

## Insights from the Meshech Chochma

רב מאיר שמחה הכהן מדווינסק זצ"ל

פְּרִשְׁת בַּמִּדְבָּר תִּשְׁפֹּה

Shulie Plawes

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה פְקֹד כָּל בְּכֹר זָכָר לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִבֶּן חֹדֶשׁ וּמַעֲלָה וְשָׂא אֶת מִסְפָּר שְׁמֵתָם. (פרק ג' מ)  
*Hashem said to Moshe: "Count every firstborn male of the Children of Israel from one month of age and up and take a census of their names."*

When Hashem eradicated all the firstborn of *Mitzraim* in the last of the ten plagues, מִכָּת, בְּכוֹרוֹת, He forever sanctified the firstborns of *Klal Yisrael* by sparing them. Long before this, from the times of *Adam*, it had been the practice to assign the performance of עֲבוֹדָה to the בְּכוֹרוֹת. This remained in effect until the tragic הֶעֱקֵל. Because they joined in its worship, the עֲבוֹדָה was given to the *Kohanim* and *Leviim*, the only ones who refrained from sinning. Our pasuk begins with Hashem's command to Moshe to count the בְּכוֹרוֹת among the *Yisraelim* and to take the male *Leviim* as a redemption for these בְּכוֹרוֹת.

The Meshech Chochma, and I do not believe that anyone else comments on this, questions why the Torah chooses to write כָּל בְּכֹר זָכָר לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל and not the more grammatically correct לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל? Subtle, but subtleties did not pass by the shtenda of Rav Meir Simcha.

He begins his answer by taking us to בבִּכּוֹרוֹת ד', where there is a discussion regarding a statement of the Mishna that when *Kohanim* and *Leviim* are *themselves* firstborns, they are exempt from the law of פְּדִיּוֹן הֶבֶן. This was derived from a וְחֹמֶר: If the *Leviim* exempted the firstborn of the *Yisraelim* in the *Midbar*, it is logical that they can redeem themselves. (This is a reference to our *Parsha* which describes the process of the 22,000 *Leviim* being exchanged for a similar amount of firstborn *Yisraelim* and the excess firstborn *Yisraelim* having to pay the usual בְּכוֹר redemption of five *shekalim* to the Kohen.) Rav Safra asks, "If we are utilizing this וְחֹמֶר then the בְּכוֹר sanctity of a *Leviyah* i.e., the daughter of a Levi who marries a *Yisrael*, should not be removed?" As Rashi explains that since only male *Leviim* were included in the census, *only* they removed the בְּכוֹר sanctity of *Yisraelim*. The female *Leviim*, who were not counted, were not involved in this process. So that if a *Leviyah* who married a *Yisrael* gave birth to a בְּכוֹר, that son *should be* subject to the בְּכוֹר law. Continues Rav Safra: "Why, then, does Rav Adda bar Ahava say that her firstborn son *is* exempt from the obligation of giving five *sela* coins to the Kohen to be redeemed?" The Gemara answers with a statement of Mar, the son of Rav Yosef, in the name of Rava: "The fact that the Torah, with regards to the sanctity of the firstborn, writes in ב' וְשָׂא אֶת מִסְפָּר שְׁמֵתָם לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, שמות יג' ב' *Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the first issue of every womb among the Children of Israel*-the phrase describes a בְּכוֹר as one which *opens up the womb*, is teaching us that the Merciful One made the sanctity of the בְּכוֹר *dependent* on it being the first opening of the womb." And so, when the womb that the firstborn opened is that of a *Leviyah*, he too is exempt, regardless of his paternal lineage.

Rav Meir Simcha proposes that this rule i.e., the kedusha of the Leviyah exempts her בְּכוֹר regardless of who her husband's *Sheivet* is, applies only to “modern” times. In the *Midbar* however, before the חֲטָא הָעֵגֶל, the *Leviim* were “ordinary citizens”. The extra קְדֻשָּׁה of the בְּכוֹרוֹת was removed from them and placed onto *Sheivet Levi* after the חֲטָא הָעֵגֶל, but only on to the male *Leviim* at that time and therefore, Rav Meir Simcha boldly tells us, in the *Midbar*, a בְּכוֹר born to a Leviyah married to a Yisrael *would* have been required to undergo פְּדִיוֹן הַבֵּן. And he believes that this is what the Torah is telling us with the slight exchange of לְבִי יִשְׂרָאֵל instead of מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל i.e., לְבִי יִשְׂרָאֵל is hinting to us that Hashem told Moshe to include in the בְּכוֹר census any בְּכוֹר born to a בֵּן יִשְׂרָאֵל, even one whose mother was a Leviyah! (Rav Meir Simcha concludes his piece with וַעֲיִין בְּכוֹרוֹת בְּזָה, וְדִיִּיק הֵיטֵב, as he may have an issue with this חִידוּשׁ from a comment by Rashi there. It is beyond the scope of my understanding though.)

Rav Kupperman זצ"ל adds that this is a wonderful example of our author using the נְשׁוּטוֹ נָסַל to “create” a *halacha* that applied only to a specific period, לְשָׁעָה, and all the while acknowledging that it is contrary to the *real* exegesis of חַז"ל for that same *halacha* לְדוֹרוֹת, for perpetuity. Rav Netziv also does this in his Haamek Davar and Rav Kupperman זצ"ל believes that “this originated in the Beis HaMidrash of the GRA”, along the lines of the pasuk in Tehillim, אַחַת דְּבַר אֱלֹקִים נִשְׁתַּמְּרִים זֶה שְׁמִעָתִי. Rav Netziv himself tells us in his Haamek Sheilah on the Sheiltos, that “this phrase teaches us that one pasuk can produce many laws... and as the Yeshiva of R’ Yishmael taught regarding the pasuk in Yirmiyahu, יִפְצֹץ סֶלַע, just as a hammer that smashes a stone can produce many sparks, so can one pasuk be interpreted to produce many laws.” It is all לְהַגְדִּיל תוֹרָה וּלְהַאֲדִירָה!

לזכר נשמת אבי מורי ר' ישראל מנחם בן ר' שלום ז"ל  
 לזכר נשמת אמי מורתי רחל בת ר' אלחנן אביגדור ע"ה  
 לזכר נשמת חמי מורי ר' יעקב נתן בן ר' ישראל שלמה ז"ל  
 ולזכר נשמת הרב יהודה בן ר' אברהם שמחה (קופרמן) זצ"ל  
 מחבר הגהות על ספר משך חכמה