

BECHOR: THAT'S MY FIRSTBORN!

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah:

The firstborn of both man and animal is sanctified to G-d (Exodus 13:2). Indeed, the first issue of the Children of Israel were consecrated in Egypt when they were spared as G-d struck down all the Egyptian firstborns (Numbers 8:17). The firstborn animals were presented to the kohen, priest who offered up the unblemished animals as a sacrifice on the Altar. The firstborn son of man had to be redeemed by the father from the priest for 5 silver pieces (See Numbers 18:15).

This week's parshah discusses the consecration of the Tribe of Levi. In the aftermath of the Golden Calf, the firstborns' right to serve in the Sanctuary was lost only to be replaced by the Levites who were assigned all the tasks in the Sanctuary: "I took the Levites in place of every firstborn among the Children of Israel" (Numbers 8:18).

In spite of this, there persists an innate "holiness" to the Jewish firstborns from their salvation in Egypt in the Tenth Plague: the Death of the Firstborn. The firstborn to emerge from the womb is considered the natural candidate for living an existence of holiness.

That which underscores the sanctity of the firstborn is the Jewish nation herself. The chosen people of the Children of Israel are called, in its entirety, as the quintessential bechor: G-d calling them "My son, My firstborn Israel" (Exodus 4:22).

What is the uniqueness of a firstborn? And why is he the most appropriate candidate for holiness more than any other child?

The uniqueness of the firstborn, explains the Meshech Chochmah (Exodus 4:22), rests in the fact that he makes his father into a father. Thus, the Jewish people are called G-d's firstborn because it is they who crown Him as Our Father in Heaven.

Israel was not, in fact, the first nation to emerge on the scene. On the contrary, their nationhood in the Exodus was established well after that of other seventy nations (See Maharal, Gur Aryeh Bereishis 1). Nevertheless, they were the "first in thought".

Whatever is first is related to the "essence" and "purpose" of a process. It harks back to the original intent. The first stage is pivotal because this sets out exactly where one is heading and why: "everything follows after the head [beginning stage]" (Pirkei deR'Eliezer Ch.42).

The Jewish nation is identified with the word reishis, "first" or "beginning" (Rashi, Genesis 1:1). This is

because creation was because of Israel and their study and observance of the Torah. Their status of firstborn was earned because of their single-minded efforts to universally proclaim G-d as "father of the world" - Ovinu Malkeinu, Our Father, Our King.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (Genesis 4:4) observes how the "first" is always taken as the representative dedication of all the rest. So when man places what is first and foremost before G-d, he is indicating how his relationship with G-d constitutes the first and most important one. It alone is placed at the fore. It alone gives meaning to his life. And how his whole existence is to bestow glory onto his Father. No wonder why the firstborn naturally gravitates to holiness and to G-dliness.

Where the firstborn is sanctified, then this majestically paves the way for everything else urging it to follow on. Where the Jewish nation taps into their spirituality as endemic to the symbolism of a firstborn, then they are able to similarly influence the rest of the world to forever relate back to the Origin: to G-d.

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