



A Pidyon HaBen in Isolation

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* the foreleg...” (Devarim 18:3). The Sifrei expounds (Devarim, Shofetim 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 על פדיון הבן – “concerning redeeming the first born.” It is clear (according to the Rambam and the Ran), that for *mitzvot* upon which you recite the blessing על “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 בורא פרי הגפן 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 Meiros* 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:

“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.”⁴

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.

1 Shemot 19:1-2.

2 Midrash Rabbah, Bemidbar: Parasha 1, section 7.

3 Bemidbar 1:1.

4 Yeshayahu 2:17.

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