



Parashat Bemidbar
By Rabbi David Silverberg
Shomrim Mishmeret HaKodesh

Parashat Bamidbar discusses the arrangement of the Israelite camp during their travel and encampment in the wilderness. We read that the Levite tribe, which was designated to serve as the attendants in the *Mishkan*, encamped immediately surrounding the *Mishkan*, which stood at the center of the camp. In describing the Levites' encampment, the Torah speaks of them as “*shomerim mishmeret ha-kodesh*” – “watchmen of the sacred guard” (3:38). Maimonides, in the *Hilkhot Beit Ha-bechira* section of his *Mishneh Torah* (8:2), cites this verse as a source for the obligation upon the *kohanim* and *Leviyim* to stand guard in and around the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

Maimonides emphasizes in his codification of this *mitzva* that it applies regardless of the presence of any threat to the Temple's accessories and treasuries. Even under circumstances where guards were not necessary to protect against theft, there was an obligation for the *kohanim* and *Leviyim* to stand guard, “because guarding it served only to give honor to it – a palace with guards is not the same as a palace without guards.” The guards served not as a means of protection, but rather as an expression of honor, and hence the obligation applied irrespective of the Temple's security needs.

An interesting question arises concerning this definition of the *shemirat ha-Mikdash* obligation. At first glance, we might view the positioning of guards in and around the Temple as intrinsically a display of honor. The very presence of these *kohanim* and *Leviyim* lends respect to the Temple. They don't serve as security guards, but simply stand in their places as an expression of honor. Alternatively, we may explain Maimonides' comments to mean that the guards must stand as though they protect the *Mikdash*, even though the *Mikdash* does not need protection. They show honor to the Temple not by their very presence, but rather by giving the appearance of protecting it, whereby they demonstrate its importance and value. According to this explanation, we may indeed describe the guards as “security guards,” who bring honor to the *Mikdash* by outwardly appearing as though they protect it.

These two approaches to Maimonides' comments are manifest in a discussion by Rav Avraham Borenstein of Sochatchov (Poland, 1839-1910), in his *Avnei Neizer* (Y.D. 2:449). In this essay, the *Avnei Neizer* responds to the contentions of a certain scholar who claimed that the obligation of *shemirat ha-Mikdash* applies even nowadays, in the absence of the Temple. Since, as Maimonides wrote, the guards are not needed for protection, they should stand in place even if there is no Temple to protect. This writer, of course, understood that the guards' presence itself lends honor to the holy site, and they should therefore stand in their places even when the Temple is not standing.

The *Avnei Neizer*, however, disagreed. In his view, even though the Temple guards are not intended for the purpose of protection, they achieve the desired purpose of

honoring the *Mikdash* by appearing as though they protect it. Hence, the *mitzva*, by definition, requires something to protect. The guards' presence in itself does not glorify the holy site of the *Mikdash*. Rather, this is accomplished by "guarding" it, if only outwardly. Hence, where there is no *Beit Ha-mikdash*, and the guards thus give no appearance of affording protection, the obligation does not apply.

For this and other reasons, the *Avnei Neizer* dismissed this scholar's arguments and upheld the conventional understanding that the *mitzva* of *shemirat ha-Mikdash* applies only during the times of the Temple.