

MESHECH CHOCHMAH

Parshas Bamidbar

What's in a Shekel?

קח את הלויים תחת כל בכור בני ישראל... ואת פדויוי השלישה והשבעים והמאתים העדפים על הלויים מבכור בני ישראל. ולקחת חמשת שקלים לנגלת... עשרים גרה השקל. ונתתה הכסף לאהרן ולבניו

Take the Leviim in place of every firstborn of Bnei Yisrael... And as for the redemptions of the two hundred and seventy-three of the firstborn of Bnei Yisrael who are in excess of the Leviim; you shall take five shekels for each headcount... the shekel is twenty geras. You shall give the money to Aharon and his sons. (3:45-48)

“AHARON AND HIS SONS” – MIDRASH CHAZAL

As the above pesukim describe, of the 22,273 firstborn among Bnei Yisrael, 22,000 had their kedushah transferred to the 22,000 Leviim, while the remaining 273 redeemed themselves with money, which was given to Aharon and his sons.

How was this redemption money apportioned? The pasuk does not discuss this matter explicitly. However, Chazal¹ explain the Torah's directive that the money be given to “Aharon and his sons” to mean that Aharon shall receive half the money and his sons will divide the other half. This exposition parallels a statement of the Gemara in a different context. The Torah² states that the *Lechem Hapanim* is to be given to “Aharon and his sons,” which the Gemara³ explains to mean that Aharon shall receive half of the loaves and the remaining half shall be divided among his sons.

The Meshech Chochmah proceeds to explain that this understanding of the division emerges not only from the exposition of Chazal on the words “Aharon and his sons”, but also from a closer look at our pasuk itself.

1 Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 4:11.

2 Vayikra 24:9.

3 Bava Basra 143a.

“THE SHEKEL IS TWENTY GERAS” – UNDERSTANDING THE PATTERN

Pasuk 47 which states that each firstborn shall redeem himself with five shekalim, concludes by saying that each *gera* is twenty shekel. This detail is something the Torah has stated on previous occasions – but not on all occasions. For example:

In the beginning of Parshas Ki Tisa,⁴ when commanding the Bnei Yisrael to donate a half-shekel to the Mishkan, the Torah adds that each shekel is twenty *gera*.

In contrast, in the end of last week’s parsha,⁵ when dealing with the mitzvah of redeeming pledges (*arachin*) to the Beis Hamikdash, the Torah simply states the various amounts in terms of shekalim, without adding how many *gera* there are in a shekel. Having said that, toward the end of the perek, when describing the redemption of an ancestral field (*s’deh achuzah*), the Torah does mention this.⁶

What determines when the Torah will state how many *gera* are in a shekel?

The answer, says Meshech Chochmah, lies very simply in whether whole shekalim are to be given or parts thereof. Thus, when the Torah commands that a half-shekel be donated to the Mishkan, it then adds how many *gera* comprise a shekel, so that one may give half that amount. In contrast, the *arachin* pledges all comprise amounts of entire shekalim, hence, there is no need to add how many *gera* are in a shekel. It is only with the regard to one who redeems an ancestral field that this needs to be mentioned. Since the rate is prescribed as fifty shekalim for forty-nine years, the redemption rate per year will be somewhat more than one whole shekel, and thus the Torah adds the sub-denominations of the shekel in that pasuk.⁷

PSHUTO SHEL MIKRA – DIVIDE AND ANSWER

Bearing this in mind, we return to our pasuk, which mentions that each shekel comprises twenty *gera*, and can discern thereby how the redemption money was apportioned between Aharon and his sons. Each of the two hundred and seventy three “extra” firstborn gave five shekalim, totaling one thousand three hundred and sixty five (1,365) shekalim. Seeing as Aharon had two remaining sons, Elazar and Itamar, if the redemption money was to be apportioned equally among all three, there would be no need to break up any shekalim, since that amount is exactly divisible by three ($1,365/3 = 455$); as such, there would be no need to state how many *gera* make up the shekel! Rather, since the amount was to be divided by four, with half going to Aharon and the remaining two

4 Shemos 30:13.

5 Vayikra 27:3-8.

6 Ibid. pasuk 25.

7 According to the Meshech Chochmah, this principle finds expression in the words of Chazal as well. Commenting on the Torah’s mention that “*the shekel is twenty gera*” regarding redeeming ancestral fields (Vayikra 27:25), the Toras Kohanim (Bechukosai 11:8) states: “*This teaches us how much a shekel is.*” Since as we mentioned, the redemption money for each year is more than a shekel, we need to be told how many *gera* make up a *shekel*. In contrast, when the Torah mentions this fact within the context of redeeming the firstborn, the Sifrei comments that this teaches us that a person may use any item of value equivalent the five shekalim to redeem his son. In that case, since the amount in question is five *shekalim* exactly, there was no need for the pasuk to inform us how many *gera* are in each *shekel*. Therefore, it is understood as teaching us that other items with a value of five *shekalim* can be used, and hence needs to teach us the value of a *shekel* itself.

quarters to each of his sons, it was necessary to mention the sub-denominations of a shekel, since 1,365 divided by four equals 341 plus one quarter, i.e. five *gera*!

DOWN TO THE LETTER

Taking the discussion one stage further, the Meshech Chochmah notes that our pasuk will now serve as the basis for an additional halachah with regards to redeeming the firstborn. The Gemara⁸ states that if one divided the redemption money for his firstborn son between a number of kohanim, it is valid. The Gemara does not provide a source for this ruling, however, the Meshech Chochmah explains that it emerges from our pasuk. Since the redemption money for the two hundred and seventy-three kohanim was divided four ways between Aharon and his sons, it emerges that there was one Kohen whose five shekalim did not all go to the same Kohen, but was divided among them.

Indeed, this idea is alluded to in the final pasuk of our perek,⁹ which reads:

וַיִּתֵּן מֹשֶׁה אֶת כֶּסֶף הַפְּדוּיִם לְאַהֲרֹן וּלְבָנָיו עַל פִּי ה'

Moshe gave the money of the redemptions to Aharon and his sons according to the word of Hashem.

We note that the word for “redemptions” (הַפְּדוּיִם) is spelled without a vav in the middle. As a rule, whenever a word is written “chaser” (with a letter missing), it indicates a lack of completion. In our case, the missing letter alludes to the fact that the redemption money of the final firstborn was not given in its entirety to any one Kohen, but was divided among them. This “lack of completion” within that final amount is reflected in the incomplete spelling of the word.

And so, as Meshech Chochmah demonstrates, the understanding of our pasuk arrived at by the exposition of Chazal (*drash*) is also borne out by a close analysis of the pasuk itself, paying attention to a phrase within the pasuk and setting it against all the other occasions where it is – and is not – mentioned in the Torah (*pshat*), and ultimately alluded to in the anomalous spelling of one of the key relevant words (*remez*).

8 Bechoros 51b.

9 Pasuk 51.