

# MESHECH CHOCHMAH

## Parshas Vayeshev

### The Sale of Yosef and Pidyon Haben

וַיִּמְשְׁכוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ אֶת יוֹסֵף מִן הַבּוֹר וַיִּמְכְּרוּ אֶת יוֹסֵף לְיִשְׁמָעֵאֵלִים בְּעֶשְׂרִים כֶּסֶף

*They drew Yosef up and lifted him out of the pit and sold Yosef to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver (37:28)*

#### A SURPRISING ASSOCIATION

The sale of Yosef was an act which has had repercussions throughout our history. According to Chazal, its reverberations are felt in the realm of mitzvos as well. The Yerushalmi<sup>1</sup> states:

אתם מכרתם בכורה של רחל בעשרים כסף, אף אתם תנו בעד בכורכם חמשה שקלים – עשרים גרה

*You sold Rachel's firstborn for twenty pieces of silver, [therefore,] you too shall give five [silver] shekalim – twenty gerah – for your firstborn.*

The Yerushalmi is referring to the mitzvah of *pidyon haben* – redeeming the firstborn, where the Torah states that the father gives a Kohen five silver shekalim in order to redeem his son. A shekel equals four *gerah*, so that five shekalim equal twenty *gerah*, the coins which Yosef's brothers received when they sold him. Thus, the background to the mitzvah of *pidyon haben* is the sale of Yosef in our parsha.

On the face of it, this statement is very difficult to understand. Aside from the fact that the Torah explicitly provides the background to the mitzvah of redeeming the firstborn, i.e. that Hashem sanctified them to Him when He spared them during the final plague of smiting the Egyptian firstborn, the Meshech Chochmah raises the following questions:

- ▶ The mitzvah of redeeming one's firstborn son applies to all non-kohanim, including those who are from **the tribe of Yosef**. Why should people who are descended from the one who was sold also need to redeem their firstborn?
- ▶ The five shekalim go to the Kohen, who belongs to **the tribe of Levi** – one the primary participants in the brother's treatment of Yosef which culminated in the sale. Why should someone from Levi be the beneficiary of that act?

1 Maseches Shekalim 2:3.

## **FIRST APPROACH: ASSESSING REDEMPTION**

Based on these questions, the Meshech Chochmah explains that when the Yerushalmi identifies the sale of Yosef as the background the money given to the Kohen, it is not with regards to the mitzvah of *pidyon* itself. That mitzvah is clearly rooted in the smiting of the firstborn when we left Mitzrayim. As such, it applies to the firstborn of all tribes – including Yosef, and is given to the Kohen, whose ancestors took over the avodah from the firstborn at the time of the Chet ha'Egel.

However, the Yerushalmi is addressing a different question. Namely, when the father wishes to redeem his firstborn son from the Kohen, how much should he have to pay? One would imagine that the value of a Jewish child is beyond estimation and, at the very least, should require a significant payment to the kohen. In the event, the father pays five shekalim. That's not really a lot of money.

Why is the amount paid for *pidyon haben* so low?

This, says Meshech Chochmah, is the question which the Yerushalmi is coming to address. While it is true that the kohanim are the ones who receive the redemption money – and deservedly so, due to their actions at the time of the Egel – when it comes to the amount they are to receive, the Torah says, “The monetary value of a Jewish firstborn has already been set by your ancestors when they sold Yosef, Rachel's firstborn, for twenty *gerah* of silver. Therefore, that is the amount that you yourselves will receive for *pidyon haben*.”

## **SECOND APPROACH: SUPERVISION AND ORCHESTRATION**

The Meshech Chochmah provides a second explanation of the Yerushalmi's statement, whereby the sale of Yosef is connected with *pidyon haben* on an essential level.

The mitzvah of redeeming the firstborn expresses our recognition of Hashem's *hashgachah* (Divine supervision), namely, how during the plague which killed all the Egyptian firstborn, the Jewish firstborn were protected from harm. In this regard, the Torah affixes a price to the redemption which will recall the sale of Yosef, in order to broaden our understanding of this concept. For *hashgachah* relates not just to Hashem's supervision during certain events, but also to His orchestration of those events themselves.

We might be prone to look upon the events of the Egyptian exile in a narrow sense, i.e. we start with the fact that we were exiled there, and then contemplate *hashgachah* as it protected and ultimately redeemed us from that situation. However, a broader view of those events will lead us to contemplate what we were doing there in the first place.

The exile in Egypt was decreed upon us as early on as the time of Avraham and, moreover, played a key part in preparing the Jewish people for their destiny. Indeed, the Torah later refers to Egypt as the “smelting furnace” for the Jewish people,<sup>2</sup> ridding them of impurities and refining them for their purpose as Hashem's nation. As such, looked at in a broader way, Hashem's supervision was as much in play in terms of arranging for them to go down to Egypt as it was in taking them up!

The events which led to our descent to Mitzrayim began with the sale of Yosef. His rise to the position of power that he held during the famine brought his family there to join him. As such, when we fulfill the mitzvah of *pidyon haben*, which expresses our recognition of

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2 Devarim 4:20.

Hashem's *hashgachah*, the Torah injects an element within that mitzvah which relates, not to our Exodus from there represented by the plague of the firstborn, but to our descent to there, represented by the sale of Yosef. By bringing together the two "brackets" of our Egyptian Exile experience, the Torah is encouraging a broader view of what Hashem's *hashgachah* ultimately is.

Indeed, the Torah mentions on a number of occasions that the brothers travelled to and from Mitzrayim on donkeys in order to purchase food. This, says Meshech Chochmah, may help explain why part of the mitzvah of redeeming the firstborn includes redeeming a firstborn donkey as well.<sup>3</sup>

And why do these themes of Hashem's *hashgachah* find expression specifically in a mitzvah which deals with a firstborn child? Because the special level of *hashgachah* which the Jewish people enjoy is itself a function of their "firstborn" status. The sanctity of a firstborn is not a result of his actions, it is a natural product of the circumstances which accompanied his birth. Likewise, the Jewish people were "born into" their status, in that they were descended from the Avos who had perfected and refined their nature. As such, their descendants attained "firstborn" status, and merited Hashem's special supervision as reflected in the experiences of the exile on Mitzrayim – beginning with the sale of Yosef and culminating with the smiting of the firstborn!<sup>4</sup>

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3 Shemos 13:13. In other words, not only does the sale of Yosef find expression in an aspect of the mitzvah of pidyon (i.e. the amount of money given to the kohen), but also in a specific entity that also requires redemption.

4 Based on Meshech Chochmah Parshas Bo 13:13.