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Upcoming Events:

May 30-June 20 Rabbi Dr. Yaakov Elman at the JCC in NYC on "Modern Orthodoxy—the Fourth Century Version" 7:00-8:15 pm

May 30-June 13 Dr. Lawrence Schiffman at the JCC in NYC on "A Brief History of Heresy" 8:30-9:45 pm

June 18 Edah mini-conference at the JCC

The Dual Nature Of The Redemption Of First Born

By Rabbi Saul J. Berman

In Parshat Bamidbar, Numbers 3: 11-13, we find the execution of God's plan to substitute the Levites for the first born. God had initially elected the first born as His priesthood. But at the sin of the golden calf, the first born indiscriminately joined with those Jews who served the calf. It was only the tribe of Levi that stood apart and resisted temptation. Because of their strength of character and because of the failure of the first born, God determined that He would substitute the Levites for the first born.

That substitution is implemented in this chapter. In consequence of this substitution there is an entire ceremony in the life of many Jewish first born males which commemorates the substitution. That is the ceremony of Pidyon Ha'ben, the redemption of the first born son.

God's initial election of the first born appears in Exodus 13:2. Following upon the plague of the first born, God declares " Sanctify unto me all the first born, whatever openeth the womb amongst the children of Israel, both human children and even the first born animals, they belong to me."

Why does God say they "belong to me"? Well, obviously they belong to "Me" because "I" could have allowed them all to die, and instead of allowing them all to die, "I" rescued them. Therefore, in permanent, eternal recognition of my rescue, of my redemption, of first born; first born, eternally, says god, shall belong to me.

Before there was any substitution of Levites for first born, the Torah had determined that first born were to be redeemed for a payment of five shekel. This is independent of the sin of the golden calf, independent of the resultant substitution of the Levites. But then, the golden calf occurs, and God determines that it is necessary to replace the first born with the Levites. Therefore, in Numbers 3:40-51 – here in our parsha – God instructs Moses to have the first born pay five shekel each for their release from service and their replacement by the Levites.

This latter is a separate event of redemption. This is not the redemption from God, this is a separate redemption from the Kohanim in substitution for the Levites. But, this parsha tells us in chapter 3, verse 47, that this second redemption, as well, is to be a redemption for 5 shekel. In effect, there are two separate redemptions. Let's look at each of them separately.

This initial redemption declares a parental charge as to the raising of the child. The Talmud suggests that God is a third partner in the process of parenting, that it is not just parental values which need to shape the rearing of a child. God's values need to direct the life of the child in such a fashion as to enable that child to fulfill the demands of holiness in the relationship to God. That's the first redemption. The first redemption is the redemption from god. It is a charge to parents in the very beginning stages of the life of their child, in the first thirty days, to absorb deeply into their consciousness that this child exists in a separate covenantal relationship

with God and that their responsibilities in relation to this child are to enable the fostering of that covenantal relationship.

The second redemption is quite different. It is the redemption of substitution, which is not addressed fundamentally to parents but is done by parents on behalf of the child. It is not out of the sense of ecstasy over the birth of a child. It is rather out of a recognition of failure. After all, the first born failed God. They failed in the mission for which they had been selected. One might have thought that in the face of that failure they should just disappear as a separate group.

Says the Torah, no. The ultimate purposes which they were supposed to achieve have now been transferred to others because those goals need to be achieved. At the same time, their Kedusha does not disappear. They, too, still need to preserve that awareness of the special mission which had been theirs and to which they still have access as Jews, even if not as Levites. Their failure did not end the quest. Their failure returned them, simply, to another point in the scale of Jewishness from which the quest must continue.

We can now understand the essential nature of the ceremony of pidyon Ha'ben. The father first appears before the kohen and he announces to the kohen, My wife has given birth to a first born. And God has instructed us in a special mission as parents in relation to this child to take cognizance of the fact of the special relationship that God has with this child. We have struggled with this now for these thirty days to be conscience of God's role and to be conscience of our mission of kedusha as parents. And here we are now at the end of those thirty days ready to complete that which God has mandated us to do - to redeem him. The kohen responds to that in silence, because no response is called for. All that now needs to be done is the transaction executed, In accordance with Numbers Chapter 18 the payment of the five shekel is made.

But now there is a second task at hand; a second redemption needs to be done. The Kohen then reminds the parents that this bechor is part of a class of persons who failed and for whom substitution is necessary in the direct worship of Hashem in the sanctuary. Are you ready as well to undertake the responsibilities of that redemption? he asks. To which the father responds, Yes, I am ready to undertake on behalf of my son that second redemption as well. The father then says his blessing, and delivers the five shekel, which simultaneously constitutes a redemption from the special covenant of holiness to God, and redemption from the priest.

For all of us, the recognition of the dual nature of this redemption needs to convey two separate and powerful messages. Firstly, as parents, the awareness of the separateness of our children, the ability to affirm their distinctive paths even in the face of the reality that those paths may not be perfectly consonant with what we may have chosen for them. Secondly, as people striving for wholeness; even those selected for priesthood fail! But we can rebuild from that failure. This separate awareness exists in the redemption of first born - that redemption is still available even after failure.

Divestiture: An Evil Misapplication

By Rabbi Saul J. Berman

During a recent Palestine Solidarity Movement gathering in Washington D.C., the President of Georgetown University, with clarity and courage, informed the assemblage that Georgetown opposed divestment from Israel.

Now, I basically like divestiture campaigns.

Such campaigns alert citizens to the consequences of their investments. People usually think about investments solely as economic instruments. The Halakha teaches us that economic investment can also carry moral weight. Leviticus 19:18 forbids us from "... placing a stumbling block before the blind." Implementation of that law, Maimonides teaches, following the Talmud, bans the sale of weapons to criminals and evil-minded states. It bans the sale of defective, life threatening, toys and it bans the sale of cigarettes.

Is the gun merchant who sold the marksman's rifle to John (Williams) Muhammad thereby culpable for the deaths of thirteen people? No, says the Talmud, but he is legally and morally accountable for having enabled the performance of those acts of terror. The economic behavior of the merchant, or of the investor, is not cleansed of its moral filth by the intervening voluntary action of another person. The manufacture or sale of an inherently dangerous device bears with it the taint of moral responsibility for the injury which eventually results from its use.

This awareness is particularly essential for religious and educational institutions because they are properly viewed as models of integrity and of values for their constituents. Powerful life lessons are taught unwittingly by the administrative ethics, or lack thereof, of the institutions which young people respect. Synagogues, Colleges, Federations and youth movements, like parents, teach by what they do more than by what they preach.

With due recognition of the complexities of economic decision making, financial investments in companies which manufacture hand guns, which exploit child labor, which practice racial discrimination, ought to be avoided by institutions which claim to represent the moral voice of the society. Indeed, they ought to be avoided by anyone with a commitment to the creation of a more ethical world.

Nevertheless, as a faculty member at the Law School, I signed the petition against Columbia University divestiture from companies doing business with Israel.

Even good instruments can be used for evil purpose. The divestiture campaign against companies doing business with Israel is precisely such a manipulatively evil misuse of a potentially good instrument.

Why is this divestiture campaign so wrongheaded? Firstly, because it makes no claim of wrongdoing by the businesses themselves. The targeted companies do not exploit Palestinians, they do not destroy the homes of terrorists, they do not even build settlements; they do nothing remotely comparable to the moral wrongdoing of companies doing business in apartheid South Africa during that earlier campaign. Thus, divestiture from these companies is a corrupt form of vicarious liability, in which the businesses will be punished for the alleged "crimes" of Israel.

Secondly, there is no proportionality in the campaign. Why is there no demand to divest from companies doing business with Saudi Arabia, due to its denial of religious freedom, its denial of women's civil rights and its support of the terrorist madrasas all through the Arab world? Why is there no call to divest from companies who purchase Iraqi oil due to its slaughter of tens of thousands of its own citizens with poison gas? Why no call for divestiture from businesses with relations to Syria for its decades long occupation of Lebanon? Why no call for divestiture from companies doing business in Egypt, for its suppression of democracy and its promotion of virulent anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism? Why is there no call for economic withdrawal from the Palestinian Authority for its abuse of children in the encouragement of their being suicide bombers, and for their summary executions of suspected collaborators and their explicit targeting of civilians in violation of all civilized standards of the conduct of war? Why is there no call for divestiture from those doing business in Yemen, due to its being the world's largest slave trader?

For that matter, why is there no call for divestiture from companies doing business with Russia, due to its occupation and suppression of Chechnya; and from those doing business with China due to its decades long, murderous occupation of Tibet?

That this bizarre coalition between Islamic Fundamentalists and liberal American campus activists, groups with radically opposite utopian visions, could join together to attack the sole democratic country in the entire region, beggars the imagination. I'll leave an explanation of that perverse alliance for psychiatrists of deviance, sociologists of anti-Semitism and historians of American self-hatred. Living as we do in an era of Democracy and Terror, perhaps it was inevitable that some misguided claimants to the crown of democracy would turn their energies in support of the exponents of terror.

For me as for all Zionists, the situation is clear and unequivocal, we love Israel with all of her imperfections, and will battle against the attempt to demonize and damage her.

Rabbi Saul J. Berman is the director of Edah.