

GENERAL

Your Money or Your Son?

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz



This Sunday was my grandson Yisrael Meir Goldenberg's Pidyon HaBen. I'd like to share with you some of the comments I made at the celebration.

[As an introduction, I will quote from my article that I wrote in September about my previous grandson's Pidyon HaBen:

According to the original plan, every family was supposed to have its own Kohain — Priest. If someone wanted to bring an offering to G-d on a private Altar, he asked a Firstborn to officiate.

For example, Esau, the firstborn son of Issac and Rebecca, bore that privilege and responsibility. However, he wasn't worthy of that role. No one wants to have one's offerings to G-d brought through the auspices of a murderer and idolater. That's why Jacob offered to purchase the Birthright from Esau. When Esau learned some of the complicated and sometimes dangerous rules of the Priesthood, he responded, *"If I'm going to die, of what value to me is the Birthright?!"* (Genesis, 25:32)

The Firstborn of Israel belong to G-d. When the Egyptians refused to release G-d's children from bondage, He finally sent the Tenth Plague against them to get the job done. The Israelites smeared the lamb's blood of their Passover Offerings (offered, no doubt, by the Firstborn) on their doorposts. G-d looked into an Egyptian house: "Oh, you're a firstborn Egyptian human or animal? You're dead!" He looked into an Israelite home: "Oh, you're an Israelite human or animal? You're Mine!"

Firstborn animals are holy. A farmer whose cow or sheep or goat gave birth to a firstborn male was not permitted to use it for himself; it belonged to G-d. It needed to be brought as an offering.

Firstborn humans are holy people who are supposed to be devoted to G-d's Service. But, at one point, they blew it!

Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments engraved on two stone tablets. To his shock and dismay, his People were worshipping a Golden Calf. He smashed the Tablets.

Most of the nation didn't personally participate in worshipping the idol; but most of the nation seemed to tolerate it. Moses wanted to see who was still uncompromisingly on the side of G-d and righteousness.

Surely, the Firstborn were not participating in or accepting this sacrilege! Or, so one would have thought:

"Whoever is with G-d, join me!" cried Moses. The entire Tribe of Levi flocked to his side. (Exodus, 32:26)

Where were the Firstborn? They were nowhere to be seen! Apparently, they were busy with their younger siblings at the Golden Calf!

The Firstborn had lost their way. They were supposed to have known better. They were the leaders of Israel! They were the clerics! Yet they had failed.

The devotion that the Firstborn should have shown toward G-d was demonstrated by the Tribe of Levi instead. The Levites were found to be more worthy than the Firstborn. It was time for a change.

The Firstborn were replaced by the Levites. The sanctity of each Firstborn was "transferred" to a corresponding Levite. When they ran out of Levites, the remaining Firstborn were redeemed with 5 silver Shekels that were given to the head Levite, Aaron the High Priest.

And that is how it is done today. When an Israelite woman who is married to an Israelite man gives birth to a Firstborn son, the father is obligated to redeem him by giving the equivalent of 5 silver Shekels (approximately 100 grams of silver – 5 silver U.S. dollars are sufficient) to a Kohain in order to redeem him. (Since Aaron, the progenitor of the Kohanim, was a member of the Tribe of Levi, every Kohain is also a Levite.) If the father is a Kohain or Levite, or if the mother is the daughter of a Kohain or Levite, the child is exempt from the requirement to be redeemed.

When Rabbi Shimon Schwab, of Blessed Memory, was a teenager, he went to visit Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan, (1838-1933) known as the Chofetz Chaim. (Brief biographies of the Chofetz Chaim can be found [here](#) and [here](#). Read his obituaries in the New York Times and Time magazine [here](#).)

Rabbi Kagan, the leader of world Jewry, was, at the time, quite old. He asked the young man if he was a Kohain. The young man replied that he was not. "Why not?" asked the sage. "Because my father's not a Kohain." "Why not?" "Because HIS father wasn't a Kohain."

Once the youth was sufficiently confused by the interrogation, the Chofetz Chaim explained his point. "I am a Kohain, and when the Temple is rebuilt, I will officiate there. I am a Kohain because 3,000 years ago, my ancestors responded to Moses' call, '*Whoever is with G-d, join me!*' (Exodus 32:26) You, young man, are NOT a Kohain, because YOUR ancestors ignored that call.

“Make sure, young man, that you never miss an opportunity to respond to Moses’ call!”]

My son-in-law brought his son into the room on a silver tray covered with jewelry and packets of sugar



and garlic. (This custom is explained in the article cited above.) He placed the



tray on the table in front of the Kohain. (my brother-in-law, Chayim Goldfeder.)

The father and the Kohain engaged in the following dialogue (translated from the Hebrew and Aramaic):

FATHER: This is my firstborn son, he is the first issue of his mother’s womb, and the holy One, Blessed be He, has commanded to redeem him, as it is said, *And those who must be redeemed, from the age of a month are you to redeem, according to your estimate, five silver shekels in the shekel of the sanctuary, which is twenty gerah. (Numbers, 18:16)* And it is said: *Sanctify for Me every firstborn, the first issue of every womb among the Children of Israel, both of man and of beast, is Mine. (Exodus 13:2)*

KOHAIN: Which do you prefer: to give me your firstborn son, who is the first issue of his mother’s womb, or do you prefer to redeem him for five shekels as you are required to do by the Torah?

FATHER: I wish to redeem my son. I present you with the cost of his redemption as I am required to do by the Torah.

...whereupon the father recited the appropriate blessings and handed the Kohain 5 shiny silver dollars.

The Kohain issued to the father an interesting challenge: “*Which do you prefer: to give me your firstborn son, who is the first issue of his mother’s womb, or do you prefer to redeem him for five shekels...*”

What kind of question is that?! What would have happened had the father called the Kohain’s “bluff”?

“Well, now that you mention it, Mr. Kohain, the baby’s been keeping us up at night, and we could really use a break. And money’s a little tight. Why don’t you keep him?”

Would that work? No! The Torah requires a father to redeem his firstborn son. He doesn’t have a choice. So what is the meaning of the question?

The Aruch Hashulchan explains that Pidyon HaBen is more than taking a Firstborn=Kohain and turning him into a Firstborn=non-Kohain.

When G-d killed the firstborn Egyptians on the first Seder night, he Passed Over (hence, the name Passover) the Israelite homes, sparing the Israelite firstborn. On that night, G-d acquired the firstborn humans and animals of Israel for Himself:

Sanctify for Me every firstborn, the first issue of every womb among the Children of Israel, both of man and of beast, is Mine.

If an Israelite owned a firstborn lamb, or goat, or calf, what could he do with it? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. ... *the first issue of every womb among the Children of Israel, both of man and of beast, is Mine.*

The firstborn animals belong to G-d. You may not shear your lamb, nor may you plow with your ox. G-d acquired it for Himself on that Passover night. The animal must be brought to the Temple as a sacrifice. (Nowadays, if someone has a firstborn animal, since we have no Temple in which to bring offerings, the animal remains unused.) It is G-d's; it is holy.

The same rule applies to a firstborn human. He is holy; he belongs to G-d. His life must be lived in total holiness, there may be no secular aspect to his life. G-d knows that this is not a tenable situation. He acquired the firstborn. Now, He is prepared to return the child to his parents via redemption.

Thus the Kohain asks the father, "What do you prefer? Do you want your son to remain totally holy, totally the property of the Sanctuary? Do you want him to be a hermit, totally abstaining from any connection with the rest of the world? Or do you want him to have a life?

"If so, pay up!"

There is an important lesson we can learn here.

G-d "temporarily" acquired the firstborn of Israel by sparing their lives when he slew the Egyptian firstborn. But since it is not possible to maintain that lofty status, G-d gave us the ability to redeem our firstborn.

There is more to being a firstborn than being the first child born to a Jewish woman:

Say to the Pharaoh, "so says G-d, 'Israel is my Firstborn son...if you refuse to release him, I will kill your firstborn son.'" (Exodus, 4:22-23)

There is more to being a Kohain than being a descendent of Aaron:

You shall be to Me a kingdom of Kohanim and a holy nation. (Ibid, 19:6)

In a sense, we are all G-d's Firstborn; we are all His Priests. The Firstborn were spared by G-d on Passover Night 1. They are G-d's holy survivors.

You and I, too, are survivors. We are a minute fraction of a fraction of a fraction of the original Israelites. Only 20% of the Israelites in Egypt opted to go with Moses. The rest died out in Egypt. Our Nation has endured holocaust after persecution after pogrom.

You and I, too, have been acquired by G-d. We, too are His Firstborn survivors. We, too are his Priests.

And there is no redemption!!!!

We, G-d's survivors, have been given a Torah. We are required to live a life of G-dliness. No, we are not expected to live an impossible-to-achieve life of asceticism. We are G-d's unique and beloved children, and it behooves us to express our appreciation to G-d by following His commandments.

Forgive me for once-again plagiarising from my previous article, but here we go again [**with appropriate name substitution**]:

After the redemption took place, Great-Uncle-Chayim-the-Kohain blessed the little "redeemtee."



Part of the blessing he gave him is borrowed from the ceremony at a Bris: "May it be Your will that the same way he has entered into this redemption (or, at a Bris: "The same way he has entered into the Covenant...") so too may he enter into the Torah, the Chuppah (marriage canopy) and good deeds."

What does this blessing mean? "The same way he has entered the Covenant/redemption...?" What is the "same way?" Should he come to his Chuppah the same way he came to his Bris — naked, kicking and screaming???"

My nephew, Rabbi Moshe Goldfeder, explained to me that there is something unique about a child of this age as he begins his Mitzvah life.

Yisrael Meir has never in his life engaged in gossip. He has never insulted anyone. He has never stolen and he has never violated G-d's Word. **Yisrael Meir** is a *Tzaddik*; a perfectly righteous little *Tzaddik*! The blessing we give him is that the same way he has entered the Covenant – without sin, the same way

he has entered redemption, surrounded by those who love him, and bedecked with the adornments of those who love Mitzvahs, so too may he live a sinless life that is devoted to growing into a Ben Torah. May he grow into a Torah scholar like his father, a devoted lover of Torah and Mitzvahs like his mother, and an uncompromising fighter for Torah values like his great-grandfather.

Mazel Tov. May we all have reasons to celebrate many Simchas in the near future!

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