



Parashat Bemidbar  
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Chapter 3 of the Book of the Bamidbar describes the "substitution" of the Israelite firstborn with the Levite tribe. It emerges from this description that God had consecrated the firstborns when they were spared during the plague of the firstborn that He visited upon Egypt (3:13), and now, during *Benei Yisrael's* encampment at Sinai, they were replaced by the *Leviyim*. The Sages explain that the Levites were chosen to fill the firstborns' role as officiators in the *Mikdash* because they had not participated in the grievous incident of *chet ha-egel* (sin of the golden calf). This is indicated in the *chet ha-egel* narrative, in which we read that Moshe proclaims to the Levites after this incident, "*mil'u yedkhem hayom le'Hashem*" (Shemot 32:29), which Rashi and other commentators explain to mean the Levites' designation as servants in the Sanctuary. Thus, the Mishna comments in Masekhet Zevachim (112b), "Until the *Mishkan* was erected...the service [of sacrifices] was [performed] by the firstborns... Once the *Mishkan* was erected...the service was [performed] by the *kohanim*."

Maimonides, in his commentary to this Mishna, remarks, somewhat surprisingly, that this special stature of the firstborns had existed since the time of creation: "The [sacrificial] service was always [performed] only by the firstborns, from Adam until our teacher Moshe." This assertion appears to run in direct contradistinction to the verses in Parashat Bamidbar, which speak of the designation of the firstborns in the wake of *makat bechorot*, the plague in Egypt from which the Israelite firstborns were miraculously spared. If God endowed the firstborn with a special status as a result of this plague, it seems difficult to understand how this status had existed since the time of Adam. True, as some writers have noted, Maimonides' comment is rooted in a number of Midrashic sources. *Bamidbar Rabba* (4:4) indeed traces the firstborns' stature to the times of Adam, and *Bereishit Rabba* (Toledot 63:18) famously explains Yaakov's desire to obtain the

birthright as expressing his longing to serve as a *kohen* instead of his sinful older brother. Still, it remains unclear how this tradition can be reconciled with the verses here in Parashat Bamidbar, which speak of the firstborns' designation at the time of *makat bechorot*.

One simple explanation might be to distinguish between two aspects of priesthood – the privilege, and the obligation. Maimonides perhaps refers to the right of offering sacrifices, which was reserved for the firstborns since the time of Adam, but did not necessarily require all firstborns to devote themselves to this "occupation." At the time of *makat bechorot*, however, God assigned this stature and role upon the firstborns regardless of their consent. As He had personally intervened to save them during the plague, they "belonged" to Him and were thus to devote themselves exclusively to His service: "For every firstborn is Mine; on the day I smote every firstborn in the land Egypt I consecrated for Myself every firstborn among the Israelites..." (3:13). The firstborns were then replaced by the tribe of Levi, who did not receive agricultural land in *Eretz Yisrael*, as they were required to devote themselves exclusively to serving the Almighty in the *Mikdash*.

God instructs Moshe before his journey to Egypt to confront Pharaoh, "You shall say to Pharaoh, 'So says the Lord: Israel is My firstborn!'" The process of the Israelite firstborns' consecration reflects the designation of *Am Yisrael* as a whole, all of whom are deemed God's "firstborn." Even before the Exodus from Egypt, our ancestors willingly maintained and preserved the privileged legacy of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. With the Exodus, however, they entered the service of God permanently and obligatorily; performing His will was no longer just a privilege, but also a personal duty. The designation of the firstborns thus serves as a microcosmic representation of the designation of all *Am Yisrael*; the entire nation, too, was freed from Egyptian persecution and is thus forever bound to the service of God.

Many have suggested that *sefirat ha-omer*, the counting of the days from Pesach until Shavuot, represents the inextricable bond between the historical events commemorated by these festivals – the Exodus and *Matan Torah*. It reminds us that the events of *yetzi'at Mitzrayim* must be viewed in the context of the event that transpired seven weeks later, when the nation received God's law at Sinai. As God's firstborns, we

are granted the privilege and assigned the duty of living at a special standard and devoting ourselves exclusively and unconditionally to the special laws of the "firstborn" – the laws of the Torah.