



RABBI SHALOM

ROSNER

RAV KEHILLA, OHEL EPHRAIM IN NOFEI HASHEMESH
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Taanit Bekhorot – The Power of Personal Example

On *Erev Pesah*, as we are busy cleaning our homes, preparing for the Seder, and burning the remaining *hametz*, there is a universally accepted custom that all first-born males (*bekhorim*) fast.¹ Most, however, participate in a *siyum* (celebration of completing a tractate of the Talmud) so that they may partake in a *seudat mitzvah* (a meal marking a mitzvah) and thereby avoid the remainder of the fast.²

This practice raises several questions. Why are we so lenient with this particular fast? On other fast days, no one suggests avoiding the fast by attending a *siyum*. Perhaps if we better understand the reason for *Taanit Bekhorot*, we will also understand

1. Yerushalmi, beginning of perek Arvei Pesahim

2. Shulkhan Aruch, O.H. 470; Mishna Berura ad loc.

 **MAZAL TOV to** 
Elroi Binyamin Singer
of Kiryat Arba
On your Bar Mitzvah
Shabbat HaGadol

*Ari & Rivka Singer, Avraham & Malka Shrybman,
David & Sara Bedein and the entire family*

the widespread practice of breaking it through a *siyum*.

The Purpose of Taanit Bekhorot

The general reason given for *Taanit Bekhorot* is to commemorate the miracle in Egypt. During the tenth and final plague, all Egyptian firstborns were killed,³ while the Jewish firstborns were spared. One could infer that the plague of the firstborn (*Makkat Bekhorot*) could have affected the Jews as well. Indeed, that is why God commanded them to place blood on their doorposts, to protect themselves from the plague.⁴

But this raises several difficulties:

Why was this plague directed specifically at the Egyptian firstborn, rather than the taskmasters or others directly responsible for the enslavement of Bnei Yisrael?

Why do Jewish firstborns express gratitude for being spared from *Makkat Bekhorot*, while there is no similar commemoration of being spared from the other plagues?

Why is it accepted practice to avoid the fast through a *siyum* rather than by completing the fast as we do on other occasions?

The Educational Role of the Firstborn

3. Shemot 12:29

4. Shemot 12: 7; 13

The Esh Tamid⁵ offers an insightful explanation. The most powerful form of education is not formal instruction, but the personal example one sets. A child learns from the way his parents live, and a student is shaped by the conduct of his teacher.

Of Avraham Avinu the Torah states⁶:

כִּי יִדְעַתִּיּוּ לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְנֶה אֶת־בְּנָיו וְאֶת־בֵּיתוֹ
אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דְרָגוֹ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּנְמוּשָׁפֹט...

For I have known him, because he commands his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of Hashem, to perform righteousness and justice...

The Esh Tamid, citing his father, explains that although we do not find an explicit verse of Avraham verbally instructing his family, his example was so powerful that his offspring naturally followed his ways. For that alone he is credited as if he explicitly commanded them.

In many families, the eldest child serves this role. Younger siblings look up to their older brother or sister and are shaped by their conduct. Halakhah even requires showing respect to older siblings, similar to the respect given to parents.⁷

It is therefore understandable why the Egyptian firstborn were punished so severely. They bore unique responsibility for the behavior of the nation. Their negative influence encouraged others to join in oppressing the Jewish people.

By the same measure, the Jewish firstborn were held accountable as well. As the natural role models in their families,

they could have elevated their siblings but instead contributed to the nation's spiritual decline in Egypt. For this reason, they too were threatened by *Makkat Bekhorot* — and must therefore express gratitude for being spared.

Why a Siyum?

With this in mind, we can understand why the fast of the firstborn can be replaced by a *siyum*. Fasting facilitates introspection, reminding the *bekhor* of his responsibility to serve as a positive influence. But a *siyum* accomplishes this in an even more powerful way. Celebrating the completion of Torah study is itself a model of spiritual commitment, a demonstration of the very responsibility that the firstborn bears. By participating in a *siyum*, the firstborn exemplifies what it means to inspire others — this time through Torah.

Conclusion – Becoming Living Examples

As we prepare for the Seder, the night when we transmit our *mesorah* (tradition) to the next generation, the message of *Taanit Bekhorot* becomes particularly poignant. The firstborn reminds us that our most lasting influence is not through words but through example.

Every Jew is, in a sense, a firstborn — called upon to inspire others through the way we live. When we act with integrity, immerse ourselves in Torah, and engage in acts of hesed, we become living role models for our children, our students, and our communities.

May we merit, on this night of faith and transmission, to live lives worthy of emulation — so that our children, like those of Avraham Avinu, will “*keep the way of Hashem, to perform righteousness and justice.*” ■

5. Esh Tamid. Parashat Ki Tetze, on Ben Sorer U'Moreh

6. Bereishit 18:19

7. see Kiddushin 31b