

Bemidbar - Trading the Levites for the Firstborn
Rabbi Eliot Malomet May 16, 2026 29 Iyyar 5786

Firstborns are special. They symbolize God's power to generate life; they confer upon their parents a new status and they are the harbingers of the future. But we need not look further than Genesis to see that the Bible is somewhat ambiguous about them. Here are the firstborns of Genesis:

Cain (Firstborn son of Adam and Eve):	When God ignores his offering and reacts to Abel's, Cain became humanity's first killer. Seth, the third-born of Adam and Eve, is the progenitor of humanity.
Ishmael (Firstborn son of Abraham and Hagar):	Displaced by Isaac (second-born to Abraham). Ishmael receives an indirect guaranty that he will father a nation, but he does not inherit God's covenant with Abraham.
Esau (First-born son of Isaac and Rebekah):	He is supplanted by his younger twin Jacob. Jacob purloins his birthright and his blessing.
Reuben (Firstborn son of Jacob and Leah):	A problematic figure. He sleeps with his father's concubine, Bilhah. He comes off as a fool in the Joseph story. He is supplanted by Judah.
Er (First-born son of Judah and Bat Shua):	"Evil in God's sight," God has him put to death. Judah's lineage proceeds through his two younger sons, Peretz and Shelah.
Manasseh (Firstborn son of Joseph):	Despite being the older son, Jacob elevated Ephraim over him, giving Ephraim the primary blessing.

However, it is not until the exodus that the firstborns of Israel attain their sacred status. Because they were spared from death during the 10th Plague they would forever have a requirement to be consecrated to God.¹

קָדַשׁ לִי כָל בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר כָּל רֵחֶם בְּבִנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאָדָם וּבְבֵהֵמָה לִי הוּא.
Consecrate to Me every first-born; man and beast, the first issue of every womb among the Israelites is Mine. (Exod. 13:2)

And this is echoed in our parasha:

כִּי לִי כָל בְּכוֹר בְּיוֹם הַפֶּתִי כָל בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִצְרֵיִם הַקְּדָשְׁתִּי לִי כָל בְּכוֹר בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאָדָם עַד בְּהֵמָה לִי יִהְיֶה אֲנִי ה'.
For every first-born is Mine: at the time that I smote every first-born in the land of Egypt, I consecrated every first-born in Israel, man and beast, to Myself, to be Mine, the LORD's. (Num. 3:13)

¹ The conflict between paganism and monotheism plays out in the example of the firstborn. In Egypt, a firstborn sees his existence an affirmation of nature and its gods. In Israel, a firstborn sees his existence as an affirmation of God's role in history.

² An analogy: Some banks require minimum balances for "free" checking accounts. If you opt-out of that requirement, you have to pay a fee. Why? The bank relies on the minimum balance to generate its income. If you don't have the minimum balance, the bank loses the income. The fee compensates the bank for the loss of income. Similarly, the sanctuary depends on the labor of the firstborn. In this trade, it is losing out on the value of 273 persons and their labor. To effectuate the substitution and

This meant that the firstborns were originally supposed to function as a kind of priesthood. They were the ones who were going to manage the apparatus of the ritual and the cult. That in turn meant that they would have to be plucked out of their families for the sake of the sanctuary. This put the goal of operating and maintaining a sanctuary on a collision course with building and nurturing the family.

While the sanctuary was supposed to bring God's presence into the people, the family brought the people's presence into the world. Therefore, for the sake of the integrity of the family and the future of the people, God chooses a tribe to substitute for the firstborn. That tribe is Levi.

Now we get to logistics. After taking a census of the rest of the tribes, God instructs Moses to take a census of the Levites. The result:

כָּל פְּקוּדֵי הַלְוִיִּם אֲשֶׁר פָּקַד מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן עַל פִּי ה' לְמִשְׁפַּחְתָּם כָּל זָכָר מִבֶּן חֹדֶשׁ וְעֹמֵלָה שְׁנַיִם וְעֶשְׂרִים אֶלֶף.
All the Levites who were recorded, whom at the LORD's command Moses and Aaron recorded by their clans, all the males from the age of one month up, came to 22,000. (Num. 3:39)

God then instructs Moses to take a census of the firstborn males of the entire people, those who would have been consecrated to serve God in the sanctuary. The result:

וַיְהִי כָל בְּכוֹר זָכָר בְּמִסְפַּר שְׁמֹת מִבֶּן חֹדֶשׁ וְעֹמֵלָה לְפָקְדֵיהֶם שְׁנַיִם וְעֶשְׂרִים אֶלֶף שְׁלֹשָׁה וּשְׁבַעִים וּמְאַתָּים.
All the first-born males as listed by name, recorded from the age of one month up, came to 22,273. (Num. 3:39)

Levites: 22,000. Firstborn: 22,273. This meant - astonishingly, bedazzlingly, coincidentally - that there just so happened to be enough Levites to sub in for the firstborn, with 273 to spare! What were they supposed to do? Easy: pay a redemption fee. Each one of the 273 extra firstborn would have to pay a symbolic 5-shekel/head to be "decommissioned."² But here's the obvious problem with that: how do you choose who pays? The rabbis imagined this scenario:

אָמַר מֹשֶׁה: כִּיצַד אֶעֱשֶׂה לָהֶן לְיִשְׂרָאֵל? אִם אוֹמַר לוֹ: תֵּן לִי פְדִיּוֹנָה וַיֵּא, יֹאמַר לִי: כָּבֵד פְּדֹאֲנִי בֶן לוֹי. (סנהדרין יז.)

symbolically compensate the sanctuary, these persons must pay their redemption fee of an assessed 5-shekels per person. Another analogy: In Monopoly, one of the ways to get-out-of-jail is to pay the Bank a \$50 fee, a redemption fee, as it were. The \$50 is the price for your unrestricted movement on the board. The Bank may not "need" the money, but the payment constitutes a symbolic act to the other players that re-admits you to the regular flow of the game. Likewise, here, while to some firstborn the obligation of serving in the sanctuary may feel like jail, the payment of the 5-shekels constitutes a symbolic act to release you from your obligation and re-admit you to the regular life of Israel.

Moses said: How shall I do this for the Jews? If I say to one of the firstborns: Give me money for your redemption and you may leave, as you are among the 273 extra firstborns, he will say to me: A Levite already redeemed me! (Sanhedrin. 17a)

Comment: Moses anticipates that everybody will make their own arrangements and find their own personal Levi to replace them. And that will mean that at least some of them would be tempted to lie when they make the claim that *A Levite has already redeemed me.*

A voluntary system that is flawed will ultimately result in fraud.

Therefore...

מה עשה? הביא עשרים ושנים אלפים פיתקין, וכתב עליהן "בן לוי", ועל שלשה ושבעים ומאתים פתב עליהן "חמשה שקלים". בללן ונתנו בקלפי. אמר להן: טלו פיתקיהם. מי שעלה בידו "בן לוי", אמר לו: כבר פדאת בן לוי. מי שעלה בידו "חמשת שקלים", אמר לו: הן פדיונה נצא.

What did he do? He brought 22,000 slips and he wrote on them: 'Levite,' and on 273 additional ones he wrote: 'Five shekels.' He mixed them up and placed them in a box. He said to them: Draw your slips. Everyone whose hand drew up a slip that said: 'Levite,' he said to him: A Levite already redeemed you. Everyone whose hand drew up a slip that said: 'Five shekels,' he said to him: Pay your redemption money and you may leave.

[Note: this is the position of R. Nehemia.]

In other words, Moses created a lottery. But lotteries are subject to charges that they are not fair. It would appear that the last people in line had a better chance of not having to pay the fee!³ And this is of course not the only problem with such a scenario. In our shul we have held lotteries as fundraisers. God knows how difficult it is to manage a lottery with a pool of participants a fraction of the size of the Levites, where we are talking about hundreds of tickets as opposed to thousands! 😊 It is hard enough to imagine Moses conducting a lottery with 22,273 tickets! I mean, it's not as if Moses could run to Staples and get spools of raffle tickets! 😊

In midrash Tanhuma, R. Yehuda proposes a different scenario from the one above offered by his erstwhile debating partner, R. Nehemia. R. Yehuda says:

מה עשה? הביא עשרים ושנים אלפים פתקין, וכתב עליהן "בן לוי", ועל שלשה ושבעים ומאתים פתקין "חמשה שקלים". בללן ונתנו בקלפי. אמר להן: טלו פתקיהם. מי שעלה בידו "בן לוי", אמר לו: כבר פדאת בן לוי. מי שעלה בידו "חמשת שקלים", אמר לו: הן פדיונה נצא.

What did Moses do? He took 273 lots and wrote 'Levite,' on each of them. Then he took 273 more lots

and wrote '5 sela'im' (shekels) on each of them. He mixed them up and put them in an urn. Then the father of a first-born would put his hand into the urn. If he picked a lot on which was written 'Levite,' he was redeemed (by a Levite) and exempted from the 5 sela'im (shekels); but if he picked a lot on which was written 'five sela'im,' he handed over five sela'im (shekels).

According to R. Yehuda, once Moses was able to get 273 firstborn to pay their 5 shekels, all he would have to do was pair off the remaining 22,000 firstborn with the corresponding 22,000 Levites. At this point, a reader might reasonably ask, what does it matter? What's the difference? Actually, there is a significant difference.

In R. Yehuda's scenario only 546 out of the 22,273 firstborn enter the lottery, and each of them has a 50% chance of pulling a pay-5-shekel ticket. In R. Nehemia's scenario, all 22,273 firstborn enter the lottery and each of them has a 1.2% chance of pulling a pay-5-shekel ticket.⁴

So what is the debate about?

Practicality vs. Fairness. R. Yehuda is proposing a system that is practical in a large cohort, more efficient, less time consuming, and therefore less subject to objection, doubt and frustration. He understands that in the end, it is all going to boil down to the 273 who pull the pay-5-shekel ticket so why subject the entire cohort of 22,273 to a huge ordeal? R. Nehemia is proposing a more egalitarian system, where everyone has the same chance and that chance is smaller.



In the end, the Torah does not tell us how the trade was made, but leaves us with an interesting question:

When you need to manage a complex system, does the practical outweigh the perfectly fair, or does the perfectly fair outweigh the practical? What are you supposed to do? Pour the wine. Discuss over kiddush!

Shabbat Shalom!

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Rabbi Esther Reed on the 20th Yahrzeit of her father, Allen Reed, z'l, and the 14th anniversary of Rabbi Mordy Schwartz's recovery.

³ When I posed this scenario to my Artificial Intelligence "Hevruta" (ChatGPT) it responded as follows: **The key is to distinguish between what the odds are before the drawing starts and what the situation feels like while the drawing is unfolding. Being first is not better. Being last is**

not worse. Every position is equally likely to be one of the 273 marked tickets. Mathematically, your position in line makes no difference.

⁴ 273/22,273=1.226%.