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# PARSHA ENCOUNTERS

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Parshas Korach ✍️ Rabbi Dovid Rifkind

## Internal Struggles

The beginning of this week's parsha, Parshas Korach, begins with an enigmatic pasuk. "And Korach the son of Yitzhar the son of Levi took..." (Bamidbar 15:1) Rashi appears to be bothered by the fact that the pasuk doesn't explain *what* Korach took. He explains that the pasuk means that Korach "took himself to one side to be separate from the eida, by raising objections about the kehuna."

R' Shimon Schwab zt"l explains this phrase of Rashi, "he took himself"-*"lakach es atzmo"*- by pointing out that initially Korach was an eved hashem in the full sense of the word. During the *chet haegel*, when Moshe said, "mi laShem eilai", Korach came. Korach was one of those who carried the Aron. His entire focus was on serving Hashem. As Rashi explains, the roots of his aveira was feelings of jealousy. This focus on himself was what eventually led him to go to the lengths that he did in denying the validity of the kehuna. This, explains R' Schwab is what is meant by, *lakach es atzmo*.

How though could someone on as high a level as Korach was, fall to such a low level? Chazal teach us that *kol ha-gadol mechaveiro yitzro gadol mimenu*. The greater a person is the greater is his yetzer hora. On the surface, this seems to fly in the face of logic. We see many great people focused full time on reaching ever higher levels of ruchniyus. Where do we see the manifestation of *yitzro gadol mimenu*? R' Yisrael Salanter zt"l explains that with people on a low spiritual level, the battle of the yetzer hora is focused on their actions. It is focused on getting them to do aveiros. This is why the midrash says that

reshaim are full of regrets. After the fact, it is easy for them to see that their actions were aveiros and that they were once again led astray by the yetzer hora. On the other hand, by tzadikim, who are on control of their actions, the focus of the yetzer hora is on getting at the essence of the person in such a way that often it becomes very difficult to discern what is the yetzer hora and what is not. With this he explains the gemara in Sukkah 52a that to tzaddikim the yetzer hora appears like a mountain, almost unconquerable, while to reshaim it appears like a strand of hair. To reshaim, the yetzer hora is obvious, and after the fact it is almost a shock that they stumbled yet again! However to tzadikim, it's almost unimaginable that they were able to conquer the yetzer hora, for the yetzer hora begins to feel like a part of them. This, explains R' Schwab, is what happened to Korach. Although he was doing all the right things, internally the yetzer hora was getting a foothold and was affecting his middos. This eventually led to his downfall.

We must always be on guard against the yetzer hora, both externally and internally. In both our actions and our middos, let's always be cognizant of the words of chazal, *im paga bo m'nuval zeh mashceihu l'beis midrash*. In our everlasting battle with the yetzer hora, our best weapon is limud hatorah.

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## Pidyon Haben

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One of the many tributes awarded to Aharon and his descendants to solidify their claim on the priesthood is the Pidyon Haben (redemption of the firstborn). (see Rashi Bamidbar 18:8) The Torah states (18:16) that after a month from the birth of a firstborn boy (bechor) the father should redeem him from the kohein by paying him five shekalim. The underlying concept is explained in Bamidbar 3:13. When Hashem brought the tenth plague on Mitzrayim, that of killing the firstborn, the Jewish bechorim were also in danger. As the Jews' state of righteousness was still deficient, the firstborn as the most honored members of the nation, deserved to feel the brunt of this national plague (see Seforno *ibid*). When Hashem miraculously spared them, He acquired every firstborn as His special servants to be devoted wholly to His service. Unfortunately, by succumbing to the sin of the Golden Calf, the firstborn of the majority of Klal Yisroel proved themselves unworthy of this venerable position. Thereafter, Hashem replaced the special status of the bechorim with the tribe of Levi who had remained unsullied. The holiness of that generation's bechorim was transferred directly onto the bodies of the Leviim as recorded in Parshas Behaaloscha. All future bechorim's inborn holiness necessitates pidyon- redemption, as described earlier. It is therefore understood that any bechorim from the tribe of Levi (Kohanim and Leviim) don't need a pidyon as the tribe retains their exalted status. Since the status of firstborn is dependent on the mother, if she is from the tribe of Levi, her children are exempt from pidyon, despite the fact that her husband is a Yisrael.

### Proper Day

There is a dispute amongst the poskim as to what the Torah's definition of a month is regarding this mitzvah. The Shach (Y.D. 305:19) is of the opinion that when twenty-nine days, twelve hours and 793/1080 portions of an hour (aprox. 44 minutes) pass from the time of birth, the child may be redeemed. That is the time it takes for the moon to revolve around the Earth once- a true lunar month.

The Magen Avraham (339:8) argues that in all areas of halacha we reckon months by full days- not by hours. Therefore, one counts the day of birth, (even if the delivery was right before dark) as day one, and the pidyon can only be commenced after a full thirty days. The halachic consensus follows the latter opinion.

### Proper Time

As pidyon haben commemorates the salvation of the Jewish bechorim vis a vis their Egyptian counterparts who perished at midnight, one would assume that to redeem at night would be ideal. Indeed some poskim hold that way. However, the majority of poskim, although conceding the validity of such a pidyon, write that the custom is to redeem only during the day. Many different reasons for this are offered. 1) According to the Zohar (Parshas Bo), during the plague of the firstborn, the dark night was miraculously lit up like day. 2) Rabbi Yochanan says in the beginning of Mesechas Semachos that the Egyptian firstborns were in death throes beginning at midnight, lasting until morning when they died. Therefore the commemoration for this miracle should be at the time of the miracles finale. 3) The Noda Beyehuda (vol. 2 Y.D. 187) wrote that the purpose for waiting until the day is to be assured that twenty-nine days twelve hours and forty-four minutes have passed from the time of birth so that the pidyon may be done to satisfy all opinions. 4) The Sefer Trumas Hadeshen says that the purpose of the seuda (festive meal) at the time of the pidyon is for the sake of "pirsumei nisa", publicizing

the miracle of the firstborn's salvation. Therefore, one should perform the pidyon with the accompanying meal during the day when more people can attend.

If the thirty-first day falls out on Shabbos, the pidyon is postponed. (O.C. 339:4) The reason for this is that the redemption ceremony resembles a business transaction which is forbidden on Shabbos. In this case, many have the custom to perform the pidyon on Motzaei Shabbos. The concern of the Noda BeYehuda doesn't apply in this case because enough time has surely elapsed. Even the concern of the Terumas Hadeshen may not apply as Motzaei Shabbos is a convenient time for people to gather together.

### Who is a Kohen?

In the times of the Beis Hamikdash, a Kohen who wished to do "Avodah" (sacred duties in the temple) was subject to a rigorous investigation of his lineage requiring many witnesses. What is the status of most contemporary Kohanim whose sole claim to priesthood is their tradition from their fathers? This question has direct relevance to whether one can fulfill his mitzvah of pidyon haben properly today as well as a host of other ramifications.

### The Background

The Gemara Kesubos (24b) relates that when the Jews returned to rebuild the second Beis Hamikdash, some Kohanim lacked the proper identification to prove their lineage. Nechemiah, the leader at that time, instructed that these "Kohanim" not eat from the sacrifices or from the priestly tithes (terumah) that were Biblically ordained to Kohanim. However as they were accustomed to be considered Kohanim throughout the exile, any privileges they had previously enjoyed, such as receiving Rabbinically required tithes, may be continued. The Gemara concludes, "Gadol Chazaka", strong is the law that one must maintain the status quo until it is proven to have changed.

Rabbi Yaakov Emden (quoted in Pischei Teshuva Y.D. 305:12) writes that our Kohanim must be considered of doubtful lineage. Therefore, every Kohen who performs a pidyon haben should return the money so as not to transgress the law of stealing on the chance he's not truly a Kohen. Every father should attempt to redeem their firstborn from many Kohanim which would increase the probability of finding a true Kohen. Additionally, every Kohen and Levi should have a pidyon performed on them in case they really are a Yisrael. This is explained in the sefer Yam Shel Shlomo (B.K. chap. 5:35). Because of our terrible exile and suffering by the hands of the gentiles, the purity of the Kohanim has become much more suspect since the days of the Talmud.

However, based upon the aforementioned Gemara, most poskim conclude that one may rely on the tradition of our Kohanim at least in those areas which they have maintained their status throughout the ages i.e. Pidyon Haben, Bircas Kohanim. This is the established halacha. There are some scrupulous individuals who attempt to redeem their firstborn from many Kohanim to satisfy all opinions. It is related about the Vilna Gaon that he repeatedly redeemed himself until he found a Kohen with the family name Rappaport who are known to have a pure lineage. A Kohen, however, should not be stringent to redeem himself out of doubt because it will lead him to be lenient in the laws of the Kehuna i.e. marrying a divorcee. (Sheilas Yaavetz s. 155)

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