**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BO**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Towards the end of Parashat Bo, the Torah presents several *mitzvot* that serve to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt, including commands relevant to firstborn people and animals. One such command is that of *peter chamor* – the obligation to “redeem” a firstborn donkey (13:13). The Torah requires the owner of a firstborn donkey to redeem the animal by giving a sheep to a *kohen*, and if the owner refuses, then he is required to kill the donkey, as a penalty for refusing to give a sheep.

The Gemara in Masekhet Bekhorot (11a) establishes that if one does not have a sheep, he may redeem his firstborn donkey by paying a *kohen* the donkey’s value. In the Gemara’s words, “It should be no more stringent than hallowed property, and the Torah said ‘a sheep’ not as a stringency, but as a leniency.” This means that a firstborn donkey cannot possibly be treated more stringently than actual *hekdesh* – hallowed articles – which can be “redeemed” and divested of their status of sanctity by paying their value to the Temple treasury. When the Torah speaks of using specifically a sheep to redeem a firstborn donkey, the Gemara explains, it establishes a measure of leniency, allowing the owner to redeem the donkey with a sheep even if the donkey’s value considerably exceeds that of the sheep. One is permitted to redeem a donkey for its full price using money or objects of value, but the Torah gives him the option of saving money by using a sheep that is worth far less than the donkey.

The Gemara formulates this *halakha* by presenting the case of a person who does not have a sheep with which to redeem the donkey. This formulation is adopted also by the Rambam, in his codification of this law (*Hilkhot Bikkurim* 12:11). The implication, seemingly, is that optimally, the owner should give a *kohen* a sheep, as the Torah commanded – “*tifteh be-seh*” (“redeem with a sheep”). It appears, at least at first glance, that although redeeming the donkey with money or objects of value has the effect of divesting the donkey of its status of sanctity – because, after all, “It should be no more stringent than hallowed property” – this is not the preferred way of performing the *mitzva*. (One might even go so far as to say that one thereby does not fulfill the *mitzva* at all; he has succeeded in divesting the animal of its hallowed status, but is not credited with the fulfillment of a *mitzva*, since he did not do what the Torah commands.) Indeed, the *Beit Yosef* and *Perisha* (Y.D. 321) infer from the formulation of the Gemara and the Rambam that one should redeem a *peter chamor* with a sheep, and it is only when this option is not available that other means of redemption are allowed.

However, Rav Moshe Sternbuch (*Teshuvot Ve-hanhagot*, vol. 4, Y.D. 245) cites one source (*Divrei Chamudot*) which argues with this conclusion. It is possible that the Gemara and Rambam speak specifically about somebody who does not have a sheep because it is only in such a case that a person would want to use something other than a sheep to redeem the *peter chamor*. Only a fool would want to pay the full value of the donkey instead of discharging his obligation by using a sheep, and thus it may be for this reason that the Gemara and Rambam formulated the *halakha* in this fashion, addressing specifically the case of a person who does not own a sheep. According to this view, there is no preference at all to using a sheep over money or other objects of value for the obligation of *peter chamor*.

Furthermore, in contrast to the Gemara and Rambam’s formulation, the *Tur* (Y.D. 321) writes, “Just as one may redeem it with a sheep, so may one redeem it with whatever he wishes” – clearly indicating that there is no preference to redeeming a firstborn donkey with a sheep. The *Shulchan Arukh* (Y.D. 321:5), however, cites the Rambam’s formulation, likely reflecting the view taken by the author in his *Beit Yosef*, that optimally one should use specifically a sheep for this obligation.

In practice, Rav Sternbuch writes (in the aforementioned responsum) that one should satisfy the stringent view of the *Beit Yosef* and use a sheep for *peter chamor*, rather than redeem the firstborn donkey through some other means.

Sunday

Yesterday, we noted the obligation of *peter chamor* – to “redeem” a firstborn donkey by giving a sheep to a *kohen* – and the law stated in the Gemara (Bekhorot 11a) that one can fulfill the requirement even by paying a *kohen* the value of the donkey. The Torah mentioned redeeming with a sheep, the Gemara teaches, to instruct that a sheep suffices even if the sheep’s value is far lower than the donkey’s value, but one may also use money or objects of value to redeem the donkey. As we saw, there seems to be a difference of opinion as to whether there is nevertheless a preference to use a sheep for this purpose. The Rambam, in *Hilkhot Bikkurim* (12:11), writes that one who does not have a sheep can redeem the donkey through other means, from which the *Beit Yosef* (Y.D. 321) inferred that one should preferably use a sheep. This is in contrast to the *Tur*, who indicated that money or other objects of value are no less preferred than a sheep as the means of redeeming a firstborn donkey.

We parenthetically added in yesterday’s discussion that an extreme version of the Rambam’s position would be to suggest that in truth, the *mitzva* is not fulfilled at all with anything but a sheep. One could interpret the Gemara’s ruling to mean that if one pays money or another object value to redeem the firstborn donkey, the payment is effective in divesting the donkey of its sanctity, but does not fulfill the *mitzva*. Using a sheep is not just preferred – but the only way of being credited with a *mitzva*. If one redeems the sheep with other means, he succeeds in making the donkey permissible for use, but he has forfeited the *mitzva* of *peter chamor*.

Rav Moshe Sternbuch, in his *Teshuvot Ve-hanhagot* (vol. 1, Y.D. 666), raises this possibility amidst an interesting discussion of whether nowadays, when most people do not own donkeys, there is value in specifically purchasing a *peter chamor* in order to fulfill this *mitzva*. At first glance, one might assume that although there is clearly no requirement to purchase a donkey, it is worthwhile and commendable to do so in order to facilitate a *mitzva*. Of course, as Rav Sternbuch observes, it is not customary to purchase donkeys for this purpose. He offers several different theories to explain why this might be the case, including one possibility which relates to the Rambam’s view mentioned earlier. The Mishna (Bekhorot 12a) establishes that one does not fulfill the *mitzva* of *peter chamor* by giving the *kohen* a sheep that is a *tereifa* – meaning, that has a fatal injury that renders it forbidden for consumption. As some commentators noted, it is still possible in such a case for the redemption to be effective, if the value of the sheep is equal to that of the donkey (such as because of its wool, or because of the possibility of selling its meat to gentiles). The use of a such a sheep for redeeming the donkey is no worse than using money or any object of value, such that the redemption is effective. Nevertheless, Rav Sternbuch writes, in light of the Rambam’s view, it is possible that the *mitzva* has not been fulfilled. Even though the redemption is effective, this does not necessarily mean that one is credited with the performance of a *mitzva* in such a case.

If so, Rav Sternbuch suggests, then this might be one reason why we should not go out of our way to purchase a donkey in order to fulfill the *mitzva* of *peter chamor*. If the sheep turns out to be a *tereifa* – which is possible even if it has no outward signs of illness – then no *mitzva* has been fulfilled. It would then turn out that the trouble and expense entailed in obtaining a donkey and a sheep for this *mitzva* had been for naught. Given this possibility, it is not expected to make an effort to obtain a *peter chamor* in order to perform this *mitzva*, an objective which in the end might not be achieved.

Rav Sternbuch also offers other theories, such as the possibility that there is no value in going out of one’s way to perform a *mitzva* which is solely a *matir* – meaning, it serves only to make something permissible. For example, there is no value in specifically obtaining produce in *Eretz Yisrael* so one can separate the various *terumot* and *ma’aserot* portions, if he does not want to eat fruits or vegetables. Rav Sternbuch also mentions that in the case of a *peter chamor*, going out of one’s way to own a firstborn donkey creates the situation of an animal that is forbidden for mundane uses until its redemption. Given the risk – however small – that it might be mistakenly used before being redeemed, it is preferable not to create such a situation, even for the otherwise lofty goal of performing a *mitzva*.

Monday

In our previous two installments, we discussed the obligation of *peter chamor*, which requires “redeeming” a firstborn donkey, noting that whereas the Torah (Shemot 13:13) commands redeeming the donkey with a sheep, the Gemara (Bekhorot 11a) teaches that it may be done also through other means. The Gemara explains that one fulfills this *mitzva* by giving a sheep to a *kohen* even if its value is far less than the donkey’s, but one can also redeem the donkey with money or objects of value equivalent to the donkey’s value. As we saw, the *Beit Yosef* (Y.D. 321) inferred from the formulation of the Rambam (*Hilkhot Bikkurim* 12:11) that the option of using money or objects of value is available only as a last resort, if one does not have a sheep with which to redeem the donkey.

The question naturally arises as to why this should be the case. What exactly is the relationship between these two options – the preferred option of redeeming the firstborn donkey with a sheep, and the second option of using money or other objects of value? Yesterday, we explored the possibility that in truth, one fulfills the *mitzva* of *peter chamor* only with a sheep, and the Gemara meant only that if one does not have a sheep, he should redeem the donkey through money to divest it of its status of sanctity so it becomes permissible for use. According to this view, the *mitzva* of *peter chamor* actually requires using a sheep – as the straightforward reading of the verse suggests – but one who cannot fulfill the *mitzva* should redeem the donkey through other means so it does not remain forbidden for use.

Some, however, suggested a much different approach to explain the Rambam’s position, based on the comments of the Ritva in a separate context. The Torah in Sefer Devarim (25:5-10) introduces the *yibum* obligation, requiring the brother of a married man who died without children to marry the widow, or to perform the *chalitza* ceremony to release the widow from the levirate bond. In describing the *chalitza* ceremony, the Torah instructs that the widow must remove “*na’alo*” – “his shoe” – from the brother’s foot (Devarim 25:9). The plain meaning of the verse is that the shoe which the widow removes should be the brother’s shoe, but the Gemara in Masekhet Yevamot (103b) derives from the next verse (“*chalutz ha-na’al*”) that in truth, even somebody else’s shoe may be used for this purpose. The word “*na’alo*,” the Gemara explains, is used to instruct that the shoe must be the proper size to fit the brother’s foot, but it does not have to belong to him. Nevertheless, the Gemara later establishes that although the *chalitza* is effective if somebody else’s shoe is used, preferably, a shoe belonging to the deceased’s brother should be used.

The *Rishonim* debate the question as to why this is the case. The Rashba speculates that *Chazal* may have enacted this provision as a way of ensuring that the shoe would fit the brother’s foot. If the brother wears somebody else’s shoe, it might not be his size, in which case the *chalitza* is invalid. In order to avoid this mistake, *Chazal* instituted using the brother’s own shoe – which can, quite obviously, be presumed to be his foot’s size – for *chalitza*.

The Ritva, however, writes that *Chazal* established this provision “*le-kayeim peshuto shel mikra*” – in order to uphold the straightforward reading of the verse. Intriguingly, the Ritva asserts that the Sages saw fit to require acting in accordance with the plain meaning of the verse, even though halakhic exegesis has shown that the act may be done differently. Even after it was determined that anybody’s shoe may be used for *chalitza*, *Chazal* established that the brother’s shoe should be used, in order to fulfill the requirement as indicated by “*peshuto shel mikra*.”

It has thus been suggested that the Rambam’s understanding of the *peter chamor* requirement may perhaps be understood along similar lines. Although *Chazal* determined that one fulfills the *mitzva* through any object of value, and not just a sheep, the plain meaning of the verse is that specifically a sheep must be used for this purpose. Therefore, according to the line of reasoning expressed by the Ritva in regard to *chalitza*, it follows that there should be a rabbinic requirement to redeem a firstborn donkey specifically with a sheep. And it is perhaps for this reason, then, that the Rambam indicates that other means of redeeming are allowed only if one is unable to redeem the donkey with a sheep.

Tuesday

Towards the beginning of Parashat Bo, the Torah tells of the tense exchange between Moshe and Pharaoh in advance of the eighth plague, the plague of locusts, after Pharaoh’s advisors urged him to accede to Moshe’s demand to release *Benei Yisrael*. Pharaoh called Moshe and Aharon into the palace and told them he was prepared to grant their request and permit *Benei Yisrael* to journey into the wilderness to serve God. He wanted to know, however, whom Moshe intended to bring with him, and Moshe replied, “We will go with our young and with our old, with our sons and with our daughters…” (10:9). Pharaoh responded angrily to this demand, telling Moshe and Aharon that only the adult males would be permitted to leave (10:11). Rashi explains that since Moshe’s demand was that the people needed to leave to serve God in the desert (5:8), Pharaoh was prepared only to allow the adult males leave, as children did not normally participate in religious rituals.

Some have suggested that this exchange forms the background to the pronounced emphasis on children in the celebration of Pesach. The obligation of *sippur Yetziat Mitzrayim* – to tell the story of the Exodus on the night of Pesach – revolves around children, and *Chazal* instituted several practices at the *seder* aimed exclusively at piquing the children’s interest. It has been explained that whereas Pharaoh insisted – as Rashi comments – that there was no reason to bring children out of Egypt to serve God, we place special emphasis on our children in celebrating the Exodus, as if responding to Pharaoh’s claim and making it clear that children occupy an especially prominent place in our service of God.

Rav Yissachar Dov of Belz added that this might explain an extraordinary provision relevant to the *pesach* sacrifice. The Rambam, in *Hilkhot Korban Pesach* (5:7), addresses the case of a youngster who reaches the age of *mitzva* obligation at some point in between the 14th of Nissan – the day when the *korban pesach* is offered – and the 14th of Iyyar – the day known as “Pesach Sheni.” The occasion of Pesach Sheni was established as a second opportunity granted to those who were unable to offer the *pesach* sacrifice at its proper time, on the 14th of Nissan. We might have assumed that this includes the youngster in the aforementioned case – who was a minor on the 14th of Nissan, and thus had no obligation to offer the *pesach* sacrifice, and become a halakhic adult before Pesach Sheni. Even if the youngster was included in an adult’s *korban pesach* on the 14th of Nissan, we might have intuitively thought that he is required to bring a sacrifice as an adult on Pesach Sheni, since he was unable to fulfill the actual obligation on the 14th of Nissan, as he was yet excluded from the *mitzva*. The Rambam, however, ruled that the youngster in this case does not, in fact, have to bring a sacrifice on Pesach Sheni. Although we generally assume that a minor’s *mitzva* observance cannot be considered an actual *mitzva* act through which his obligation as an adult can be discharged, in this case, the youngster is considered to have fulfilled the *mitzva*. Rav Yissachar Dov of Belz viewed this *halakha* as a striking expression of the special status given to the children in the Pesach observance, as a resounding rejection of Pharaoh’s denial of the need for children to participate in religious services.

The significance of this concept perhaps extends beyond the specific point of the importance of children’s participation in religious life. We are all, in a sense, “children.” Like children, we all have so much more to learn, so many good habits to develop and so many bad habits to break, and we all have so much more we need to grow. At every age, and no matter how much we know or do, we have so much more to achieve in terms of knowledge, conduct, growth and maturity. The “Pharaoh” in our minds might try telling us that “children” such as ourselves have no place in religious practice. After all, we might think, something as lofty as the worship of God must be restricted to the “adults,” to the elite, to those who have achieved near perfection. But Moshe teaches us in this *parasha* that to the contrary, “we will go with our young and with our old” – everybody is included in the responsibilities and privileges of *avodat Hashem*. No matter how small we are, no matter how “young” and “childish” we are, God wants us included. God wants us to serve Him even in our very imperfect condition, despite our faults and our failings. We must commit ourselves to serve God to the best of our ability under our current conditions and circumstances, flawed as they may be, and work to inch just a bit closer to greatness, one small step at a time.

Wednesday

Parashat Bo begins with God telling Moshe that He was performing miracles in Egypt “in order that you tell in the ears of your child and your child’s child about how I made a mockery of Egypt, and My wonders…” (10:2). The plagues were brought upon Egypt not simply as a way of forcing the kingdom to release *Benei Yisrael*, but also in order for these miracles to live in the nation’s collective memory for all time, serving as an everlasting source of faith in God.

A number of commentators noted that God speaks here of the people telling about these miracles “*be-oznei binkha*” – “in the ears of your child.” Rather than state simply that *Benei Yisrael* should tell their children about these miracles, God emphasizes that this should be spoken “in the ears of your child.” Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the expression “*be-oznei binkha*” indicates that parents are to not simply speak of the miracles of the Exodus, but rather “impress it so deeply that through the ears it penetrates the heart.” According to Rav Hirsch, then, the Torah here requires parents to tell of the miracles in a manner that leaves a deep impression upon their children’s hearts, rather than simply relay the information.

Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman (the “Ponevezher Rav”) is cited as suggesting that “*be-oznei binkha*” refers to speaking directly into the listener’s ear. Normally, when a person speaks to another person, they are close enough for the sound to reach the listener, but the speaker’s mouth does not need to be positioned directly next to the listener’s ear. This becomes necessary, the Ponevezher Rav explained, when there is a lot of background noise that would interfere with the sound which the speaker wants to reach the listener. Under such conditions, the speaker must speak directly into the listener’s ear to ensure that his words are heard. The Ponevezher Rav thus suggested that in Egypt, there was a good deal of “background noise” that made it very difficult for the message of faith to reach the youngsters’ ears. In a society and environment opposed to the principles and tenets of Jewish faith, special effort is needed to reach the “ears” of the youth, to teach them and inspire them with our beliefs. The phrase “*be-oznei binkha*” thus refers to the hard work and creativity that is needed to impart our values and our faith to the next generation when we compete against the “background noise,” competing values and ideas. When youngsters are regularly lured and distracted by ideas that conflict with our tradition, it does not suffice to merely relay information; we must communicate our tradition “*be-oznei binkha*,” in a manner that can draw their attention and arouse their interest.

We might add that this image, of a speaker talking directly into the listener’s ear, symbolizes the special close bond that must be forged between teacher and student for the messages to be “heard” over the “background noise.” In the face of competing, alluring messages and values, we must teach our tradition “*be-oznei binkha*” – with warmth and closeness. The closer the students feel to those relaying to them the information, the more likely they are to lend their ears and pay attention to what they are taught instead of to the “background noise” all around them.

Thursday

In the final verses of Parashat Bo, Moshe relays to *Benei Yisrael* a series of laws aimed at commemorating the night of the Exodus, and foresees the time when children will inquire about the meaning and reason of these observances: “It shall be, when your son asks you in the future, saying, ‘What is this?’…” (13:4). The parent is then instructed to answer, “The Lord took us from Egypt, from the house of bondage with a mighty hand,” and to tell the child about the plague of the firstborn which forced Pharaoh to release *Benei Yisrael*.

As we know from the text of the *Haggadah* read at the *seder* on Pesach, the Sages understood this verse as referring to the *tam* – the “simple” child. This appears also in the Talmud Yerushalmi (Pesachim 10:4), paraphrased by Rashi in his commentary to this verse, where he writes, “This is an unintelligent child, who does not know how to ask a deep question, and asks very simply, ‘What is this?’” The Torah here foresees the time when, in Rashi’s words, a “*tinok tipeish*” – “unintelligent child” – will wonder about his parents’ religious observances, and will ask the unsophisticated question, “*Ma zot*” – “What is this?”

The Tolna Rebbe raised the question of whether this interpretation of the verse can be reconciled with a Midrashic passage in *Vayikra Rabba* (11:7) associating the word “*ve-haya*” with joy and celebration. The Midrash there states that the Torah uses the word “*ve-haya*” specifically in reference to joyous events. Applying that rule to this verse in Parashat Bo – which begins, “***Ve-haya*** *ki yish’alekha binkha*” (“It shall be, when you son asks you”) – it seems we are forced to conclude that the prospect of a “*tinok tipeish*,” an ignorant, foolish child, posing a simple, unsophisticated question, is something to celebrate. Is this, in fact the case?

The Tolna Rebbe suggests that indeed, any opportunity to educate any child at any level is a joyous moment. Even if a child has disappointed in the past, falling far short of expectations, and has achieved so poorly that he can be accurately described as a “*tinok tipeish*,” the opportunity to teach him and advance him, if only slightly, is something to cherish and celebrate. The value of education does not depend on the student’s current level, capabilities or potential. Any progress achieved in the education and religious growth of any child is joyous and worthy of being celebrated, irrespective of his past performance or current standing. When even an ignorant Jewish child asks a simple question about Torah observance, this is truly an event worth celebrating.

Friday

We read in Parashat Bo of the eighth plague – the locusts that swarmed into Egypt and consumed all the country’s vegetation. The Torah tells, “The locusts descended upon the entire land of Egypt, and landed throughout the boundaries of Egypt” (10:14).

The *Ba’al Ha-turim* notes that the word used here in reference to the locusts’ assault – “*va-yanach*” (“landed,” or, literally, “rested”) – appears in only one other context in the Torah, namely, in regard to God’s having “rested” on Shabbat. In the fourth of the Ten Commandments, the Torah tells “…for the Lord made heaven and earth…in six days, and **He rested** [*va-yanach*] on the seventh; the Lord therefore blessed the day of Shabbat and declared it sacred” (Shemot 20:10). To explain this textual association between Shabbat and the plague of locusts, the *Ba’al Ha-turim* suggests that the locusts which descended upon Egypt “rested” on Shabbat, just as God “rested” on Shabbat after the six days of creation.

What might be the significance of this association between the locusts in Egypt, and the observance of Shabbat?

One answer ([cited](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=55510&st=&pgnum=207) in the name of Rav Yisrael David Shlesinger) relates to the Torah’s emphasis on the unique nature of the swarm of locusts in Egypt: “…there was never [a swarm of] locusts like it, and there will never be like it afterward” (10:14). The *Ba’al Ha-turim* perhaps sought to draw our attention to the similarly unique feature of each and every Shabbat. As we observe Shabbat each week, we might intuitively assume that every Shabbat is essentially the same, without much difference between one Shabbat and the next. The *Ba’al Ha-turim* thus compares Shabbat to the plague of locusts that struck Egypt, which was a singular event. Each Shabbat offers us a unique opportunity for spiritual growth that differs from the opportunities presented by any previous Shabbat and by any future Shabbat. We are thus urged to take full advantage of each and every Shabbat which we are privileged to experience, and make every effort to utilize this precious opportunity to its very fullest.

We might also suggest an additional possibility. The *Ba’al Ha-turim* appears to be saying that the locusts stayed in place on Shabbat, as opposed to their usual practice of flying to a different location once they finish consuming the produce in their current location. Whereas normally locusts do not “rest,” but rather fly from place to place in a constant, never-ending search for more food to consume, on Shabbat, they “rested,” staying in one place. If so, then perhaps the *Ba’al Ha-turim* is presenting us with a symbolic representation of one of the purposes on Shabbat. Throughout the workweek, we – like locusts – are constantly on the run, tirelessly and frantically working and expending energy to collect “food,” to earn more. In our natural, and legitimate, desire to improve our material condition, we “fly” from place to place in search of more money. On Shabbat, however, just as *Benei Yisrael* were commanded in the wilderness, “No person shall leave from his place on the seventh day” (Shemot 16:29) – not to leave the camp to look for manna to collect – we, too, are to “remain in place.” Whereas during the week it is perfectly acceptable to expend efforts to obtain more than what we already have, on Shabbat, we are to feel content and satisfied with our current material blessings, and feel no need to go out looking for more. Just like the locusts, which the *Ba’al Ha-turim* describes as “resting” in place on Shabbat, without flying about in search for more produce to consume, we, too, are to “rest” on Shabbat in the sense of feeling content with and grateful for what we have already been given, focusing exclusively on all that we have rather than concerning ourselves with what we don’t.

**THE FIRST DECADE OF SALT ARCHIVES CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/salt-archives.html](http://etzion.org.il/en/salt-surf-little-torah-archives)

**MORE RECENT INSTALLMENTS OF SALT DIVREI TORAH CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files](http://www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files)