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Preface

Baruch Hashem, we are meriting here to fulfill the mitzvah of ***pidyon haben (redeeming a firstborn child)***.

Chazal say that “learning Torah is great, for it brings one to act” [1]. When one acts upon his learning, that reveals the light of the Torah. Therefore, let us learn here about the mitzvah in a way that reveals the light of our learning, which enables us to act properly - and then we will feel the light of what we have learned.

Let us try to understand the concept of the mitzvah - its concept, its root, and its purpose.

The Root of Redeeming The Firstborn

The mitzvah of *pidyon haben* is written in the possuk, “*To Me belongs all the firstborn.*” After Hashem brought the plague of the firstborns upon Egypt, Hashem sanctified all the firstborns of *bnei Yisrael*.

So the mitzvah of *pidyon haben* seems to have begun with the exodus of Egypt, in which we became the firstborns of Hashem, after Hashem brought the plague of the firstborns upon Egypt. Ever since then, the firstborns have been sanctified.

The Rashbam and the Ramban (Parshas Bo) explain that when we were brought to Eretz Yisrael, that is when we became obligated in the *mitzvah*. The Rashbam explains that the Leviim did not sin with the Golden Calf, and therefore they are not obligated in *pidyon haben*. Thus, the *mitzvah* did not begin with the exodus - it began with the sin of the Calf, in which the *avodah* was taken from the firstborn; and thus the Leviim, who did not participate, did not become obligated in *pidyon haben*.

So, the *mitzvah* of *pidyon haben* has two sources - the exodus, and the sin of the Calf. Let us try to understand a little of the root of this *mitzvah*.

What is the concept of a *pidyon*?

There is a mitzvah of *pidyon shvuyim*, to redeem a captive. There is also a mitzvah of *pidyon* on a firstborn donkey (*pidyon peter chamor*). So there are several kinds of *pidyon*.

From Egypt, we were redeemed, and it was called a “*geulah*”; “*From the house of Egypt we were redeemed (“ge’altanu”), and from the house of slaves we were redeemed (“pidisanu”).*” What is the

difference, though, between “*geulah*” and “*pidyon*”? They seem to be almost identical concepts; they are both about redemption.

The *Arizal*, however, explained that there is a difference: with *geulah*, nothing is given in return; but when there is *pidyon*, something is given in return. For example, when we would do *pidyon* on *terumah* with money, the *halacha* is that you have to add on some amount of money in addition to the actual value.

When it comes to the *pidyon* we make on a *bechor* (firstborn), not only do we redeem the *bechor*, but we give money, five *selaim* [2], in place of the *bechor*. It's not for free. But *geulah* is for free; we don't give anything along with *geulah*. With *pidyon*, we redeem something, and we give something along with it.

A Deeper Look At Pidyon HaBen

Upon some more reflection, we can ask: did the mitzvah of *pidyon haben* come about through something good, or something negative?

The Rashbam and the Ramban both explain that since the sin with the Calf, the status of holiness was removed from the firstborns and given to the Leviim [because the firstborns sinned with the Calf, while the Leviim did not]. So *pidyon haben* is rooted in the fact that the *Leviim* took the place of the firstborns. The Leviim are like a *pidyon* in place of the firstborns.

So the first time we needed a *pidyon* began with the sin with the Calf; it did not begin with the exodus. Had the *bnei Yisrael* not sinned with the Calf, the firstborns would have retained their holy status, and they would have done the Avodah in the Beis HaMikdash; each firstborn born to any Yisrael would have been able to do the Avodah, if not for the sin with the Calf. The *bechor* himself would have had a status of a *Kohein* and be able to do the Avodah of the Beis HaMikdash.

Thus, the entire mitzvah of *pidyon haben* which we have today is a result of the sin with the Calf, when the *bnei Yisrael* fell from their level, in which we have to give money to the Kohen in order to redeem our firstborn child. So *pidyon haben* today is all a result of something negative: the sin with the Golden Calf.

If the *pidyon haben* today would be like the *pidyon haben* we were commanded with when we left Egypt - which was in place of the firstborns of Egypt - then it would be a result of something holy. Our firstborns would retain their holy status.

The Question

But since the *pidyon haben* of today is to redeem our firstborn from the Kohen by giving him money - which is rooted in the sin of the Calf - we must then wonder: why do we make a *simcha* today out of *pidyon haben*? What are we so joyous about?? The firstborns lost their holy status after the sin with the Calf, and it was given instead to the Leviim; this is something to be sad about, not something to celebrate! If so, why do we make a *simcha* today out of a *pidyon haben*??

The Bechor|Firstborn In Terms of The Physical and the Spiritual

The Gemara [3] says that “Yaakov redeemed Avraham”, and the Gemara explains that because Yaakov was in the place of Avraham, with regards to the fact that he raised only good children; Avraham had a wayward child [Yishmael], [and Yitzchok also had a wayward child - Esav], whereas Yaakov had only righteous children. The twelve tribes were really supposed to be born to Avraham, but it was decreed on Avraham that he had to endure the test of difficulty in raising children. Thus,

Yaakov took Avraham's place and "redeemed" him - by raising children that were all holy.

We see from this that the concept of *pidyon* was really around before the sin with the Golden Calf: Yaakov made a "*pidyon*" on Avraham. What does this mean - how do you redeem Avraham Avinu?! And why did Yaakov redeem Avraham, and not his own son, Yitzchok?

Avraham's firstborn was Yishmael, and Yitzchok's firstborn was Esav. Both were not holy, so they were not a true *bechor*. The firstborn of Yaakov, though, was Reuven, of whom Yaakov said, "*Kochi v'raishis oni*", "*He is my strength and the beginning of my offspring.*" Chazal explain that this was because Yaakov never saw *keri* (emission) in his entire life; thus, Reuven is a true *bechor*, because he was the first seed to come from Yaakov.

With most people, however, the *bechor* is not a true *bechor*! Perhaps he is the first to exit the mother's womb and thus he has certain *halachos* of *peter rechem* (first to exit the womb), but he is not necessarily the *bechor* to his father. It cannot always be said of every firstborn child that he is "*my strength and beginning of my offspring.*"

Avraham had to endure the pain of raising a wayward child. What is the root of this? It is rooted in the curse given to Chavah: "*I will greatly increase your pains, and with pain shall you bear children.*" Rashi explains that women have to endure the pains that come with raising children. Avraham and Sarah existed to fix the sin of Adam and Chavah, thus they were given the curse of having pain from raising children.

Why indeed must there be pain in raising children?

"Raishis": Beginnings

Every beginning (*raishis*) can either be the root of holiness, or evil, *chas v'shalom*.

The first time there is a concept of "*raishis*" (beginning) in Creation was by "*Beraishis*", the beginning of Creation, which was a holy beginning, for it was Hashem's handiwork.

But when a person has a *bechor*, which is his "*raishis oni*" ("first of my offspring"), is it always holy? Was the child born with complete holiness...?

Dovid HaMelech said, "*I was born in iniquity, and with sin my mother conceived me.*" There is no person born in complete holiness, ever since the sin of Adam and Chavah; every person born since then is born from physical desire of the parents, and not from complete holiness. Even Dovid HaMelech was born from his parents' desire, and his father was Yishai, one of the four *tzaddikim* who never sinned, as Chazal say; so even the most perfect *tzaddik* does not escape physical desire, therefore, even the child of a *tzaddik* also comes from desire.

Thus, the depth of why we need a *pidyon* on a *bechor* is because the birth of the *bechor* is not rooted in complete holiness. If a *bechor* would be born today in complete holiness and not out of desire, but purely because Hashem commanded one to bear children - if that would be a person's total intention in having a child - there would be no negative spiritual effect on the firstborn child to redeem him from.

Every birth is thus missing a true and holy beginning. Because the "beginning" has become impaired, there is a necessity for *pidyon*.

Thus, the deeper meaning behind *pidyon haben* on our *bechor* is that we are redeeming him from the ruination that came upon Creation. We were redeemed from Egypt and had a *pidyon* from it. We were

redeemed from that confinement and from that evil place. So too, a *pidyon* on a *bechor* is to redeem him from the root of evil that is stained on his soul as a result of the lack of holiness we are born with.

Pidyon haben is thus about redeeming our beginning: that our beginning should become holy, and not be unholy, *chas v'shalom*.

Pidyon HaBen - An Atonement for the Sale of Yosef

Pesikta D'Rav Kahana says that the reason why we have a mitzvah of *pidyon haben* with five *selaim* (silver) is to atone for the sale of Yosef, who was like a *bechor*, for Yosef is called *bechor shor* ("firstborn" and "ox") he was sold for 20 silver coins, which is equal to 5 *selaim*.

This reveals a new understanding in *pidyon haben*: besides for the simple reason, which is the fact that our firstborns became holy after Hashem brought the plague of the firstborn upon Egypt, we have another reason: to atone for the sale of Yosef.

Reuven and Yosef: Two Levels of A "Bechor"

The depth of this matter is as follows. Yaakov's *bechor* was Reuven. However, the status of *bechor* was taken from Reuven and given to Yosef^[4]. What indeed is the difference between the status of *bechor* of Reuven with the status of *bechor* of Yosef?

Reuven was only the "*petur rechem*" (first to exit to the womb) of his mother Leah, but he was not considered the true *bechor* of Yaakov. Reuven is the physical kind of *bechor*, for he is called "*Kochi v'raishis oni*" ("my strength and the beginning of my offspring"). But Yosef is called "*Ben Zekunim*" ("Son born in old age") and Rashi explains that this means that Yaakov transmitted to Yosef all of the Torah that he learned by Shem and Ever.

So it is Yosef who is the real *bechor* of Yaakov, for he is the *raishis* (beginning) of the *chochmah* (wisdom) of Yaakov, since Yaakov transmitted his main wisdom to him. He is not the physical *bechor* that Reuven was. When Reuven lost his status of *bechor*, the *bechor* concept was essentially switched from being a physical title to being a completely different definition: the *raishis*\beginning of one's *chochmah*\wisdom.

Reuven was the first "physical" *bechor* of Yaakov. But Yosef is the true *bechor* of Yaakov, for he received the *chochmah* from his father. He is the *raishis* of *chochmah*. We find that by the word "*Beraishis*", the *Targum* translates it to mean "*B'raishis - b'chochmasah*", that *chochmah*\wisdom is called *raishis*\the beginning.

So there is *bechor* of our *guf*\physical body, which was like Reuven, and there is *bechor**raishis* in the inner sense, which is the *bechor* of one's *chochmah*.

The *bechor* of *guf* (physical firstborn) comes from bodily desire of the parents; such a *bechor* cannot retain its holiness, as we see from the fact that the *bechoros* sinned with the Calf. But the inner kind of *bechor* is when the *bechor* is the *raishis* of *chochmah*.

Thus, when we do *pidyon haben*, what are we doing? [According to this inner perspective that we have explained], we are redeeming him from being a merely physical *bechor*, which comes from physical desire, and we instead bring him to holiness, to the beginning of *chochmah*, to the beginning of Torah, to the beginning of Creation which Hashem made, which was the *raishis* of all *chochmah*.

That is what *pidyon haben* is about.

The *Pesikta* says that *pidyon haben* is to atone for the sale of Yosef – the depth of this is, that instead of viewing our *bechor* as being a mere physical *bechor*, like Reuven, we need to return every *bechor* to its more spiritual root, which is like the *bechor* that Yosef was: the *raishis* of *chochmah*.

The Leviim and Kohanim are in the place of the *bechoros*. Of a Kohen it is written, “For the lips of a Kohen guard *daas*, and Torah is sought from his mouth, for he is an angel of Hashem.” And, “The Torah comes from Zion, the word of Hashem comes from Jerusalem” – through the *Urim V’Tumim*, which was on the Kohen.

Bringing The Firstborn Into Holiness

This is the depth of *pidyon haben*.

So on a simple level, it was rooted in the sin of the Calf, but the depth of the act of the *mitzvah* is to enter the *bechor* into the *raishis*\beginning of *chochmah*\wisdom.

Thus, when we give money to the Kohen, it is not just a *pidyon*. To illustrate, when you give a present to a friend, you are not just giving him something – you are becoming connected with him. So too, when you give the money to the Kohen by a *pidyon haben*, you are connecting the *bechor* to the *raishis* of *Kehunah* – which reveals the *raishis* (beginning) of *chochmah* (wisdom). The *raishis* of *chochmah* is Hashem – as Chazal state: “Hashem, the Torah, and Yisrael are one.”

In Connection With The Upcoming Rosh HaShanah

We are approaching Rosh HaShanah, where there is a *minhag* to eat the head of a fish and say, “May we be like a head, and not like a tail.” What does it mean to be like the ‘head’?

It reflects the concept of “Hashem looked into the Torah and created the world”; that our *avodah* is to return to the Torah, to return to the beginning of the Torah, the *Beraishis*.

The beginning of the year, Rosh HaShanah, is when Hashem created the world. A person has the power on Rosh HaShanah to return to the beginning of creation – the beginning that we all come from.

Pidyon haben is thus not just to redeem the *bechor* and give money to the Kohen in the simple sense. It is to connect to the *bechor* to his *raishis*\beginning - not to the physical *bechor* that he is, but to the true concept of *bechor*, which is: the *raishis*\beginning of all *chochmah*\wisdom.

And what is that *raishis*? “*Raishis chochmah, yiras Hashem*” - “The beginning of wisdom is fear of Hashem.”

In Conclusion

May the *baal hasimcha* here, together with his wife, merit, that this *mitzvah* of *pidyon haben* should not just be a passing event to go through, but that it should dwell upon us and connect us to our Source.

And may we merit through that to enter into Rosh HaShanah, into our *raishis*; that all of our existence should be “Yisrael” – which are from the words “*Li Rosh*”, “A head unto Me.”

May we all merit to be signed for a good year, not to remain in superficiality and instead to penetrate

deep into the Torah. May we be remembered for life by becoming connected with the Eternal King,
Amen V'Amen – a good year to all of you.

[1] Bava Kamma 17a

[2] Which goes to a Kohen

[3] In Tractate Bava Metzia

[4] As a result of Reuven's act of switching the bed of Bilhah with his mother Leah's bed.

Source: <https://bilvavi.net/english/droshos-depth-pidyon-haben>