

Because There Is No one Else

Category: Holidays, Pesach

Is the whole world turning against us? It might just be a sign of Moshiach...

Perspective

The protests on campuses across the United States are spreading like wildfire, leaving Jewish Americans feeling a bit besieged and anxious about the future.

Let's look for some perspective from Jewish tradition.

Rabbi Simlai was a beloved Talmudic sage who lived in the third century, known for his eloquent speeches and popular sermons. Many of his teachings were famous; one such statement is his teaching that the Torah begins and ends with acts of kindness (Sotah 14a). He points out that G-d's first act with humanity is an act of kindness, where He makes clothing for Adam and Eve, and the final tale is of G-d Himself burying Moses—showing kindness to the living and dead.

Another famous point is his device to remember the count of positive and negative commandments. We all know there are 613 commandments, 248 positive ones and 365 negatives, but Rabbi Simlai provides us an easy way to remember them: "365 prohibitions correspond to the days of the solar year, and 248 positive commandments correspond to the limbs of a person" (Makos 23b).

But the important story for today is about the occasion when Rabbi Simlai joined a Pidyon Haben (Pesachim 121b), the ritual of redeeming the firstborn son.

Redeeming the First Born

Pidyon Haben is quite a rare observance, because it requires several criteria:

Firstly, the child must be a firstborn male. Secondly, he must be the mother's first child, and is disqualified if his mother previously miscarried (after forty days of pregnancy). Thirdly, the birth must be natural, not through a Caesarean section. And fourthly, the mitzvah applies only if both the father and mother are Israelites, not if either parent is a descendant of Kohanim or Levites. When the infant meets

all these conditions, the father has a mitzvah to redeem his child from the Kohen with five silver coins, which today would be slightly more than one hundred grams of silver.

Since fulfilling all these conditions for a firstborn son is rare, and only about 15% of the population qualify, the mitzvah is observed with great pomp and circumstance. The baby is adorned in fancy clothes, and the women decorate him with their gold jewelry. He's carried on a silver platter and presented to the Kohen. Then the father informs the Kohen that his wife has given birth to a firstborn son and he is commanded to redeem him. The Kohen asks, "What do you prefer, to give me your firstborn son or to redeem him for five silver coins?" The father replies, "I prefer to redeem him," and hands over the money.

Then the father recites a blessing, as is customary for any mitzvah—just as a woman blesses, "Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us to light the Shabbat candles," and as we recite a blessing "al netilat yadayim" when washing our hands, similarly, when redeeming a son, the father recites a blessing, "Who has sanctified us with His commandments and commanded us regarding the redemption of the son."

Well, Rabbi Simlai once found himself involved in a pidyon haben ceremony. When the people realized that an esteemed rabbi was present, they came to him with a question. "We know that the father recites the blessing, but there's another blessing typically said on such occasions, the 'Shehecheyanu.' Who should say 'Shehecheyanu,' the father or the Kohen?" Should the Kohen thank G-d for the opportunity to receive the money, or should the father thank G-d for the opportunity to fulfill such a rare commandment?

Rabbi Simlai didn't know the answer, so he went to the study hall and posed the question there. The scholars decided that the father should recite both blessings, the Pidyon Haben blessing and the "Shehecheyanu."

G-d's Firstborn Son

During a farbrengen commemorating his sixtieth birthday, the Rebbe discussed this story from the Talmud. As always, the Rebbe "translated" the story, explaining how this question and answer from the Talmud are relevant today in the life of every person (Sichos Kodosh 5722 pg. 374).

The Rebbe pointed out that the mitzvah of redeeming the firstborn son stems from the narrative of the Exodus from Egypt. The first time God revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush, He instructed Moses to go to Pharaoh and say, *“So says G-d: Israel is My son, My firstborn. Let My son go, that he may serve Me. If you refuse to let him go, I will slay your son, your firstborn”* (Exodus 4:22-23). From the very outset, God declared Israel as His firstborn, and if Pharaoh refused to release them, he would be punished with the plague of the firstborn. That’s exactly as the story pans out: on the eve of Passover, while the Israelites were sequestered in their homes, God descended into Egypt and struck down every firstborn Egyptian while sparing the Israelite firstborn.

As we read in the Pesach Torah reading, the commandment of redeeming the firstborn was established right afterwards. On the day of the Exodus, God tells Moses, *“Consecrate to Me every firstborn, the first offspring of every womb among the Israelites, both of man and of beast; it is Mine”* (Exodus 13:2). Subsequently, Moses says that this mitzvah is intended to commemorate the Exodus from Egypt: *“And when, in the future, your son asks you, ‘What does this mean?’ you shall say to him, ‘G-d killed the firstborn of Egypt . . . so every firstborn of your sons you shall redeem”* (Exodus 13:15).

The story of Rabbi Simlai needs to be viewed from that perspective. The Rebbe quoted the famous Midrash which says that whenever God commands us to do something, He Himself does it. Just as God commands us to redeem the firstborn son, He Himself is obligated to redeem the firstborn—the people of Israel—from exile.

This is the essence of the discussion in the Talmud: It’s clear that the obligation lies with the father to recite the blessing *“al pidyon haben,”* because he is obligated to redeem his son. Similarly, G-d is obligated to redeem us from all our troubles. The question is who recites the blessing *“shehecheyanu.”* Is it the Kohen or the father? Meaning, does G-d Himself perform this act, or in more natural ways.

In the Passover Haggadah, we point out that G-d took us out Himself, *“I and not an angel, I and not a seraph, I and not a messenger.”* The difference is in the form of miracle; if it’s done by an angel, it could be a miracle dressed in nature that is not always recognizable as a miracle. However, the plague of the firstborn in Egypt was a miracle entirely beyond the natural order, requiring G-d Himself.

Similarly, the Rebbe concluded, when it comes to the final redemption of Moshiach—it will be completely above the boundaries of nature; it will be done by G-d Himself.

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Why is it so critical for this to be performed by G-d Himself?

The Rebbe quoted from the prophet Isaiah (beginning of Chapter 63), where the prophecy is written in the form of a conversation between the world and G-d. The world asks G-d, *“Who is this coming from Edom, with dyed garments from Bosrah?”* Edom here represents Esau, Rome, and all the enemies of Israel throughout the generations. Suddenly, G-d arrives with red garments dyed from Bosrah, which was then the capital city of those who destroyed the Temple.

G-d responds, *“I who speak in righteousness, mighty to save.” I, who do everything with justice and righteousness, have come to save the people of Israel.*

And they continue to ask: *“Why is Your clothing red?”* Why in this way? Why is G-d angry with Edom? So G-d answers, *“I looked and there was no one to help, and I was shocked and there was no one to support.”* G-d looked around and saw that there was nobody coming to the defense of His firstborn; everyone was against them. Everyone has something to say against Israel. Instead of blaming the perpetrators, they are blaming the victims.

Therefore, G-d Himself, not through a priest or a messenger, but He Himself, in a manner “from above and beyond the ordinary,” will come and save us from all these. And then, we will all recite together—Shehecheyanu Vekiyemanu Vehigiyanu Bizman Haze!