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Dismantling the Tabernacle

In Numbers 4:1-20 we find the Lord's instructions concerning how the Tabernacle [a portable sanctuary] should be handled when the Israelites dismantle it in order to move camp.

Read these instructions. Note that Aaron and his sons have a specific role in dismantling and covering the holy items, while the Kohathites (part of the Levite tribe) have the duty of transporting them.

"Aaron and his sons shall go in and assign each to a particular task and burden. But the Kohathites must not go in to look on the holy things even for a moment; otherwise they will die" (Numbers 4:19-20).

In Jewish tradition we find the rabbis puzzling over these verses: Why the strict rules about who does what? Why the dire warning that the Kohathites must not look upon the holy objects? Where lies the danger? In the creative and prayerful spirit of the sages, ponder this before reading on.

The midrash¹ presents two different views, both containing the idea that assigned duties prevent chaos from breaking out in the presence of the Holy One. According to Rabbi Eleazar, the holiness of the Ark (the most precious item) is so overwhelming

that people may be tempted to run away from it, preferring to carry something else like the lamp or the table. Rabbi Samuel takes the opposite view: the privilege of carrying the Ark may cause people to abandon the other objects and quarrel over the right to carry the Ark. Either way, at risk is the decorum befitting such a sacred environment. Therefore Aaron must "assign each to a particular task and burden" (v.19). Imaginatively enter the scenes depicted by these storytelling traditions. How does the sacred text speak to you?

Still, the question remains: why does the Torah forbid even 'looking' upon the holy things?

Says Hirsch,² the Torah is warning against looking upon a sacred thing without the correct depth of vision. Should the Kohathites have witnessed the covering of the holy objects they might have perceived them as ordinary things being packed up like any other household item. Thus the command to not look protects 'the sense of the sacred.'

For Abravanel³ the holy things covered and kept from sight are a reminder to retain an appropriate sense of mystery. Not everything can be grasped by human endeavor. "The heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings" (Ps. 115:16). Faith calls for restful trust in a mystery ultimately beyond us.

Yet another view is set forth by Hefez.⁴ Enjoying the privilege of carrying the Ark, the Kohathites were in danger of becoming full of pride. By withholding from them an important detail, the Lord helps them to be humble and reverent.

Then again, Sforno⁵ explains the text without any resort to symbolism. The matter is purely organizational! It allows for the smooth carrying out of sacred tasks.

Where do you find yourself entering this discussion among the sages? Share your views and the experiences that fuel them.

1. Bamidbar Rabbah.
2. Hirsch: 19th c. German.
3. Abravanel: 15th c. Spanish.
4. Hefez: 16th c. Italian.
5. Sforno: 14-15th c. Italian

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar*, (NY: Lambda).

Scripture quotations: NRSV.