



## PARASHAT BO

# WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE REDEMPTION?

### Redeeming the firstborn and redemption

The *mitzvah* to redeem our firstborn sons (*pidyon haben*) appears at the end of *parashat Bo*, this week's *parashah*. The *mitzvah* requires us to redeem our firstborn sons who belong to God, because God spared the lives of the firstborn children of Israel during the plague of the firstborn. He commands, "Consecrate to Me, from among the Israelites, every firstborn of man or beast which is the first issue of every womb; it is Mine."<sup>1</sup> From the time the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel, redeeming the firstborn has been performed by giving five silver coins to a *cohen* (a member of the priesthood family) when the baby is a month old, as "payment," as it were, for the priest functioning in his stead. Indeed, the name of the *parashah*, *Bo* alludes to this commandment, as its letters (בא) are the initials of "the firstborn of man"<sup>2</sup> (בְּכוֹר אָדָם), an idiom found only once in the Torah, in our *parashah*, in the description of this *mitzvah*.

Since the *mitzvah* of redeeming the firstborn son appears in context of the termination of the Ten Plagues and the ensuing exodus from Egypt, it serves as a spiritual model for redemption. We are commanded to redeem our firstborn son because God, our Father, redeemed us from our bondage in Egypt. Indeed, following the Torah's lead, Chassidic commentaries and Kabbalistic works discuss the *mitzvah* of redeeming the firstborn in connection with our own final redemption, whose future description is likened by the prophets to the exodus from Egypt, "Like the days when you came out of the land of Egypt, I will show you wonders."<sup>3</sup> (Michah 7:15)

### Father or son?

The Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds differ on the question of upon whom the Torah places the responsibility of redeeming the firstborn son: the father or the firstborn himself. According to the Babylonian Talmud the responsibility is the father's (and this is how we rule). However, according to the Jerusalem Talmud, the responsibility is placed on the firstborn himself. It is only because he is too young to perform the redemption himself (at a month old) - therefore just as a baby cannot circumcise himself, the son is unable to redeem himself and thus the Torah temporarily gives the obligation to

the father. But, once the firstborn son is old enough the responsibility reverts back on him to redeem himself if his father has not yet done so.

### Who holds the key to redemption?

Because of the parallel between the *mitzvah* of *pidyon haben* and the redemption from our present exile, we may interpret the difference between the Talmuds as representing two opinions regarding the question of "Who holds the key to redemption?" In other words, who is responsible for acting in order to redeem us from our current exile, God or we, the Jewish people?

When the son is young, both Talmuds agree that the responsibility is the father's because the son is unable to redeem himself. This was the state of the Jewish people at the time of the exodus from Egypt. We were very young, the nation had just been born, and there was no possibility of us freeing ourselves from Egypt. As a people, we did not have any merits of our own and therefore God redeemed us with Heavenly strength alone. Now, after the giving of the Torah, following thousands of years of ups and downs during which the Jewish people have matured, and continue to mature, we have come to the point where the dispute between the two Talmuds is relevant. Does the responsibility to redeem us from our current exile still belong to our father—God—as the Babylonian Talmud holds. Or, is it now (*lechatchila*) our responsibility (and the father's responsibility is over)?

### Redeeming ourselves

As noted earlier, halachically (legally) we rule according to the Babylonian Talmud and the obligation is upon the father. Thus, if the son snatches the *mitzvah*, as it were, and performs it before his father has a chance to, it sounds like he acted in rebellion, what the Talmud describes (in relation to the redemption) as a forceful *aliyah* (עֲלִיָּה בְּחֻמָּה).<sup>4</sup> In which case, the son is obligated to compensate his father.

However, if it is the case that the key and responsibility for redemption is placed in our hands, why wait another moment!? The moment it becomes possible, we must redeem ourselves. It might be that the Jewish people are in such a downfallen state that we are like a premature

firstborn (which in Hebrew is called “a fallen one,” נָפֵל) that cannot yet be redeemed—in fact, it would be dangerous to try and perform the redemption then. But, the moment we are able to rise up, the moment we are no longer considered premature, we must we must seize the opportunity and as the verse states, “As I have fallen, I have risen.”<sup>5</sup>

### Revelation or consciousness?

Even though we rule according to the Babylonian Talmud, in truth, both opinions appearing in both Talmuds are the words of God (אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי דְבָרֵי אֱלֹקִים חַיִּים). What then is the holy and true root of the dispute between them? This root is found in the question of what is redemption about in the first place. Is the redemption about revelation or about consciousness. In more technical terms, is it about wisdom or knowledge. If the redemption is about revelation (the *sefirah* of wisdom), then the wonders we will see are those of God revealing Himself. But, if the redemption is about consciousness

(the *sefirah* of knowledge), then the wonders we will see refers to something else.

Since wisdom is the *sefirah* associated with the “father principle” (פְּרִצוּף אָבָא), this parallels the Babylonian Talmud and the obligation rests on the father, on God, to redeem us. This revelation is called the lights of father (אִוְרוֹת אָבָא).

But, according to Maimonides,<sup>6</sup> the most important element of the redemption is knowledge or a change in consciousness. As the prophet says, “For the world is full of consciousness of God as the waters cover the ocean.”<sup>7</sup> A change in knowledge/consciousness fulfills the Divine purpose of creating the world, “...So that they [His creations] will know Him [God].” God created us so that we would know Him. So if redemption is about consciousness, the key is on our hands.

(from a *Pidyon Haben*, 11th of Kislev, 5769)

Notes: 1. Exodus 13:2 2. Exodus 13:15 3. Micah 7:15 4. *Ketubot* 111a 5. *Micah* 7:8 6. *Hilchot Teshuvah* 9:2 and *Melachim Umilchamoteihem* 12:5 7. *Isaiah* 11:9 8. *Zohar* II, 42b; *Tanya* ch. 42.

## HASHEM LOVES TZADIKIM

This Monday is the 10th of Shevat, the day of ascent of the 6th Lubavitcher Rebbe's (the *Rayatz*), Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn's soul. When he received the mantle of leadership the Chassidim gave him *pidyonot nefesh* (*panim*, as they are called in short), in which they declared their commitment to follow by asking him to awaken Heavenly mercy upon them, etc.

When the Rebbe saw these first *panim* he complained that they contained only spiritual requests, but they did not include requests he beseech the Almighty for his follower's material success. In passing, let us note that this marked a new direction, for when his father, the 5th Lubavitcher Rebbe became the Rebbe he declared that spiritual requests should be given to him, but material questions should be addressed to his brother.

The *Rayatz's* demand that he receive material requests as well is a sign of kingship and sovereignty. If the *tzadik* is not a king (merely a *tzadik*), it is left to the discretion of the individual whether or not to trouble him with material questions and needs. The *tzadik* is a conduit for blessing.

But, as we have explained many times, in the past few generations, particularly beginning with the generation of the *Rayatz*, we are in a

transitional period in leadership—from *tzadikim* (which began with the Ba'al Shem Tov) to kings. Our generations are those in which the Jewish people once again have a king. Of course the king has to be a *tzadik*, but not every *tzadik* is a king.

A king first of all provides the people with their material needs; the *tzadik's* primary concern is their spiritual needs—ensuring that individual be a *tzadik*. That his how the *tzadik* is measured, by how much effort he expends ensuring that each Jew be a *tzadik*. The *tzadik* is also involved with material needs, but that is not his primary concern.

A king senses that his primary task is to rectify the world—the material world—under the rule of the Almighty.

The more kingly the *tzadik*, the more he is concerned with his people's material success, ensuring that every one has what they need. There cannot be a king without a people, and so the people's responsibility is to address their material demands to the king, otherwise he is not a king. This was what the Rebbe *Rayatz* demanded of his Chassidim, that they demand materiality, that they demand kingship.

(based on lecture of 4th of Shevat 5767)

### THE REDEMPTION GROWS NEAR

During the exodus from Egypt, there was still an immature small-mindedness in us that resulted in, “the people have run away” (Exodus 14:5). But, in our current redemption we will have the mature presence of mind to fulfill the prophecy, “You shall not depart in haste” (Isaiah 52:12). In the first redemption, even Moshe Rabbeinu himself did not ascend to the level of Mashiach [the difference between Moshe (מֹשֶׁה), 345 and Mashiach (מָשִׁיחַ), 358 is 13, alluding to the missing revelation of the level of “One” (אֶחָד), 13 that was still lacking). But, in our current, final redemption “the head of the nation will be rectified”—the Moshe Rabbeinu of the generation will identify completely with faith thereby ascending to the level of Mashiach—and thus “the entire people will be rectified.” Moshe Rabbeinu's tremendous faith will empower the entire Jewish people!

(from *Ma'ayan Ganim Shemot*, p. 74)