

The Path To Follow

Bo

477

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The Sanctity of the Firstborn – He is Mine

Among other things in Parsha Bo, we find orders dealing with the sanctity of the firstborn of both man and animal, as the verse states: “Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the first issue of every womb among the Children of Israel, of man and animal; it is Mine” (Shemot 13:1). We also have what follows: “You shall set apart every issue of the womb to Hashem, and of every first issue that is dropped by livestock that belong to you, the males are Hashem’s. Every first issue donkey, you shall redeem with a lamb or kid; if you do not redeem it, you shall axe the back of its neck. And you shall redeem every human firstborn among your sons” (vv.12-13). The reason for this is also given in the text, clearly expressed for everyone to see: “It shall be that when your son asks you at some future time, ‘What is this?’ you shall say to him: ‘With a strong hand Hashem removed us from Egypt, from the house of bondage. And it happened that when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to send us out, Hashem killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of man to the firstborn of animal. Therefore I offer to Hashem all male first issue of the womb, and I will redeem all the firstborn of my sons’ ” (vv.14-15).

“Of man and animal; it is Mine” – be it the firstborn of man or animal, it belongs to G-d. Therein lay the greatness of the firstborn. The first issue of every womb does not belong to man, for “it is Mine.” To one examining this subject, it would appear that man and animal are the same in this verse, being included in the same concept, namely that “it is Mine.” In fact within the passage that tells us of the firstborn’s sanctity, no verse specifically applies to man alone, but rather to both man and animal. We need to understand what this is alluding to. Furthermore, the letters of the word rechem (“womb”) are the same as those of chamor (“donkey”), which again tells us that the first issue of the womb, be it of man or donkey (which is an unclean animal), are equal. We first need to understand why they are compared, and then we need to understand why they are compared precisely in this week’s parsha.

Let us begin by examining the nature of the firstborn’s sanctity. In Egypt, the firstborn were sanctified by transforming them into objects of worship, as the Midrash says. This is why the last plague with which the Holy One, blessed be He, struck Egypt concerned the firstborn and idols of Egypt. This proved that He is G-d, and that there is no other.

Even according to the Torah, the firstborn has precedence. We note that the blessings given by Isaac were meant for the firstborn. We also note that Jacob went to purchase the birthright from Esav, and that he removed the birthright from Reuven. The reason is simple: The firstborn is sanctified and elevated, and all the firstborn of men were consecrated to the priesthood until the sin of the golden calf. From that time forwards, they were to be redeemed. The sanctity of the firstborn from the Torah perspective differs from the sanctity attributed to it by the Egyptians. According to the Torah, the firstborn is not independent. Its essence and sanctity are instruments designed to serve the Master of the universe,

and to assume the service of Hashem that rests upon it. The birthright is first and foremost an obligation; the firstborn is required to conduct himself at a higher level than others, and to guide his younger brothers. We see this with Reuven (who was reprimanded in this regard), as well as in other cases. This is why Esav despised the birthright and said, “Of what use to me is a birthright?” (Bereshith 25:32). Yet Jacob, since he served Hashem and was an upright man who dwelled in camps, wanted it.

This is why these two orders were given together in the same verse, so as to compare man to animal. It is also why the expression “the first issue of every rechem [womb]” – which evokes chamor [donkey] – is used. It tells us not to commit the same mistake as the Egyptians, who viewed the firstborn of man as an object of worship. We must fully realize that the firstborn, with all its greatness and importance, is but a tool in the service of G-d. It is consecrated to his Creator and considered a high-ranking soldier, nothing more, just as the firstborn of an animal is but a slightly more important animal. The same applies to all firstborn: Be it of man or animal – it belongs to G-d – and exists only to serve Him.

This is what our Sages tell us in the Gemara, “Adam was created on the eve of Sabbath. Why? Lest the Sadducees say: ‘The Holy One, blessed be He, had a partner in His work of creation.’ Another answer: In order that, if a man’s mind grows proud, he may be reminded that gnats preceded him in the order of creation” (Sanhedrin 38a). It is also written in the Midrash, “If man acts meritoriously, they say to him: ‘You preceded all the works of creation.’ If not, they say to him: ‘A gnat preceded you, a snail preceded you’ ” (Vayikra Rabba 14:1). This teaches us that if a person grows proud, he should realize that he is nothing but an instrument designed to serve G-d, just like a gnat or snail. Why take the example of a gnat or snail? Because an ordinary person finds it difficult to understand why they were created. In fact, it initially appears that there is no reason for their creation. This question is raised in some midrashim. Now there is no limit to the creations of G-d, and it is clear that the world also needs gnats and snails. As we read in the Gemara, “Rav Yehudah said in Rav’s name: Of all that the Holy One, blessed be He, created in His world, He did not create a single thing without purpose. He created the snail as a remedy for a scab, the fly as an antidote to the [sting of a] hornet, the mosquito [crushed] for [the bite of] a serpent, a serpent as a remedy for an eruption, and a [crushed] spider as a remedy for [the bite of] a scorpion” (Shabbat 77b). Here the Meiri comments, “This is among the principles of faith, not to attribute a futile deed to G-d, even if the reason for numerous things escapes us. We find an allusion to this in the teaching: ‘Of all that the Holy One, blessed be He, created in His world, He did not create a single thing without purpose.’ This is what man is told: Know that even the things that were created before you were created to serve the Master of the universe.”



The Mitzvah of the Mezuzah

The Latest Fad

Over the course of the last generation, segulot have turned into a kind of fad, one that has led to a decline in the proper observance of mitzvot.

We know that the essence of Judaism is the observance of Torah and mitzvot, accompanied by faith in the principle of reward and punishment. When we turn Judaism into a mystical and superstitious belief system, it is no longer Judaism. That is not what the Torah clearly says it should be. The mashgiach Rabbi Dov Yaffe Shlita once said that the greatest and most effective segula in the world is an explicit segula from the Torah: “Hashem has chosen you to be to Him le’am segula [a treasured people]” (Devarim 14:2) – a reference to the observance of Torah and mitzvot.

To our great regret, if someone is faced with a certain problem and he is told that he must perform a particular mitzvah as a segula to solve it, he will lack enthusiasm. Yet if he were told, for example, to obtain a lizard eye from South Africa – the third born of its mother, to be precise – and to mix this eye with frog juice brought specifically from North America, then to wait three months and brush this mixture... ah, now there’s a segula that really looks like it will work!

As the faithful observers of Torah and its mitzvot, we must realize that there is no greater segula than the observance of mitzvot in accordance with Halachah! “Hashem has chosen you to be to Him le’am segula” is the greatest and most effective segula in the world.

Some people address “babas” who perform various miracles, thinking that even if nothing comes of it, at least it can’t do any harm. That’s a mistake!

An avrech went to see the gaon Rabbi Nissim Karelitz Shlita and told him that he wanted to fulfill the mitzvah of shiluach haken (sending the mother bird away in order to take her young), since it is a segula of fertility for childless couples.

Brushing the idea aside, the Rav Shlita said in a decisive tone: “A segula? It’s a mitzvah!”

A Knife in the Eyes

In this regard the Maggid Mesharim, Rabbi Shlomo Lewinstein Shlita, recounted an amazing personal story:

When I was a young man, about 18 years of age, my father experienced major heart problems. The doctors said that as far as they were concerned, there was nothing that could be done for him. Since my father needed a new heart, which was an impossibility, prayer was our only recourse.

What did we do? My brother brought him to various tzaddikim to receive blessings. A certain tzaddik instructed my father to take the holy book Raziel HaMalach and to place it in his pocket. He was also to obtain a kosher mezuzah, for these two things together would protect him. My father complied.

In the meantime, his condition deteriorated. As he lay on his sickbed during his final hours, we his faithful sons took this mezuzah and placed it on his pillow so it would protect him. He died a few hours later.

The years passed, and then one day, as I was in kollel learning the halachot regarding the mezuzah, I came across a Halachah from the Shulchan Aruch: “Where should the mezuzah be placed? In the opening, a tefach from the outside” (Yoreh Deah 289:2).

The Shach offers two reasons for this:

1. In order to immediately find the mezuzah upon entering the home from outside.

2. In order for the mezuzah to protect the entire home against forces of impurity. In other words, if we place the mezuzah by the door, it will not protect the entire home.

In a commentary of the Maharsha, he writes in regards to the words in order for the mezuzah to protect: “One who places it to fulfill the mitzvah may rightfully believe that by the merit of this mitzvah, Hashem will protect him. However one who does it only to be protected is given no protection, but rather a knife in the eyes.”

When I saw that, I trembled to the depths of my soul! We had thought that the mezuzah would protect my father, which is why we placed it near his head when he was sick. Now it turned out that using the mezuzah in this very way constituted a “knife in the eyes”!

People believe that there is no harm in any of this. However this can indeed cause harm, may G-d help us!

Respect for the Mezuzah

Since we are discussing the subject of the mezuzah, it is fitting to cite the book Kav Hayashar (ch. 46):

“I found in the name of a writing from King Solomon that a demon sat by the door and wanted to harm anyone who entered the house. Yet when it saw the Name Sh-dai, it could not harm anyone. That is why we must not spill any dirty water near the mezuzah, this being for two reasons: The first is not to adopt a scornful attitude towards the Sacred Name, and the second is that if we spill dirty water, it gives permission to forces of destruction. However when the area near the mezuzah is clean, and a person cherishes the mezuzah and kisses it upon leaving and entering, this demon will bless that person despite itself and say: ‘This is the gate of Hashem; the righteous shall enter through it’ [Tehillim 118:20].

“Yet when a person does not have a mezuzah at the entrance of his home, forces of evil are given permission to attack this person, who wanted to save money by not buying a mezuzah, and who did not have mercy on his soul. In particular, this can result in the death of children if there is no mezuzah in every room of the home. Hence we find that the expression, ‘You shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates’ [Devarim 11:20] is immediately followed by, ‘so that your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children’ [v.21]. As the Sages state in the text concerning the lighting of the Shabbat candles, children die at a young age due to negligence regarding the mezuzah and tzitzit. Rabbis and Jewish leaders are obligated to be careful in this regard. Whoever is mindful of this will merit many good things, as it is written: ‘Waiting at the posts of my door, for one who finds me finds life’ [Mishlei 8:34-35].”

Similar things appear in the book Hanhagot Tzaddikim (“Customs of the Righteous”) by Rabbi Shlomo Baruch of Budapest: “We must be careful not to place something repugnant next to the mezuzah. If this cannot be avoided, we make an effort to cover the mezuzah.”

Guard Your Tongue!

A Rumor

If a rumor spreads that someone has done or said something which the Torah regards as reprehensible – be it a severe or light prohibition – even as such, it is forbidden to believe this rumor with certainty. We may only harbor a suspicion until the matter becomes clear.

Who is a Hero?

It is written, “Not so! Let ha-gevarim [the men] go now” (Shemot 10:11).

What does the term gevarim (“men”) signify?

Here it signifies giborim (“heroes”) – men who control their desires.

– Aggadot Atikot MiTeiman

Cherished Friends

It is written, “Let each man ask his friend, and each woman her friend” (Shemot 11:2).

Were the Egyptians friends of the Jews, such that the verse employs the expression “his friend” and “her friend”?

This teaches us that after the plagues, the Jews were cherished by the Egyptians, who were inclined to lend them things at that point. A Jew would say to an Egyptian, “My dear friend, lend me that vessel, that article of clothing, that silver object, and that gold object,” and the Egyptian wouldn’t dare refuse.

– Lekach Tov

The Merit of the Patriarchs

It is written, “On this tenth of this month, they shall take for themselves, each man, a lamb” (Shemot 12:3).

Why did they have to take a lamb on the tenth of the month? The lamb was slaughtered on the fourteenth of the month! Why did they have to bind lambs and goats for three full days?

Here Hashem acted as He had with Abraham. When He commanded Abraham, “Take your son” (Bereshith 22:2), at that point He bound the ram that would be sacrificed in Isaac’s place. Abraham then travelled for three days, as it is written: “On the third day” (Bereshith 22:4). Hashem therefore told the Children of Israel, “Plan ahead and bind the lamb for Pesach on the tenth day, meaning three days before the sacrifice, so that I may remember you as I remembered your forefathers.”

– Midrash Chadash

Who Raises the Lowly

It is written, “You shall take a bundle of hyssop” (Shemot 12:22).

Why hyssop in particular?

There are many other things which appear lowly, but with which G-d commanded many precepts to be performed. The hyssop, for instance, appears to man to be of no value. However its power is great in the eyes of G-d, Who placed it on a level of the cedar in numerous cases: In the purification of the leper and the burning of the red heifer. In Egypt as well, He commanded a precept to be performed with hyssop, as it says: “You shall take a bundle of hyssop.” ... This teaches you that the small and the great are equal in the sight of G-d. He performs miracles with the smallest of things, and through the hyssop – the lowliest of trees – He delivered Israel.

– Shemot Rabba 17:2

Redeeming the Firstborn

It is written, “Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the first issue of every womb among the Children of Israel” (Shemot 13:2).

Why must a woman’s firstborn son be redeemed with five selayim?

This corresponds to the five mitzvot incumbent on men but not on women: Dwelling in a sukkah, taking the lulav, hearing the shofar, wearing tzitzit, and donning tefillin.

Since women are exempt from performing these mitzvot, their sons are redeemed with five selayim in order that they may receive a reward, as if these women had personally carried out these five mitzvot.

From here we learn that Hashem does not deprive anyone of a reward.

– Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer

Compensation for Leaving the Land

It is written, “When Hashem will bring you into the land of the Canaanites” (Shemot 13:11).

Canaan was rewarded with the land carrying his name.

What did he do to earn this reward?

When Canaan heard that the Children of Israel were preparing to enter the land, he departed in order to leave it for them.

Hashem then said to him, “Because you liberated the land for My son, I will give the land your name, and I will grant you another beautiful land.”

What land was that? The land of Africa. – Mechilta

In the Light of the Parsha

The Promise of a Great Blessing in this World

It is written, “Please speak in the ears of the people: Let each man borrow from his fellow, and each woman from her fellow, vessels of silver and vessels of gold” (Shemot 11:2).

Our Sages say in the Gemara, “The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: Please, go and tell Israel, ‘Please borrow from the Egyptians vessels of silver and vessels of gold,’ so that this tzaddik [Abraham] may not say, ‘“And they shall serve them, and they shall afflict them” [Bereshith 15:13] He did fulfill for them, but “and afterwards they will leave with great wealth” [ibid.] He did not fulfill for them’” (Berachot 9ab).

This Gemara raises some questions: During the Covenant Between the Parts, why did Hashem promise Abraham that the Children of Israel would escape from exile with great wealth? Does one who finds himself wrongly confined among thieves demand great wealth? He only asks to be freed! As our Sages say in the Gemara, “[They were] like a man who was kept in prison and people said to him, ‘Tomorrow they will release you from prison and give you plenty of money.’ He answers them, ‘Please, let me go free today and I will ask for nothing more!’” (Berachot 9b).

The explanation is that during the Covenant Between the Parts, Abraham was told that his descendants would not be assimilated among the nations. G-d said to him, “Know that your offspring will be strangers,” meaning that the Children of Israel would be exiled in a foreign land. He also said, “Although they must spend 400 years in exile, I will ensure that they do not become assimilated, and I will bring them out before they reach the 50th gate of impurity. Furthermore, I will entrust them with a few commandments, which they will observe and which will give them merit to be delivered.”

Furthermore, G-d promised that the Children of Israel would be worthy of receiving a great reward in this world on account of their good deeds. In fact He guarantees a great reward to His children as long as they fulfill His will, as it is written: “If you follow My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them, then I will provide your rains in their time, and the land will give its produce and the tree of the field will give its fruit. Your threshing will last until the vintage, and the vintage will last until the sowing. You will eat your bread to satiety, and you will dwell securely in your land” (Vayikra 26:3-5).

Hashem also told Abraham: “Since they will be called upon to leave with great wealth, you can rest assured that they will have fulfilled My will. Indeed, I will not give them great wealth if they are not worthy of it.”

In the new book *Pninei Tefillah* (recently published by the gaon Rabbi Ben Tzion HaKohen Kook), emphasis is placed for the first time on Rav Eliashiv's "service of the heart," meaning his prayer. Reading between the lines, we learn how the Rav senses the *Pesukei D'Zimra* [Verses of Praise], and sings them with a harmonious voice. We also learn how he "accepts the yoke of Heaven" as he recites the Shema. His entire Amidah expresses the fact that he is "standing before Hashem, the King of kings." His concentration and emphasis on each word as he recites, "O King, a helper, a savior, and a shield" from the first blessing of the Amidah – or "Who graciously bestows knowledge" from the fourth blessing – moves all who hear him.

Numerous Torah scholars and eminent sages come specifically to see the Rav's approach to prayer, as well as to learn halachic details from it. Each of his movements is precise and conforms to the Halachah, leaving a strong impression on all who see him, encouraging them in the path of a good prayer. May Hashem, Who hears prayer, answer the prayers addressed to Him by the Rav for the sake of the community and the individual! "And yet," as the author in his introduction underlines, "it's unfortunate that I don't have a container that can conserve and transmit this heat [of his prayers]!"

Here are a few extracts drawn from the hundreds of questions recorded in this book:

A young man once told Rav Eliashiv that it was difficult for him to get up in the morning to pray Shacharit. He therefore wanted his advice.

The Rav replied, "Advice? You must simply be aware of the importance and value of prayer. If you owned a store, you would overcome this difficulty and get up early!"

He then continued: "For a store, you would get up early. Now a store is very little compared to prayer. A store will only earn you a few pennies. But if you knew the great benefit that you could derive from prayer, there's no doubt that you would get up early."

In regards to prayer that could disturb other passengers in an airplane, Rav Eliashiv is cited in the book as having taken the halachic decision that "every passenger has an equal right to fly. If it disturbs them, it's better not to form a minyan [a group of ten men to pray] unless their consent is obtained."

To the question raised by Rav Kook: "Even if a single passenger objects?" Rav Eliashiv replied: "What does 'a single passenger' mean? He also has a right-of-way, and he cannot be deprived of it."

The Rav was extremely careful to safeguard the customs of our forefathers. Under the title *As Grandma Would Do*, the story is told of a few women from an orthodox school who wanted to modify a passage from the prayers by changing certain terms from masculine to feminine. The Rav reacted by saying, "Tell them that it must be recited as grandma would do."

One day a close friend of the Rav told him about the intention of his daughter, who was engaged, to go and pray by the grave of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai in Meron. The Rav said to him, "If you are asking me for advice, I think it would be better for her to go to the Kotel." He then added, "The Shechinah never leaves it."

When the man responded by saying that his daughter would perhaps pray more effectively at Meron, the Rav was perplexed. He exclaimed, "That itself is the question: Why? Because the Shechinah dwells at the Kotel!"

Continue Praying

The gaon Rabbi Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, the Rav of Jerusalem, would always say that whoever accustomed himself to continuously praying to G-d would reach the highest levels of perfection. Hence he never stopped praying in every situation, imploring the Creator to hear his requests, be they for the sake of the community or the individual.

He would say, "There is nothing in this world that does not require prayer." Hence this principle played an important role in the advice that he gave to those who sought his help: "Go pray, and you will succeed."

In fact he had the right prayer for every problem brought to his attention: To those who complained that they had a hard time "serving G-d" properly, he advised them to diligently recite Parashat HaYirah (the passage on the fear of G-d) each day.

To those who turned to him because they were beset by financial problems, he gave them a good piece of advice: "Accustom yourself to reciting Parashat HaMann [the passage on the manna] each day, and to think of it during Birkat Hamazon. In this way, you will receive help." When a person asserted that he had already prayed two or three times without receiving an answer, he recommended: "Continue praying and you will see miracles."

One day, a shochet from Jerusalem whose financial situation was very precarious came to the Rav and poured out his heart to him. As he normally did, the Rav encouraged him to recite Parashat HaMann each day. A few weeks later, the man returned and said: "I followed your advice, and I was answered. Nevertheless, there's only one problem: One of the jobs being offered to me is in the new city of Tel Aviv. I'm not sure if I can accept it, because I'm worried about my children's education."

Upon hearing this, the Rav congratulated him on his concerns and said, "Happy is the man who always fears" (Mishlei 28:14). He then added, "That's not what I had in mind, my son. Continue praying and hoping in deliverance, which G-d will send you in the blink of an eye."

Not long afterwards, this shochet found a job in Jerusalem, an honorable position that he occupied for the rest of his life.

I Covered His Tracks

The Baal Shem Tov once declared, "Whoever wants his prayer to ascend to Hashem, let him pray with me word for word." This is what one disciple did. When the Baal Shem Tov said Adon, he also said Adon. When he said olam, he also said olam at the exact same time...until the end of the prayer service. His disciple did this for several days.

One time, during the *Pesukei D'Zimra*, the Baal Shem Tov began to repeat the phrase *sheker hasus litshua* ("false is the horse for victory" [Tehillim 33:17]) several times in succession. The first time he said it, his disciple recited it at the same time. But once the Baal Shem Tov started to repeat it, his disciple began to wonder why. He looked into the book *Mishnat Chassidim*, but found no reference to repeating this phrase. At that point, he stopped praying in parallel with the Baal Shem Tov.

He later went to see the Baal Shem Tov, who immediately asked him: "Why did you stop praying with me?" When his disciple explained why he had stopped, the Baal Shem Tov explained: "A Jew was delayed while traveling on the road one Friday afternoon. When he realized that he couldn't reach a town before Shabbat, he stopped in a field. A thief noticed his presence there, and he decided to head into the field with his horse and kill him. By reciting this verse, I 'covered his tracks' so he couldn't find the way."

I Am Prayer

A Broken and Crushed Heart

Another essential element for receiving an answer to prayer is mentioned in Scripture: "Hashem is close to the brokenhearted, and He saves those crushed in spirit" (Tehillim 34:19). True, Hashem offers great help in prayer, but one must first feel broken on the inside, in the spiritual realm. Only then is there a chance that G-d will deliver us.

Nevertheless, if we are serene, without realizing our own lowness, and our prayers and requests do not stem from a humble heart, then even prayer will offer no help. – Ohr Yechezkel