



DEAR TORAH TIDBITS FAMILY

RABBI AVI BERMAN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, OU ISRAEL
ABERMAN@OUISTRAEL.ORG

There's a small social moment that I think about more often than I'd like to admit. Someone starts telling you a joke, and within the first few words you realize you've heard it before. So what do you do? Do you let them finish, smile, and "discover" the punchline again with them because you know it will make them feel good that they brought something fun to the conversation? Or do you cut it short with a quick, "Yes, yes, I know that one"?

A number of years ago, one of my sons came home and told me a joke that I'm sure many of you reading this have heard as well. A man comes to the rabbi and says, "Rabbi, I really, really want to be a Kohen." The rabbi tells him, "I'm sorry. I can't make you a Kohen." But the man keeps coming back. Again and again. He won't let it go. Eventually the rabbi says, "Tell me something. Why is it so important for you to be a Kohen?" And the man answers, "Because

my father was a Kohen. My grandfather was a Kohen. My great-grandfather was a Kohen. I also want to be a Kohen."

As a father who wanted to build up my child's confidence, I made sure to laugh. I made sure he felt great. I wanted him to feel like he had just told me something new, something funny, something that brought light into our home. But the joke stayed with me for a different reason. It made me think about Kohanim and the emotional connection that they have to their lineage and the unique mitzvot that they are commanded to fulfill. Just like Kohanim, Jews of all types develop emotions when we learn Torah. The way that we connect to Torah and mitzvot is often more personal than we realize.

It is natural that each of us connects to some mitzvot more than others. Whether because of our personalities, our values, or our life circumstances. With 613 mitzvot in the Torah, we are bound to have a stronger relationship to some over others. I think it makes sense that those who live in Eretz Yisrael feel a different connection to mitzvot related to the Land than someone who doesn't live here. It makes sense that Kohanim connect more to mitzvot involving Kohanim, Leviim to those involving Leviim. That emotional connection is important because it helps us pay particular attention to the mitzvot that speak most directly to our lives.

I remember a friend from elementary school who was a Kohen. There was a *chidon*, a contest, held annually for Kohanim at Yeshivat Ateret Kohanim, and he studied an entire book on the mitzvot related to the Kehunah in order to win. Even then, he felt connected

**May the Torah learning this week
be in loving memory of**

our twin brother

**Moshe Leib ben Yosef Baer z"l
(Michael) on his 17th yartzheit**

and our dear cousins

**Matthew Meir Zalman
ben Godel Pesach Silverberg z"l
on his 12th yartzheit**

and

**Richard Reuvan ben Saul Tilis z"l
on his 3rd yartzheit**

Sorely missed by many

Avraham & Malka Shrybman

as a Kohen to the *avodah* of the Beit HaMikdash and he wanted, just like so many other Kohanim, to understand it more and prepare for the upcoming Beit HaMikdash.

In this week's parsha, right as the Torah begins transitioning from the drama of the *makot* to the first mitzvot that will shape us as a nation, we encounter the mitzvah connected to firstborns, *pidyon haben*. And it is not random that it appears here. In the very shadow of *makat bechorot*, the Torah says, "*Kadesh li kol bechor*," "Sanctify for Me every firstborn", and ties it directly to *Yetziat Mitzrayim* and what Hashem did for us that night. The Torah then paints a scene that is so Jewish it almost feels like it could happen at your own Shabbat table: "*V'hayah ki yishalcha bincha machar*," when your child asks you tomorrow what this is all about, you answer with the story, "*b'chozek yad hotzianu Hashem miMitzrayim*." In other words, this mitzvah is built as a parent-child moment. It is not only about coins. It is about what we choose to remember and what we choose to prioritize inside a Jewish home.

One would think *pidyon haben* is very common, and therefore many people naturally connect to it, either because they are firstborn themselves or because they are parents of a firstborn. But actually, it's pretty rare. There are many halachic factors determining who has a *pidyon haben*. For example, if the father is a Kohen or Levi, they don't perform *pidyon haben* for a firstborn son. Same thing if the mother is the daughter of a Kohen or Levi. Likewise if the firstborn is a girl, or a boy born via C-section, or if there was a previous pregnancy that ended in miscarriage, there is no *pidyon haben*. I've heard a statistic that roughly five percent of Jewish people experience this mitzvah.



Taken at my pidyon haben, with Rabbi Baruch Taub and his son serving as the kohanim. Rabbi Taub is part of the OU Israel family today, sharing Torah through his shiurim.

Before my first grandson's pidyon haben, I was learning in chavruta with Rav Nachman Kahane. I mentioned to him the three-generation connection: I had a *pidyon haben*, my firstborn son had a *pidyon haben*, and his firstborn son was about to have this mitzvah performed with him as well. I realized that I was lucky to have such a strong bond with this mitzvah, more than most other people.

When I told this to Rav Nachman, he shared with me a beautiful idea about the ceremony, one which I always try to internalize. At one point during the *pidyon haben* ceremony, the Kohen looks at the father and asks the following Aramaic phrase: "*Mai ba'it tefei*?" What do you

לע"נ הרב שרגא פייבל וגנר ז"ל
On the occasion of his 20th yearzeit
of our beloved
father, brother, and uncle
Rabbi Feivel Wagner ז"ל

We will meet at
Har Menuchot Cemetery
8:45am on Wednesday
January 28 - שבת "

יהי זכרו ברוך

want more, the child or the money? At first glance, it seems like a ridiculous question. Why would a Kohen ask a father if he wants his money or his child? After nine months of pregnancy, preparing the baby's room, building a home, building a family, clearly they want the child. What kind of question is "*Mai ba'it tefei*?"

Rav Nachman explained that this is not a question we're supposed to answer only at the *pidyon haben* ceremony. It is a question we're supposed to ask ourselves every single day. It is a question that should guide us each time we're sitting in the office wondering: should I go home and spend time with my children, my spouse, my parents, my brothers and sisters, my nieces and nephews? Or should I stay for more meetings? The work-life balance is a question that we all experience and battle with. Every time we have to choose between professional obligations and being present with our loved ones, we are answering this question: "*Mai ba'it tefei*?"

Now obviously, when we are talking about making ends meet so that there's food on the table and the rent is paid, a person must do what they need to in order to support their family. But I'm sure I'm not the only one who reaches moments asking: should I attend this work event, or should I have dinner with my children? Should I stay in the office, or should I spend this time at home? Rav Nachman said it to me like this: there will be many times when the answer will be that work is necessary right now. But there will also be times when you'll decide, "*Mai ba'it tefei*," what do I really want? I would rather be with my family.

Even when we ultimately decide that a particular work obligation is unavoidable, that an event will not happen without our presence, that people are depending on us, the very fact that we go through this thought process matters tremendously. When we are

constantly asking ourselves, "Where would I rather be right now?" and the answer is "with my family," even if circumstances require us to be elsewhere, there is tremendous value in that internal dialogue. We are keeping our priorities clear. We are recognizing what truly matters most.

I heard a similar idea recently in Parshat Shemot. Moshe finally agrees to go down to Mitzrayim, and he stops at a lodging with his family. The Torah describes a frightening moment until Tziphora performs a *brit milah* and saves their son. Chazal understand that Moshe was held accountable for delaying the *brit milah*. Whatever the exact *pshat*, the message lands with force: before Moshe Rabbeinu could lead a nation, he had to make sure his own home was in order. Family comes first. The most important leadership decisions begin with the priorities we set when no one is applauding.

This consciousness, this constant awareness of "*Mai ba'it tefei*," is what enables us to think about how we can spend more time with our children, our spouse, our parents, our loved ones. It is essentially about setting priorities and keeping them straight, because it is very easy to fall into the trap of focusing on things that are less important. But when we maintain our *sechel yashar*, our clear thinking, directing us in the right direction, this is what will enable us to continue raising our families and our next generation with the proper love, attention, and support they need to, be'ezerat Hashem, become leaders and contributors to Klal Yisrael.

Wishing you all an uplifting and inspiring Shabbat,



Rabbi Avi Berman
Executive Director, OU Israel
aberman@ouisrael.org