

Maamarei Mordechai

הסבר לפי ממש פשוט

Parshas Bamidbar 5784

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Hashem takes the Leviim to His service instead of the Yisroel firstborn. The Torah says,

וְאֵת פְּדוּיֵי הַשְּׁלִשָּׁה וְהַשְּׁבַעִים וְהַמֵּאָתָּים הַעֲדָפִים עַל־הַלְוִיִּם מִבְּכֹר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

“And the redemption for the two-hundred and seventy-three that were in excess to the number of the Levites, from the firstborn of Yisroel.” (Bamidbar 3:46).

What does it mean the two-hundred and seventy-three that were in excess? Why did these have to be redeemed on top of the Leviim? How were they redeemed and who paid whom? What special lesson does it teach about this redemption?

The next pasuk explains: : וְלָקַחְתָּ חֲמִשָּׁת חֲמִשָּׁת שְׁקָלִים לְגִלְגֶּלֶת : “And take five shekalim by weight, per head...” (Ibid 3:47). “And give the money to Aharon and his sons, a redemption for those in excess.” (Ibid 3:48). The money had to be given to Aharon and his sons—the kohanim---and it was for payment for the firstborn of Yisroel being in excess of the number of Leviim. Who would pay the five shekels?

Hashem told Moshe to take a census of the twelve Yisroel tribes. (Ibid 1:2). This would include Menashe and Ephraim but leave out Yoseph and Levi. Levi had its special count. Hashem asked Moshe to count the number of males in Levi from 30 days and upward (ibid 3:15) and to record the number of firstborn Yisroelim (ibid 3:40). The numbers for Levi came out to 22,000. The number of firstborn Yisroelim came out to 22,273. The reason for this comparison count was because Hashem wanted to replace the firstborn Yisroelim with Leviim. The Leviim would enter the service of Hashem. וְאֵי הִנֵּה : “And I, behold, take to Me the Leviim from among Bnei Yisroel instead of all the firstborn issue of the womb from the Bnei Yisroel, and the Leviim shall be Mine.” (Ibid 3:12). Next week we will discuss exactly when this commandment was given to Moshe. (Hint: It cannot be the second month of the second year, the time of the census, because the Leviim were already told of their duties a month earlier).

The Torah says that 22,000 Leviim were taken into the Mishkan service to assist the kohanim in place of 22,000 Bnei Yisroel firstborn. The question remains: Who pays the kohanim for the 273 in excess? And does Hashem taking the Leviim instead of the firstborn eradicate the mitzvah of *petter rechem* and *pindyan haben* (redemption of the firstborn animals and children)? Also, later, it says that Leviim only participated in the workforce of the Mishkan from 25 and up. (Ibid 8:24). Therefore, why count from 30 days?

It would seem obvious that it was the firstborn of Bnei Yisroel who would pay the kohanim. These 273 firstborns do not have a Levi match to give to the Mishkan service in their stead. (How they chose which 273 firstborns would have to pay is a different question and out of the scope of this dvar Torah). However, the pasuk uses the word הַעֲדָפִים “those in excess.” That expression is used again twice more when paying Aharon

and his sons. (Ibid 3:48 and 49). If the payment would come from Bnei Yisroel the Torah should have said, “for those deficient a Levi pair.” The Bechor of Bnei Yisroel would pay because he does not have a Levi to give over in his stead. It seems, then, it was the Leviim who had to pay. They were the number 273 short of men to give to service. They would have to make up for that service to the kohanim, with money. Since the firstborns were in excess, the payment from Shevet Levi had to be made.

The later pasuk is also not clear. וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת כֶּסֶף הַפְּדוּתִים מֵאֵת הָעֶדְוָה עַל פְּדוּתֵי הַלְוִיִּם: “And Moshe took the money from those being redeemed, from those in excess, for the redemption of the Leviim.” (Ibid 3:49). Is the Torah saying those being redeemed paid it? Again, does that mean from the 273 firstborns who were being redeemed (which is unfair to charge them as they did nothing to prevent another Levi being born in their stead) or is it from the Leviim—and the pasuk means “the monies of redemption?”

The resolution is in understanding why five shekels, why the redemption altogether, and why count from 30 days. The Torah keeps using the word “redeemed” instead of “in lieu of service.” It would make sense to have the firstborn and Leviim collectively make up the 273-person manpower with some money to the kohanim because the kohanim are being shorted 273 workers. However, the Torah uses the word “redeemed.” Also, the Torah makes it clear why the firstborn was the first choice for service. “Because every firstborn is Mine, from the time I struck the Country of Mitzrayim, I sanctified to Me every firstborn of Yisroel, from man to beast. They are Mine.” (Ibid 3:13). This harkens back to “Sanctify to Me every firstborn, every first issue of the womb, from man to beast, they are Mine.” (Shmos 13:2). It is because Hashem killed every firstborn man and beast in Mitzrayim when Pharaoh refused to let Bnei Yisroel go serve Hashem. (Ibid 13:15). The Torah later clarifies that the firstborn is redeemed at thirty-days old for five shekels. (Bamidbar 18:16).

Hashem took for Himself the firstborn of Bnei Yisroel. At first, they were to be redeemed through Mishkan / Mikdash service. The Torah in Shmos does not say a price or an age, because originally, they would grow up to 25 years old and engage in the Mishkan service as redemption. However, when Hashem switched that service workforce to the Leviim, the firstborn would have to be redeemed with five shekels a head at thirty days old. The initial exchange was for the Leviim to redeem the first 22,273 firstborn by engaging in holy service. That is why it was Leviim from 30 days and up and why five shekels had to be paid (by the firstborn) for each of the remaining 273 that the bechorim were in “excess of.” They owed service to the kohanim. They were being replaced in that service. However, they still had to be “redeemed” because of Makos Bechoros. This was their redemption.

This teaches the great value of those that engage in chessed and holy service. It is not that it is their privilege to serve, that they owe the kohanim for the ability to serve. Their service means so much to the kohanim that each person is worth something significant. They have value on top of their reward for their chessed and tzorchei tzibur b’emunah. They are worth a “redemption.”