

PSHUTO SHEL MIKRA

From the Teachings of Rav Yehuda Copperman zt"l

PARSHAT BAMIDBAR

The Mitzvah of Pidyon Haben In the Teachings of the Seforno

כי לי כל בכור

For every firstborn is Mine (Bamidbar 3:13)

Our *parsha* discusses the transfer of *avodat hakorbanot* from the domain of the *Bechorim* (Firstborn) to that of the *Levi'im* in general, and to the *Kohanim* in particular. As part of the introduction to this transfer, Hashem says:

כי לי כל בכור ביום הכתי כל בכור בארץ מצרים הקדשתי לי כל בכור בישראל ... לי
היו אני ה'

For every firstborn is Mine, on the day I smote every firstborn in the Land of Mitzrayim I sanctified every firstborn among Yisrael for Myself ... they shall be Mine, I am Hashem.

Before and After Makat Bechorot

The generally held understanding of this *pasuk* is that the *kedushah* of *bechor* came as a result of Hashem saving the *Bechorim* at the time of *Makat Bechorot*. In the present discussion we will be looking into the *peirush* of the Seforno which is unique both in terms of his

understanding of *kedushat bechor* itself, as well as of the role of *pidyon* (redemption) of the bechor. The *Seforno* (s.v. *ki li*) writes:

For every bechor is Mine: Originally, the *Avodah* lay in the domain of the *Bechorim*.¹

However,² when the time came for *Makat Bechorot*, the *Bechorim*³ were deserving of being punished on account of the generation, since they were the most prominent (among *Yisrael*),⁴ and were not deserving of being saved from a widespread plague,⁵ similar to that which was said (*Bereishit* 19:15),⁶ “פֶּן תִּסְפָּה בְּעֵוֹן הָעִיר” — *Lest you perish due to the sin of the city.*”

Nonetheless I saved them by sanctifying them for Myself,⁷ which rendered them forbidden to be involved in mundane pursuits, as is the case with a *hekdesh* animal that may not be shorn or worked.

Therefore, in order for these things to be permitted to them, I required them to undergo *pidyon* — as is the case for any *hekdesh* object being released for normal use — as it says (*Shemot* 13:13) “וְכָל בְּכוֹר אָדָם בְּבִנְיָהוּ תִפְדֶּה” — *And every human firstborn among your sons you shall redeem.*” However, this *pidyon* was not something that would exclude them from performing the *Avodah*.⁸

And now that they have sinned, I have detested them,⁹ and I have taken the *Levi'im* as a redemption in their stead, “וְהָיוּ לִי הַלְוִיִּם” — *And the Levi'im shall be Mine.*” (*pasuk* 12)

1 This opening phrase describes the status of the *Bechorim* as it had always been, even before *Makat Bechorot*. It was naturally understood that the *Avodah* accrued to the *bechor*; however, his involvement in *Avodah* did not preclude him from being involved in mundane (*chol*) pursuits as well.

2 According to the *Seforno*, the words that follow (ב'יום הכותי וגו') are not to be understood as a continuation of the opening phrase, but are rather describing a subsequent chapter in the history of the *Bechorim*, namely, the events surrounding *Makat Bechorot* which introduced the additional element of “*kedushat bechor*.”

3 Among *Yisrael*.

4 i.e. they did not necessarily sin more than others among *Yisrael*, nevertheless, due to their prominent status, they were more susceptible to indictment.

5 For in order to be saved from such a plague they would have had to be on the level of *tzaddikim gemurim* (completely righteous individuals).

6 To Lot, as he was being told to flee the city of Sodom. Lot may have been considered a *tzaddik* relative to the people of Sodom, but he was certainly not a *tzaddik gamur*. Hence, he had to flee in order to be spared the destruction that was to befall the city.

7 The sanctification of the *Bechorim* was in order to effectively “remove them” from *Mitzrayim* by placing them in the domain of Hashem. Thus, when *Makat Bechorot* swept across *Mitzrayim*, they were not considered as being part of their surroundings, and hence were saved.

8 Rather, it would simply allow them to revert to their prior status of being involved in *Avodah* while also being allowed to be involved in matters of *chol*.

9 In terms of them being involved in *Avodah* as they had always been.

Let us summarize the words of the *Seforno* as follows:

1. Historically, the area of *Avodah* had naturally belonged to *bechorim*, even prior to *Makat Bechorot*. This was not a product of any mitzvah in this regard, but rather of convention and natural expectation. However, the *bechor* did not originally have any intrinsic additional *kedushah*.
2. At the time of *Makat Bechorot*, in order to save the *Bechorim* from being affected, Hashem “removed them” from their surroundings by imbuing them with a *kedushah* that transferred them into His domain. At this stage, due to this *kedushah*, a *bechor* would not be allowed to involve himself in *chol* matters.
3. The mitzvah of *pidyon* was stated in order for the *bechor* to be redeemed from his *kedushah* and to allow him to be involved in *chol* matters [i.e., to return to the status of *bechor* as it was prior to *Makat Bechorot*].
4. As a result of the *Chet Ha'Egel*, the *Bechorim* were deposed from being involved in the *Avodah* altogether, and were redeemed — i.e. replaced — by the *Levi'im*.

We see that according to the *Seforno*, the *kedushah* of *Bechorim* did not come about as a **result** of *Makat Bechorot*, but rather as a **prelude** to it, in order to spare the *bechorim* from being included in the plague.

We also see from the *Seforno's* explanation that when it comes to *bechor*, there are two types of *pidyon* to consider:

1. The *pidyon* of **each newborn *bechor*** with five silver *shekalim*. This is a *mitzvah ledorot*, as the *kedushah* with which Hashem imbued the *Bechorim* continues to be imbued in each newborn *bechor*. Hence, the *pidyon* from that *kedushah* is an ongoing mitzvah.¹⁰
2. The *pidyon* of **all *bechorim* after the Chet Ha'Egel** which transferred the *Avodah* to the *Levi'im*. That transfer occurred on one occasion only and it was permanent in nature, hence, there is no *mitzvah ledorot* relating to this aspect of *pidyon*.

Pidyon Haben at Yetziyat Mitzrayim

The approach of the *Seforno* to *kedushat bechor* and *pidyon haben* can already be found earlier on, in his *peirush* to *Parshat Bo* (13:2 *kadesh*):

All (bechorim) are obligated in pidyon as is the case with all (items of) hekdesh, in order that they be permitted to involve themselves in chol matters, for without pidyon they would be forbidden to engage in chol matters, as it states (Devarim 15:19) “לא תעבד בבכור שורך” — Do not work with the firstborn of your oxen.” The amount

¹⁰ [Indeed, it is possible to explain in this vein the concluding phrase of our *pasuk* which states, “לי יהיו” — *They shall be Mine*,” i.e. *bechorim* will have this *kedushah* on an ongoing basis, including those born in future years.].

required for their pidyon is the value specified for a one-month-old male child in the parsha of Arachin,¹¹ since that is the age at which he is redeemed.¹²

According to the *Seforno*, we can understand why no specific sum was mentioned regarding *pidyon haben* when the mitzvah was first given to B'nei Yisrael upon leaving Mitzrayim. On that occasion there was no specific age at which to redeem the *bechorim*, for they were redeemed at whatever age they happened to be at that time. Indeed, there is room to ponder exactly how they fulfilled the mitzvah at that time.¹³

Between “קדש לי” and “הקדשתי לי”

In light of the above discussion, it is worthwhile noting in conclusion that the terms “קדש לי — Sanctify for Me” as directed to B'nei Yisrael and “הקדשתי לי — I sanctified for Myself” as stated by Hashem do not have exactly the same meaning. The words “הקדשתי לי” refer to something that Hashem had done, i.e. **instilling kedushah** within every *bechor*. As such, the words “קדש לי” said to B'nei Yisrael are not telling them to instill the *bechor* with *kedushah* — as that is something Hashem has already done! — but rather to **recognize** the *kedushah* of the *bechor* and to relate to him accordingly prior to performing *pidyon*.

This idea of a verb used to denote not action, but recognition, is something that is found elsewhere in Tanach, especially with regards to our relationship with Hashem. Thus, for example, when the *pasuk* says (*Tehillim* 34:4) “גִּדְלוּ לַה' אִתִּי,” it does not mean “**Make Hashem great together with me,**” but rather, “**Recognize Hashem's greatness together with me.**”

11 i.e., *Vayikra* 27:6 which states that the associated “value” (*erech*) for a male child from the age of one month until five years is five silver *shekalim*.

12 See also *Seforno* to *Bamidbar* 8:17, s.v. *ki li*.

13 [Presumably, the Rav is referring to the question as to how they gauged the value of each individual *bechor*. Additionally, he may be referring to the question of to whom the money was paid.]