bu](#) - **The Rebellion of Miryam and Aaron**) and the challenges of **the people** in **Chapter 16**.

Ha'Shem's word to **Aaron** stress the responsibility of the inner circle of **Aaronic priests** as mediators between **the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob** and **His people**. The priests were to protect **the people** from drawing near to the holy things in the Sanctuary. Failure to do so would result in death of those who

approached as well as the death of the priest responsible for guarding the holy things (**18:3**). The Levites formed a second line of protection around the Tabernacle. Together, **the priests** and **the Levites** guarded the Israelite camp from encroaching upon the holiness of **God's Presence** in their **midst**. In this way, **they** protected **the people** from the wrath of **Ha'Shem** and the **death** that it brought (**18:1-5**). The service that **the priests** and **Levites** offered **the people** was a gift from **YHVH** designed for **their** own well-being. So, the support of **the priests** and **Levites** should have been generous and done with a sense of gratitude and not mere obligation (**17:6-7**).



The priests: Numbers 18:8 begins an extended summary of **the animal sacrifices, the firstfruit offerings** of crops, **the firstborn animals**, and the devoted items captured in holy war conquests that **the priests** were to receive as **their** due. The basic understanding is stated by **ADONAI** to **the priests** in this way: **I Myself have put you in charge of the offerings given to Me. Everything dedicated by the people of Isra'el I have given and set aside for you and your sons; this is a perpetual mitzvah.** In other words, **the people** made **offerings** to **God**, and **God**, in turn, passed those **offerings** on to **the priests**. Many of these same mitzvot concerning **sacrifices** and **offerings** are found elsewhere in the Torah (see the commentary on [Leviticus An - The Offerings from the Priests Perspective](#)). **Their** role here is to review the obligations **the people** bore to support **the priests** as **they** made **their sacrifices** and **offerings** in thanksgiving and repentance before **YHVH**.

ADONAI pledges in a **covenant of salt forever** that **all the offerings of holy**

things which the people of Isra'el offer to ADONAI I have given to you, your sons and your daughters with you; this is a perpetual mitzvah, an eternal covenant of salt before ADONAI for you and your descendants with you (see [Cx - The Salt Covenant](#)). **Salt** is a preservative, and **it** often formed a significant part of the covenant meals and agreements in the ancient Near East. Thus, **Chapter 18** deals with obligations and responsibilities on the part of **the priests** and **Levites** as well as **the people of God**. The system of support is extended **to future generations as a perpetual mitzvah**. This reminder pushes our gaze for a moment to the future of the wilderness generation in the Promised Land. Like the mitzvot on **sacrifices** and **offerings** in **Numbers 15**, the mitzvot here in **Numbers 18** concerning the **sacrifices, offerings**, and devoted spoils of holy war (see the commentary on [Deuteronomy Ag - The Problem of Holy War in the TaNaKh](#)) all pertain only to the time when **Isra'el** entered into, and settled the land of Canaan. The long list of various **sacrifices** and **offerings** conjures up a picture of a lush and fertile land, settled and secure communities, productive agriculture, and herds and flocks on all the hills. This specific note about **the sons and daughters of Aaron** also point ahead to the death of **Aaron** (see [Df - The Death of Aaron](#)), and the succession of **the priesthood to his sons**. These mitzvot ensured that material support for **the priests** would continue even after **Aaron** was gone.

The primary rationale for **the priests** receiving **the offerings** made to **YHVH** is noted in **Numbers 18:20**. **Ha'Shem** declares to **Aaron**, **"You are not to have any inheritance or portion in their land; I am your portion and inheritance among the people of Isra'el."** **The priests** lived in total dependence on **God**, with no property of their own in the land of Canaan. **The priests** were a constant reminder of what was ultimately true of all **the Israelites; they** all lived in dependence on the gifts and blessings of **ADONAI**.



The Levites: Numbers 18:21-29 turns our attention from **the priests, the sons of Aaron**, to **the** descendants of **Levi** (see the commentary on **Ezra-Nehemiah An - Priests, Levites and Temple Servants**). Basically, **the Levites** worked under the supervision of **the priesthood (Aaron and his sons Eleazar and Ithamar)**, and that the work of **the priests** and **Levites** was different. **The priests** functioned primarily inside the Sanctuary with the holy things and the bronze altar; while **the Levites** assisted **the priests** by guarding the outside of the Tabernacle from any encroachment by any **Israelite** in the camp, carrying the holy things on the march, teaching **the people** the Torah, being gatekeepers, singers, and also serving as judges in the cities of refuge. **ADONAI** knew that **the priests** would need reliable helpers who could assist **them** in **their** duties. All **priests** were to be **Levites**, but not all **Levites** were **priests**.

The people: Although **the Levites** had been implicated in the previous rebellion of **Korah** and **his** followers (**Numbers 16:1** and **7**), **God** reassured **them** that **their** role in providing service to **the priests** would continue. **ADONAI** also assured **them** that **they** would receive **the tithe** (or **one-tenth**) offering of **the people**. **God's** provision for the support of **the Levites** through the **tithe** offering reinforced, in no uncertain terms, **their** important role into future generations. **The Levites**, like **the priests**, had no tribal territory of **their** own, but were scattered throughout the Promised Land. Therefore, **they** were dependent on **the LORD** and **the tithe** offerings of **the people (18:24)**.



ADONAI: In this final section, **ADONAI** turns from speaking to **Aaron** and speaks, instead, to **Moshe (18:25)**. The reason for this is because **God** was instructing **the Levites** about **their** need to give an offering to **the priestly sons of Aaron** from **the offerings** that **they** had received. It would have seemed unseemly for **Aaron himself** to command **the Levites** to give **an offering** to **Aaron and his sons**, and so **the LORD** turned to **Moses** for that part of the mitzvot. The Levites receive the tithe or one-tenth offering to help support **their** life and work in the Tabernacle. In turn, **the Levites** were to give **a tithe** (or **one-tenth**) of **the tithe they** received to **the Aaronic priests**. That **tithe** was to be the best of what **they** received (**18:25-31**). In that way, the important, but subordinate, role of the Levites was built into the very structure of their ongoing support and ministry. The words to **the Levites** end in **18:32** with a final warning that any further revolts or misuse of **the holy gifts of the people**, as in the case of Korah, would only end in **death**.

The B'rit Chadashah also deals with the need to support **the Messianic rabbis** and **pastors** in their ministry of sharing **the Gospel**. Rabbi **Sha'ul** defended the need of **the people** to share its material benefits with **the apostle** and other congregational leaders. **He** even made reference to **the priests** and **Levites** when **he** asked: **Don't you know that those who work in the Temple get their food from the Temple, and those who serve at the bronze altar get a share of the sacrifices offered there? In the same way, the LORD commanded that those who proclaim the Good News should get their living from the Good News. Yeshua Himself** sent out the seventy disciples on a mission to proclaim **the Gospel** without any money so that **they** would have to be dependent on the hospitality from the villages **they** visited: **for the worker is deserving of his support** (see the commentary on [The Life of Christ Gv - Jesus Sends Out the](#)



Seventy). **First Timothy 5:17-18** takes up the same idea in urging the support of the church's **pastors**. Therefore, **the people of God** are called to diligently support **those** who **shepherd them** in **their** life of worship and service.³⁴⁶