I was asked an interesting question about a one-month-old baby and his mother who were both infected with Corona and in isolation. The baby is a firstborn and therefore must be redeemed by a Kohen (Pidyon HaBen). According to the instructions of the authorities, a Kohen would not be allowed to come near their home – not even near their door. They asked me how they could do a Pidyon HaBen without a Kohen, with just the father, mother and baby present.

The Torah states that the Kohanim must be given “matnot kehuna” (presents of priesthood – one of which is the firstborn males, which then belong to the Kohen unless they are redeemed). It uses the language: “And he shall give the Kohen...” (Devarim 18:3). The Sifrei expounds (Devarim, Shoftim 165): “And he shall give the Kohen the foreleg...” (Devarim 18:3). The Sifrei expounds (Devarim, Shoftim 165): “And he shall give the Kohen to the Kohen himself.”

Ostensibly, we might have understood this to mean that the Kohen himself must enjoy the gift. However, some Sages have understood this to mean that one cannot give these presents through a messenger, but that “he” must hand them to the Kohen. This is what the Rema rules (Yoreh Deah 305:10) in the name of the Rivash (131): “The father cannot redeem his son from the Kohen through a messenger.”

Despite the Rema’s ruling, it seems it is possible to perform a Pidyon HaBen through a messenger, using the father’s money:

1. Most of the Acharonim disagreed with the Rema in his interpretation of the Rivash. According to their opinion, the Rivash himself admitted that one can redeem via a messenger.

2. The wording of the beracha for the Pidyon is clear: redeeming the first born. It is clear (according to the Rambam and the Ran), that for mitzvot upon which you recite the blessing “concerning,” it is permissible to send a messenger to do the mitzvah for you.

3. When the money belongs to the father (and not to the messenger), many Acharonim are of the opinion that everyone – even the Rema – agrees it can be done through a messenger. This is because the messenger is not fulfilling the mitzvah of Pidyon HaBen for the father, but simply delivering the father’s money to the Kohen. Therefore, in the case where it is the father’s money, the messenger can also say the corresponding statements and do the handing over.

4. When the messenger simply transfers the father’s money to the Kohen, but the father is the one who recites the text of the Pidyon, it is the father doing all of the actions of the Pidyon. This scenario is even better than the previous one.1

Another option is for the father to meet the Kohen elsewhere and redeem his son, without the baby being present. If however, the father cannot physically meet the Kohen – because he too is in isolation or otherwise – one can do the Pidyon via Zoom:

1. The ceremonial verbal conversation with the Kohen can certainly be done via Zoom. This is not an integral part of the Pidyon. It was instituted by the Geonim and is a verification that the baby needs to be redeemed.

2. Next, the father says the berachot (“Al Pidyon HaBen” and “Shehechiyanu”), and pays the Kohen the money. But how?

a. The father puts the special coins in an agreed upon place, beforehand. The Kohen takes them before the Pidyon, having the intention that they are not his yet. The Kohen places them on his table and only after the father makes the blessing does he raise the money and acquire it.

b. A second possibility is that the Kohen sells his own special coins, or something worth that amount, to the father - via someone else. Then the Kohen is given the coins back, immediately after the berachot, enabling the father to use them for the Pidyon HaBen.

c. The third option is for another Jew, not from the father’s family, to bring the coins (or something worth that amount) to the Kohen, immediately after the berachot are recited.

3. After the Pidyon, the Kohen makes beracha on a cup of wine, in his home, and those hearing him via Zoom should answer Amen. The custom of the Kohen making the beracha was either to give honor to the Kohen (Panim Meirot 2:99), or to publicize the event.

1 Rabbi Akiva Eiger on the Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah, 305; Hafla’ah – Ketubot 74a; Avnei Miluim 38:5, etc.

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Receiving the Torah in the Desert

When the Torah describes Bnei Yisrael’s arrival at the place where they would receive the Torah, it mentions the word “desert” three times: “In the third month of Bnei Yisrael’s departure from Egypt, on this day they arrived at the desert of Sinai. They journeyed from Refidim, and they arrived at the desert of Sinai, and they encamped in the desert, and Israel encamped there opposite the mountain.”¹ Why the seemingly superfluous emphasis?

The desert is a place of emptiness and lack, an expanse uncontrolled by human hand. In such a place, a person feels his deficiency and his complete dependence on G-d. In the desert, it is clear that without G-d’s help he cannot survive. For 40 years, Bnei Yisrael traveled in the desert and experienced in the clearest, most powerful way, utter dependence on G-d to provide all of their basic needs: water, food, and protection from dangers such as snakes and scorpions. This sense of dependence constitutes the basis for the connection between G-d and Am Yisrael, and the obligation to fulfill His commandments.

This sense of dependence could be a technical matter, i.e. when a person understands that G-d gives him his needs, he must commit to fulfilling His commandments. However, it seems there is much more to it than that. A person who lives in the desert lives with a different awareness than one who lives elsewhere. As our Sages expressed it:²

“And G-d spoke to Moshe in Midbar Sinai”³ – Anyone who does not make himself like an uninhabited (hefker) desert, cannot acquire wisdom and Torah. Thus the verse states that G-d spoke to Moshe BeMidbar Sinai.”

Our Sages explained the repetition of the word midbar by teaching us that we are not just talking about a physical location, but also an awareness and a consciousness. What is this “desert” consciousness? Our Sages defined it as hefker – ownerless, uninhabited and abandoned. One can also define it as a consciousness of lack.

Lack or deficiency (be it in the desert or in other situations) opens up a person to the understanding that nothing can be taken for granted; that even our most basic needs depend on the kindness of Heaven. This, in turn, builds the character trait of humility: the ability to recognize that which is lacking, the deficiencies and weaknesses, and the understanding and willingness to accept that someone else can fill that void. The one who fills that lack can be G-d or any other person who can give us whatever we are lacking.

Humility is the basis for all interpersonal communication and for all learning, but it is especially important for learning Torah and for connecting to G-d. G-d’s Kingship in this world can only exist when humans are not haughty, when they make space in their hearts and in their world for the presence of G-d. As Yeshayahu said:⁴

“And the loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of man shall be humbled, and G-d alone shall be exalted on that day.”

Am Yisrael’s journey through the desert was the basis for accepting the Torah with feelings of humility and dependence on G-d. Since then, every year we celebrate Shavuot, the holiday of receiving the Torah, and at the same time, we read the weekly Torah portion of Bemidbar. This parasha reminds us of the journey Am Yisrael went through in the desert – a voyage to the shores of humility, to a dependence on G-d and an inner connection with Him.

This year, we are once again accepting the Torah, albeit during difficult circumstances in which the whole world is dealing with the Coronavirus pandemic. During this time, the awareness of that which we lack – existentially, health wise, and financially – traverses nations and borders, encompassing the entire world. Let us find our humility once again and enhance our awareness of our dependence on the Almighty.

² Midrash Rabbah, Bemidbar: Parasha 1, section 7.
³ Bemidbar 1:1.
⁴ Yeshayahu 2:17.

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