

Insights from the Meshech Chochma

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קח את הלויים תחת כל בכור בבני ישראל... ואת פדויו השלשה והשבעים והמאתים העדפים על הלויים מבכור בני ישראל. ולקחת חמשת חמשת שקלים לגלגלת... עשרים גרה השקל. ונתתה הכסף לאהרן ולבניו... (פרק ג' מה-נ)

(Hashem told Moshe:) *"Take the Leviim in place of every firstborn of the Children of Israel... And as for the redemptions of the two-hundred seventy-three of the firstborns of the Children of Israel who are more than the Leviim; you shall take five shekels each according to the head count... the shekel is twenty geras. You shall give the money to Aharon and his sons..."*

These pasukim are part of the larger Parsha which describes the process of פְּדִיּוֹן בְּכוֹרִים, the redemption of the Jewish firstborn, from the age of one month and up, who were replaced by the Leviim. The בְּכוֹרִים outnumbered the Leviim by two-hundred seventy-three, and they were redeemed for five *shekalim* each, thus a total of one thousand three-hundred sixty-five *shekalim* were given to Aharon and his sons. Rashi explains that to determine which firstborn would be "exchanged" and which would have to pay the five *shekalim*, Moshe prepared twenty-two thousand lots, the total number of Leviim, upon which he inscribed לְוִי, and another two-hundred seventy-three, the excess from the בְּכוֹרִים count, and labeled them חֲמֵשֶׁת שְׁקָלִים. "He mixed them up, put them in a box and said to the בְּכוֹרִים, 'Come and draw your tickets according to the lottery.'"

In a series of pieces on these pasukim, Rav Meir Simcha gives his unique analysis of this Parsha. He starts by informing us that wherever the *shekel* is used as currency for a transaction, the Torah informs us that a *shekel* is worth twenty *geras* **only** where it is necessary to divide the shekel into smaller amounts. One of his examples is from the census in יג שמות ל': **זֶה יִתְּנוּ כָּל הָעֶבֶר עַל הַפְּקָדִים מִחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֶשְׂרִים גֵּרָה**: שמות ל' יג: *.../This shall they give-everyone who passes through the census-a half shekel of the sacred shekel, the shekel is twenty geras...* If we "do the math" by our פְּדִיּוֹן בְּכוֹרִים, there were one thousand three-hundred sixty-five *shekalim* which were divided among three Kohanim, Aharon and his two sons. That means that the redemptions left each of them with four-hundred fifty-five, a whole number. Why then did the Torah have to mention the twenty *geras*? Rav Meir Simcha proposes that this may be the source for R' Yehuda HaNasi's exegesis, stated in בבא בתרא קמג. among other places, that when the Torah writes לְאֶהֱרֹן וּלְבָנָיו, such as in our pasuk, וְנָתַתָּה הַכֶּסֶף לְאֶהֱרֹן וּלְבָנָיו, it means that Aharon would take half and his sons would divide the other half in two. Why so? *Precisely*

because our pasuk tells us that the *shekel* is twenty *geras*, which means that we are dealing with a fraction of a shekel i.e., Aharon took six-hundred eighty-two **and a half shekalim** and therefore we need to be told of the break-down of the *shekel* into a smaller component, the *gera*!

He adds that there are two instances where the Torah mentions עֶשְׂרִים גֵּרָה despite the “whole” *shekel* and in each case חֲזוֹ"ל feel the need to explain why. His second example is from later, in פרק יח' טז, the Parsha of פְּדִיּוֹן הַבֶּן: וּפְדוּיָו מִבֶּן הָדָשׁ תִּפְדֶּה... חֲמִשָּׁת שֶׁקֶלִים בְּשֶׁקֶל: פְּדִיּוֹן הַבֶּן הוּא וְהַקֹּדֶשׁ עֶשְׂרִים גֵּרָה הוּא...five silver shekalim by the sacred shekel; it is twenty geras. Sifrei asks with regards to the words עֶשְׂרִים גֵּרָה, נֶאֱמַר לָמָּה נֶאֱמַר -why tell us this? According to Rav Meir Simcha, what bothers the Sifri is precisely *because* we are dealing with a whole number of *shekalim*. It answers that עֶשְׂרִים גֵּרָה הוּא is teaching us that not only could the פְּדִיּוֹן הַבֶּן be transacted with money, but also with שִׁוְיוֹ נִשְׂוּהוּ-equivalent worth merchandise. חֲזוֹ"ל in בבורות נ. although not as “blunt” as the Sifrei, are also bothered by the Torah (unnecessarily) inserting עֶשְׂרִים גֵּרָה הוּא. They answer that one might have thought that “the Sages of future generations have the discretion to reduce the weight of the *shekel*. Therefore, הוּא עֶשְׂרִים גֵּרָה הוּא teaches us that the shekel may never weigh less than twenty *gera*.”

Rav Meir Simcha ends this piece by offering us his own explanation for the Torah’s writing עֶשְׂרִים גֵּרָה הוּא by the פְּדִיּוֹן הַבֶּן. He takes us back to בבורות נא: “We learn ...in a Baraisa that if the father gave the redemption money of five *shekalim* for his son to ten Kohanim at one time and told them to divide it among themselves, he has fulfilled his obligation.” It does not have to be given to one Kohen. How did the Baraisa know this? He answers, and with an emphatic, וזוה נבון, that it is the superfluous גֵּרָה עֶשְׂרִים that was חֲזוֹ"ל's source i.e., although the total amount of the פְּדִיּוֹן must be five *shekalim*, if the father wanted to break up the *shekalim* into smaller coinage and give to ten Kohanim, ten *geras each*, the Torah would allow it.

Once again, our author shows us a seemingly source-less חֲזוֹ"ל דְּבַר and finds for it a home in the vast תוֹרָה שְׂבִכְתָּב!

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