

Hashem instructs Moshe on how to dress the Kohanim, and regarding the shoham stones (precious shoulder stones) that were placed on the ephod:

מַעֲשֵׂה חָרָשׁ אֲבֹן פְּתוּחֵי חֲתָם תַּפְתַּח אֶת-נִשְׂתֵי הָאֲבֹנִים עַל-שְׁמַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
מִסֶּכֶת מְשֻׁבָּצוֹת זָהָב תַּעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם:

“With the work of a lapidary you shall make seal engravings, engrave the two stones with the names of the Sons of Yisroel; make for them borders of gold.” (Shemos 28:11).

The Torah instructs that the names of the Bnei Yisroel should be engraved on the stones, but like a signet ring; a seal. Were the names engraved into the stone, in the simple and literal sense. Or were the names protruding from the stones so that the stones can be used as a stamp? This would be like a signet ring or a seal. What was the purpose of placing the names of Bnei Yisroel on the stones?

When the Torah gives instruction regarding the twelve individual stones for the choshen breastplate, the Torah says: “And the stones shall be for the names of the sons of Israel, twelve corresponding to their names; the engravings like a seal.” (Ibid 28:21). These stones also had the names of the twelve sons of Yaakov engraved on them, and also must be like a seal. For what purpose?

For the avenei shoham, the previous shoulder stones, the Torah says, “And you shall put the two stones upon the shoulder straps of the ephod as stones of remembrance for the sons of Yisroel, and Aharon shall carry their names before HaShem upon his two shoulders as a remembrance.” (Ibid 28:12). Similarly, when giving the reason for the twelve choshen stones to have the names of the sons of Yaakov the passuk says: “Thus shall Aharon carry the names of the sons of Yisroel in the choshen breastplate of judgment over his heart when he enters the Holy, as a remembrance before HaShem, forever.” (Ibid 28:29).

Now, is there a difference between the remembrances of the sets of stones? Why does HaShem have to remember the sons of Yaakov? Why does the Torah want the stones to be like a stamp or a seal?

Gemara Sotah 48b says, *And according to Rabbi Nechemya, who maintains that they used iron tools even in the cutting of the stones for the Beis Hamikdash, for what purpose did the shamir worm come? It was necessary for that which is taught in a baraisa: These stones in the choshen*

and ephod, upon which were inscribed the names of the sons of Yisroel, they may not be written on with ink, because it is stated: "Like the engravings of a signet" (Shemos 28:21), which means the names must be engraved onto the stones. And they may not be scratched on with a scalpel because it is stated: "In their full settings" (Shemos 28:20). The shamir worm would follow a pattern of ink on the stones and create cracks.

Gemara is stating that no mass was taken from the stones. That only lines were cracked into the gems to form the names. How is that like a seal? The stones, then, would make no impression if pressed against another material; neither the names in dark space (if the letters protruded from the stones) or white space (if the letters were etched into the stones). It is also not done by the work of a craftsman, but a worm.

Rashi understands this as the Targum renders it: a distinct writing like the engraving of a signet ring: the letters were incised in them just as one incises the seals of a ring which are used to seal letters — a clear and distinct writing.

Rashi is learning that the letters were stamped, carved, *into* the stones.

Gur Areyeh and Rashi say that 'על שמות' means the same as 'with the names.' It is not 'on the names' as the stones were not *on top* of the names of the sons of Yisroel.

Malbim says the stones were engraved by a master, and he was diligent to seal the letters inside them like engraved ring signatories. How can they be like an engraving if the letters are engraved into the stones? The passuk uses the word יפתח, engraving, but also means open. It will not be open around the letters but the names will be in sinking script, sinking into the stone. The stone will surround the letters.

Malbim means that if ink was put on the stones and the stones stamped against parchment the stamp result would be white letters in a black background.

Rashbam says the words חרש אבן are in a construct mode; "a craftsman of gemstones," someone expert in engraving. The letters are engraved, similar to a signet ring.

Rashbam means that the explanation of the Gemara cannot be pshat as it was a worm, not a human craftsman. The Torah asks for a human craftsman. Further, he seems to imply the letters protruded outward like a regular signet ring that would be pressed into parchment or hot wax to make its mark.

Gemara Menachos 29a says *the letters of the Torah must be written in black ink. They have to be surrounded by white parchment on all sides. They may not, however, be carved out of black ink so that the letter is made up of white space.*

What exactly did the names look like on the stones, why were they on the stones, and was there a difference in the shoham and choshen stones?

While a Torah letter may not be written from white space, this does not mean that the letters on the stones were not carved out of ‘white space.’ Carving out of white space would mean the stone was carved from the outside working inwards, leaving the letters there but carving away everything else. This would leave the letters *protruding* out of the stones. If they were covered in ink and you pressed the stones up against parchment the impression would be black letters (albeit backwards).

Rashbam and Malbim both seem to say that this is how the letters were. Malbim then states that it must be the other way around, the letters engraved *into* the stones because of the word ‘yiftach’ which has the root of ‘open.’ The way Gemara Sotah learns there is no carving involved. A worm is used and that is not a lapidary. The letters are not carved in but simply cracked lines. This Gemara must mean something esoteric and not the literal pshat.

However, the wording of both *הִפְתִּיחַ* and *עַל-שֵׁמֹט* both support that the letters were carved out and protruded. The letters were ‘opened’ in the way they were carved. The craftsman did not open the stones, that would risk cracks forming around the letters. Nor did he ‘stamp’ the letters into the stone. He opened up the stone around the letters, revealing the letters that formed the names. The stones were not ‘on the names’ but the names were ‘on’ the stone.

This way, by carving around the letters, the names are placed onto the stone. The stone is the base, the support for the names. The end result is that the names are there in the stone but not yet revealed. The engraver then cuts away the stone so the letters and the names are now revealed. The stone was closed on the names, the engraver *opens* the stone to reveal the names.

Now the names act like a signet ring. Now if they would be pressed into parchment, they would be black letters surrounded by white space, exactly as the Torah letters must look like. We can even say the names were carved backward, just like images on a signet ring were carved backwards so that their impression would be the correct way, easily read, on the parchment.

The word לַי can mean on, but can also mean on behalf of. The names were made on the stones for the benefit of the Sons of Yisroel. The passuk then reads: *You shall make the stone engravings with the work of a lapidary, they shall be seals; engrave the two stones on behalf of the names of the Sons of Yisroel.*

Why use the names of the twelve sons as remembrance? And why on both the choshen and the ephod?

We note, the names were not the tribes of Yisroel. They were his sons. The ephod was for the Kohen Gadol. The names were on his shoulders—the location of the ephod—and he was to wear them like monuments. The shoham stones were for Aharon and every Kohen Gadol after him for them to remember the entire House of Yaakov, the entire Bnei Yisroel. He is not only remembering the twelve tribes (two from Yoseph and none of Levi). He is remembering the twelve sons that created Klal Yisroel. They are carried on his shoulders whenever he does his service and he remembers them and brings them into his service. *The ephod stones are his reminder of the sons of Yisroel; and Aharon carries their names when he is before Hashem—doing his service.* (Ibid 28:12). In this way the sons of Yaakov are involved in the service. The names were carved out on the ephod *for the sons of Yisroel.*

On the choshen it's a bit different. The choshen is not for Aharon to remember the sons but that the sons to be a remembrance to HaShem. This means that HaShem will remember them and then will conduct His ways in their benefit. *And the stones will be on behalf of the sons of Yisroel.* (Ibid 28:21). In this passuk it is qualified by the word “לְיִשְׂרָאֵל” shall be. *The stones shall be on behalf of the names of the Sons of Yisroel.* For the purpose that *Aharon shall carry their names on his heart when he enters the Kodesh, they shall be a remembrance before HaShem, forever.* (Ibid 21:29). They are for Hashem to see and remember. They are in Aharon's heart and they are for HaShem to remember them, to give a benefit to them and also to use their merits as a benefit toward Klal Yisroel.

We notice that by the choshen it says ‘forever.’ The remembrance is not only when Aharon is wearing the bigdei Kohen Gadol or when Aharon is in the Kodesh conducting his service. It is always. These stones are stamps. Both literally but also stamps onto the minds and hearts of Aharon and HaShem—so to speak. They serve as a reminder of the collective. Twelve imperfect sons who came together to form this great nation. They and Klal Yisroel shall be remembered for good; *forever.*

BONUS SHTIKEL

“And you bring near to yourself your brother Aharon, and his sons with him, from among the children of Yisroel to serve Me as kohanim: Aharon, Nadav, and Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar, Aharon's sons.” (Shemos 28:1).

This passuk is clear that priesthood is given to Aharon and his sons. Were they always the designated kohanim? And if not, who were and why the switch?

In Mitzrayim there were no kohanim. Everyone was able to slaughter their own korban Pesach. Moshe was commanded, “Speak to the entire community of Yisroel, saying, ‘On the tenth of this month, let each one take a lamb for each parental home, a lamb for each household.’” (Ibid 12:3). Further, “And you shall keep it for inspection until the fourteenth day of this month, and the entire congregation of the community of Yisroel shall slaughter it in the afternoon.” (Ibid 12:6). Clearly it was the responsibility of each household, regardless of shevet and regardless of having an eldest son in the house, to inspect and slaughter the korban Pesach.

HaShem then anoints the firstborn sons as the priests of Klal Yisroel. “Sanctify to Me every firstborn, every one that opens the womb among the children of Yisroel among man.” (Ibid 13:2). The firstborns were made holy. Yes, it was because they were spared in the slaying of the firstborn of Mitzrayim. They were not just ‘redeemed.’ They were “sanctified.” This means they were made to be the kahuna of Klal Yisroel. HaShem further enforces this concept that a kohen comes from each household as He tells Bnei Yisroel, “And you shall be to Me a kingdom of kohanim and a holy nation.” (Ibid 19:6).

Right before the Revelation at Har Sinai HaShem tells Moshe to warn the people that no one should approach the mountain. He also adds, ““And also, the kohanim who go near to HaShem shall prepare themselves, lest HaShem wreak destruction upon them.”” (Ibid 19:22). There were different stages of access to Har Sinai. The people would stand afar, the elders closer, the kohanim closer, then Yehoshua, then Moshe. The kohanim here must be the firstborn sons.

Should one argue that it was Aharon and his sons that the passuk refers to, we see the next couple of pessukim that it is not so. Moshe, having heard a similar warning about not encroaching the mountain previously, says, “The people cannot ascend to Har Sinai, for You warned us saying, *Set boundaries for the mountain and sanctify it.*” (Ibid 19:23). So HaShem makes the warning clear. “Go, descend, and then you shall ascend, and Aharon with you, but the kohanim and the populace shall not break out and ascend to the Lord, lest He wreak destruction upon them.” (Ibid

19:24). This passuk is clarifying that while a general proscription was given to the populace, the new one was specifically for the kohanim, should the kohanim think they are holy and can approach. Further, should it be thought that the kohanim were Aharon and his sons, the passuk clearly says “Aharon can approach with you” but “the kohanim shall not.” The kohanim were not Aharon and his sons but from the populace, the firstborn.

We also find proof in another question. Later, after the Revelation of Har Sinai, HaShem says that a mizbeach, altar, can be built and sacrifices can be brought on it. “And you shall not ascend with steps upon My altar, so that your nakedness shall not be exposed upon it.” (Ibid 20:23). An obvious question is if this is referring to the mizbeach in the Mishkan then the kohanim there were wearing pants as part of their bigdei kehuna. It must be referring to the firstborn kohanim, prior to the Mishkan, as they were never instructed to wear any particular clothing while conducting a service.

Before Moshe ascends Har Sinai for forty days, he gives them the Torah as a bris. He built a mizbeach. (Ibid 24:4). “And he sent the youths of the children of Israel, and they offered up burnt offerings, and they slaughtered peace offerings to the Lord, bulls.” (Ibid 24:5). These ‘youths’ were the firstborn. Referred to as “נְעָרִים” which means assistant (see Bereishis 22:3&5). These assistants from the people were the firstborn, kohanim.

If this is so, when did the firstborn lose their kahuna? Many commentaries say it was because of the great sin of the eigel. It was not the firstborn that rebelled but “the people.” (Ibid 32:1). The firstborn certainly were no worse than Aharon who was directly involved (albeit forced or otherwise). (Ibid 32:2-4).

However, when looking closely the passuk tells us why. Before Moshe ascended Har Sinai for forty days HaShem said: “Come up to HaShem, you (Moshe) and Aharon, Nadav and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Yisroel, and prostrate yourselves from afar.” (Ibid 24:1). “And Moshe and Aharon, Nadav and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Yisroel ascended.” (Ibid 24:9). Then the Torah gives a peculiar passuk. “And upon the nobles of the Bnei Yisroel He did not lay His hand, and they perceived the Lord, and they ate and drank.” (Ibid 24:11). Who were the “נְעָרִים” of Bnei Yisroel? Who were the nobles? They can be confused with the seventy elders. However, the seventy elders are always referred to as the ‘seventy elders.’

These nobles were the firstborn kohanim. They were warned not to encroach. Yet when Moshe brought Aharon, his sons, and the seventy elders with him, the kohanim came, too. “And they perceived the Lord of Israel, and beneath His feet was like the forming of a sapphire brick and like the appearance of the heavens for clarity.” (Ibid 24:10). Moshe and his party were warned to bow from afar so that they could not see “beneath His feet.” The kohanim, however, came and approached and they perceived. In mercy “He did not lay His hand, for they perceived the Lord, and they ate and drank.” (Ibid 24:11). They were nobility and this was not a time to wipe out a large portion of the population for an infraction. They had reason to celebrate.

The firstborn were called “nobles” and not ‘kohanim’ because they were no longer kohanim. This is even hinted at by the fact they were called ‘assistants’ when they made their offerings, and it was Aharon and his sons who went with Moshe to approach Hashem and bow to Him by the mountain. The firstborn was replaced by Aharon and his sons. “And you bring near to yourself your brother Aharon, and his sons with him, *from among the children of Yisroel to serve Me as kohanim.*” (Ibid 28:1). The firstborn kohanim were now replaced by Aharon and his sons.

“They ate and drank” (Ibid 24:11). This bodes similar to “On the next day the people arose early, offered up burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings, and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and they got up to make merry.” (Ibid 32:6). Perhaps it was prophesy that caused HaShem to name Aharon and his sons as kohanim on Har Sinai, even before the sin of the eigel. Perhaps it was the firstborn’s pension for acting with such frivolous conduct, and therefore Aharon and his sons succeeded them. Surely Aharon and his sons were fitting regardless, given his stature. So perhaps the firstborn were only temporary kohanim. Either way, surely the first ‘eating and drinking’ was a festival to Hashem. However, by also ‘eating and drinking and making merry’ for their new eigel it showed that HaShem was not unique in their hearts.