

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter XXXIV: Bamidbar (Num. 1:1–4:20)

Essay 5. G-d's love of the firstborn

מִדְרָשׁ על פסוק "קח את־הלויים", למה צנה הקב"ה לפדות בכורי ישראל בלויים? שמתחלת בריתו של עולם היו הבכורות מקריבים. אדם הראשון הקריב שהיה בכורו של עולם ולבש בגדי כהונה, כיון שמת אדם מסרן לשת, ושת למתושלח, ומתושלח לנח, ונח לשם. וכי שם היה הבכור, והלא יפת היה הבכור, אלא לפי שששלשלת אבות יוצאת ממנו וכי עכ"ל.

There is a **Midrash on the verse**, “**Take the Levites** in place of all the firstborn among the Israelite people . . . the Levites shall be Mine, the L-rd’s.”¹

Why did the Holy One, Blessed be He, command to redeem the firstborn of Israel with the Levites? Starting with the Creation of the world, the firstborn brought sacrifices The first Adam brought sacrifices, for he was the firstborn of the world, and he dressed in the garments of the High Priest. . . . When Adam died, he bequeathed them to Seth, and Seth [bequeathed them] to Methuselah, and Methuselah [bequeathed them] to Noah. . . . , and Noah [bequeathed them] to Shem. Was Shem the firstborn? Wasn't Yefet the firstborn . . . ? Why, then, did he bequeath them to Shem? It is because [Noah foresaw that] the three patriarchs would come from him.

- Num. Rabbah 4:8

קשה דמפאן משמע שקדושת הבכורות היתה מתחלת בריאת העולם, והפתוב אומר "פי לי כל־בכור בבני ישראל באדם ובבהמה ביום הפתי כל־בכור בארץ מצרים הקדשתמי אתם לי", שגראה שקדושת הבכורות של ישראל לא התחילה אלא ביציאת מצרים שהכה בכוריהם.

A difficulty is that from here it sounds as though the holiness of the firstborn was [established] from the beginning of the Creation of the world. But Scripture says: “For every firstborn among the Israelites, human as well as beast, is Mine; at the time that I smote every firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated them to Myself.”² From this verse, it appears that

* English translation: Copyright © 2024 by Charles S. Stein. Additional essays are at <https://zstora.com>

¹ Num. 3:45.

² Num. 8:17.

the holiness of the firstborn of Israel only began with the Exodus from Egypt, when [G-d] smote [the Egyptian] firstborn.

ונקדמים מדרש על פסוק "החודש הזה לכם" וזה לשונו, דבר אחר "בני בכרי ישראל", אמר הקב"ה לפרעה אי אתה יודע כמה חבבתי הבכורות שכתבתי בתורתך "לא תעבד בכור שורך" וכל העובד בהם דין הוא שילקה. וקשה שפרעה היה יכול לתרץ ולומר אדרבא יש לי ראיה להפך, דבמדרש רבה פרשת תולדות אמרינו, למה יצא עשו תחלה? כדי שיצא הוא ויצא סריתו עמו. אמר ר' אבהו כהדין פר[ו]ט[ו]טה שהיא משטף את המרחץ ואחר כך מרחיץ את בנו של מלך כד. למה יצא עשו תחלה וכו'. ואם כן אדרבא הבכור טפי גרע.

We advance a Midrash on the verse, "This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you,"³ and this is its language:

Another interpretation: "Israel is My firstborn son,"⁴ said the Holy One, Blessed be He, to Pharaoh. If only you knew how much I cherished the firstborn, that I wrote in My Torah, "you must not work your firstborn ox,"⁵ and for anyone who works them, the law is that he will be beaten.

- Ex. Rabbah 15:27

There is a difficulty, for Pharaoh would have been able to make an excuse and say, "To the contrary, I have proof of the opposite, that the firstborn is viewed as inferior, for in Midrash Rabbah, parashat Toldot, it is said:

Why did Esau emerge first [from Rebecca's womb]? So that he would emerge and his filth would depart with him.⁶ Rabbi Abahu said: It is like a bathhouse attendant who washes the bathhouse and then bathes the king's son. So, why did Esau emerge first? [To "clear the way" for his more prominent younger brother].

- Gen. Rabbah 63:8

"If so, the firstborn is inferior [to those born afterward]."

ויש לומר דאין הכי נמי שהבכור יש לו מתחלת הבריאה יותר חשיבות אלא שפשקלקלה חנה והטיל בה הנחש וזהמא נתקלקלו הדורות הבאים ונפגמו ובפרט הבנים בכורים ששואבים זיהמת אימותם, אמנם אחר כך בשעבוד מצרים נטהרו אף על פי שלא נפסקה הזיהמת לגמרי עד מעמד הר סיני כנודע.

It can be said that it's indeed so that from the beginning of Creation, the firstborn had more prominence. But when Eve was corrupted and the serpent had sexual relations with her and infused her with moral contamination,⁷ the coming generations became corrupted

³ Ex. 12:2.

⁴ Ex. 4:22.

⁵ Deut. 15:19.

⁶ When twins are born, most of the blood appears with the first child.

⁷ Shabbat 146a; Yevamot 103b.

and damaged. This was true especially of the sons who were firstborn, who absorbed the contamination of their mothers. However, afterward, during the slavery of Egypt, they were purified, even though the contamination did not stop completely until they stood at Mount Sinai, as is known.

ויִכְמוּ שֶׁפָּתְבוּ רוֹב מִפְּרָשֵׁי הַתּוֹרָה וּבִכְלָלָם הִזְרַע בְּרַחֵם (פְּרִשְׁת שְׁמוֹת) דְּסִבַּת שֶׁעֲבוּד מִצְרַיִם הָיָה לְזִכָּר אוֹתָם בְּכוֹר הַבְּרִיָּה לְכָל יְמֵי חַיָּו עַל־כֵּן הָיָה לְקַבֵּל הַתּוֹרָה, שֶׁעַל יְדֵי חֲטָא אָדָם הִרְאִישׁוֹן נִכְנָסָה זִוְהָמָה בְּכָל הַדּוֹרוֹת וְהוֹצֵרְכּוּ לִירֵד מִצְרַיִם לְזִכָּר הַחוֹמֶר בְּכוֹר הַבְּרִיָּה וּבְמַעֲמַד הַר סִינַי פְּסָקָה מִכָּל וְכָל עַכ"ל. וְאִין הָיָה נִמְי שֶׁשְׁשׁוֹנֵי יַעֲקֹב עֲדִיין לֹא פְּסָקָה הַזִּוְהָמָה וּמִשׁוֹם הָיָה יָצָא עֲשׂוֹ תַחֲלָה כְּדִלְקָמֶן בְּסוֹמֶךְ. וּבַדּוֹרוֹת הִרְאִישׁוֹנִים הָיוּ מִקְרִיבִים הַצְּדִיקִים שֶׁבְּכָל דּוֹר וְדוֹר לְפִי שֶׁעַל יְדֵי מַעֲשֵׂיהֶם הַטּוֹבִים הָיוּ מִיִּטְהָרִים מִזִּוְהָמָתָם, כְּגוֹן שֶׁת שֶׁלֹּא הָיָה בְּכוֹר כָּלֵל וְכֵן שֵׁם בֶּן נֹחַ אֶלֶּא שֶׁהָיוּ הַיּוֹמֵר חֲשׁוּבִים.

As most of the commentators of the Torah wrote, including the *Zera Berach*, that the reason for the slavery in Egypt was to refine them in an iron blast furnace⁸ so that they would be able to receive the Torah. That is, through the sin of the first Adam, moral contamination entered all generations, and they were required to go down to Egypt to refine the material in the iron blast furnace. Upon standing at Mount Sinai, the contamination all ceased.⁹ It is indeed so that when Jacob was born, the moral contamination had not yet ceased, and because of this, Esau emerged first, as explained above in the adjoining paragraphs.

In the first generations, there were righteous who brought sacrifices, for in each and every generation—because of their good deeds—they were purifying themselves from their moral contamination. These were men such as Seth, who was not the firstborn at all, and also like Shem, the son of Noah, who even though not the firstborn, were the most prominent.

וּמַעֲתָה הַקַּב"ה שֶׁלַח לְוֹמֵר לְפָרְעֹה "בְּנֵי בְּכָרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" כְּלוֹמֵר שֶׁעֲתָה יִשְׂרָאֵל נִטְהָר מִזִּוְהָמָתָם וְרִאשׁוֹנִים לְהַקְרִיא בְּנִים. וְעוֹד מֵאַחַר שֶׁנִּטְהָרוּ הֵם בְּכוֹרִים שֶׁנִּשְׁאָר בָּהֶם הַחֲשִׁיבוֹת הִרְאִי לְבָכוֹר, כְּדִכְתִּיב "אֶף־אֲנִי בְּכוֹר אֶתְנַהוּ" שֶׁהוּא לְשׁוֹן חֲשִׁיבוֹת, שֶׁהָיָה הַטַּעַם שֶׁהַבְּכוֹרוֹת מִקְרִיבִים עַל כְּרִתֵּךְ צָרִיךְ לְוֹמֵר לְפִי שֶׁהָיוּ יוֹמֵר חֲשׁוּבִים, שֶׁהָיָה כְּשֶׁהִקְטוֹן שְׁבָאֲחִים הָיָה יוֹמֵר חֲשׁוּב הָיָה הוּא הַמִּקְרִיב כְּמוֹ שֶׁמִּצִּיגוּ בְּשֵׁם בֶּן נֹחַ.

Now, the Holy One, Blessed be He, sent to Pharaoh, saying, “My firstborn son, Israel,” as if to say that, “Now Israel is purified from their moral contamination, and is suitable to be called ‘sons.’” Furthermore, after they were purified, they are firstborn, for remaining within them is the prominence suitable for a firstborn, as it is written, “I will appoint him firstborn.”¹⁰ This has the language of prominence, for the meaning is that the firstborn bring sacrifices. Therefore, you must necessarily say it is because [the firstborn] were usually the most prominent of the siblings. Of course, when the younger of the brothers was more prominent, he was the one who brought sacrifices, such as we find with Shem, the son of Noah.

⁸ Cf. Deut. 4:20.

⁹ Berachy Shapira, *Zera Berach* (Amsterdam 1730), parashat Shemot.

¹⁰ Ps. 89:28.

ואיתא בזוהר על פסוק "וַיְהִי בַחֲצֵי הַלַּיְלָה" שֶׁהַמִּצְרִיִּים קָשְׂרוּ בְּכוֹרֵיהֶם בְּקַלִּיפָה וּקְשָׁרוּם לְעֵילָא בְּכָל אֵינוֹן מְדַרְיָגָן כְּדֵי שְׂלֵא יִצְאוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיְהִיו אֲסוּרִים שָׁם לְעוֹלָם, וְהַקַּב"ה אֶפֶל דְּרָגָן עֵילָאִין וְתַתָּאִין וְתַמְבָּר כָּל אֵינוֹן קַלִּיפִין וְכוּ' עכ"ל. וְלָכֵן הַקַּב"ה רָצָה לְהוֹדִיעַ כִּם גְּבוּרָתוֹ וְ"וַיִּכָּר עֲשֵׂה לְנַפְלְאוֹתָיו" כִּי "אֵין עוֹד מְלַבְדוּ" אֶפֶילוּ כְּשָׁפִים, הוֹאִיל שֶׁהַמִּצְרִיִּים נִשְׁתַּעְבְּדוּ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל שֶׁנִּקְרְאוּ בְּכוֹרִים בְּחֻשְׁבָּם שֶׁאֲדַרְבָּא הַבְּכוֹר גְּרוּעַ טְפִי לְפִי שֶׁשׁוֹאֵב זוֹהֶמַת אִמּוֹ.

It's brought in the Zohar on the verse, "It came to pass at midnight the L-rd struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt,"¹¹ that the Egyptians tied their firstborn to a *klipah*, a force of impurity, and tied them above, on every level, in order that Israel would not exit and would be prisoners there forever. The Holy One, Blessed be He, brought down the higher and lower levels, destroying the *klipot*.¹²

Therefore, the Holy One, Blessed be He, wanted to inform of the strength of His might, and "He has won renown for His wonders,"¹³ for "there is no other besides Him," not even by sorcery. G-d acted thus, because the Egyptians had enslaved Israel who were called firstborn. In their opinion, to the contrary, the firstborn was inferior, because he absorbed the moral contamination of his mother.

וְכֵן יַעֲקֹב שֶׁהָיָה אֲבִיהֶם שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל אָף עַל פִּי שְׂלֵא הָיָה רֵאשׁוֹן לְלֵידָה מִכָּל מְקוֹם הָיָה רֵאשׁוֹן לְיִצְיָרָה כְּמוֹ שֶׁפָּרַשׁ רַש"י עַל פְּסוּק "וַיִּצְרַח יַעֲקֹב אֶחָיו", וּמִתְמַת סְבָרָא זֶה עָשׂוּ כְּשׁוֹפִים בְּבְכוֹרֵיהֶם כְּדֵי שְׂלֵא יִטְהָרוּ הַבְּכוֹרִים שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעוֹלָם הוֹאִיל שֶׁהֵם שׁוֹאֲבִים בְּיוֹמָהּ זוֹהֶמַת אִמָּם, וְעוֹד כְּדֵי לְקַשֵּׁר וּלְעַכֵּב שָׁם אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂלֵא יִצְאוּ מֵעוֹלָם.

So too Jacob, who was the father of Israel: Even though he was not the first to be born, nevertheless was the first to be created, as Rashi explained on the verse, "Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau; so they named him Jacob."¹⁴ Rashi wrote, "It was with justice that he was grabbing him to hold him back. Jacob was conceived from the first drop [of semen] and Esau from the second."¹⁵ Following Rashi's interpretation that Jacob was conceived first, they reasoned that he had absorbed the moral contamination of his mother. **Because of this opinion, they used sorcery on their firstborn, tying them to a *klipah*, as explained above, so that the firstborn of Israel would never be purified, as they had absorbed the most moral contamination of their mothers. They also did so in order to bind and hold Israel there, so that they would never go out from Egypt.**

¹¹ Ex. 12:29.

¹² Zohar, II:37b–38a.

¹³ Ps. 111:4.

¹⁴ Gen. 25:26.

¹⁵ Rashi on Gen. 25:26.

משום הכי לאחר שהקב"ה קלמל וסתר כל הפשוטים והרג בכוריהם הפליא והגדיל לקדש את בכורי ישראל, להקהות את שיני המצריים, שלא די שנטהרו כל ישראל שנקראו בכורים אלא אף אותם שהיו בכורים ניתוסף בהם קדושה גדולה יותר משאר ישראל, ולכן צוה להם מיד פרשת "קדש-לי כל-בכור" וכו' ונתקנים בהם הפסוק "מאשר יקרף בעיני נכבדת ואני אהבתיך ואמן אדם תחתיך" שגפדו ישראל ובכוריהם במיתת בכורי מצרים.

Because of this, after the Holy One, Blessed be He, spoiled and destroyed all their sorcery and killed their firstborns, He did something amazingly great, sanctifying the firstborn of Israel to dull the teeth of the Egyptians. For it was not enough that all Israel was purified, that they were called firstborn. Rather, even those who were firstborn had a great holiness added to them more than the other Israelites, and therefore He commanded them immediately the section of "consecrate to Me every firstborn."¹⁶ This fulfilled within them the verse, "Because you are precious to Me, and honored, and I love you, I give people in exchange for you, and nations in your stead,"¹⁷ as Israel and their firstborn were redeemed by the death of the firstborn of Egypt.

וכן איתא במדרש על פסוק "החדש הזה לכם", הוציאם משעבוד לגאולה שגאמר "גאלם תזק ה' צבאות שמו" לכה קבע להם שמחה נפרע מאויביהם עליהם שגאמר "ואמן אדם תחתיך" עכ"ל. וזה שאמר הכתוב "כי לי כל-בכור" וכו' "ביום הפתי כל-בכור בארץ מצרים", אז נקא "הקדשתי אתם לי" שהוספת בהם קדושה, שמתחלה היתה העבודה בבכורות לשם גדולה בלבד ולא לשם קדושה.

Similarly, it is also brought in the Midrash on the verse, "This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months":

He took them from bondage to deliverance, as it is said, "Their mighty Redeemer, Whose name is L-rd of Hosts, will champion their cause."¹⁸ Thus, He assigned [the month of Nissan] for them to rejoice, in that He avenged their enemies on their behalf, as it is said, "I give people in exchange for you."

- Ex. Rabbah 15:11

This is why Scripture said, "For every firstborn among the Israelites, human as well as beast, is Mine; at the time that I smote every firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated them to Myself." Then especially, "I consecrated them to Myself," that I added holiness to them, that in the beginning the sacrificial service was with the firstborn because of the greatness alone and not necessarily for the sake of their holiness.

¹⁶ Ex. 13:2.

¹⁷ Isaiah 43:4.

¹⁸ Jer. 50:34.

ולפי דרכנו נתרץ קושיות העולם שמכאן נראה שלפי שישראל טעו בעגל משום הכי נבחרו הלויים לעבודת ה' פחת בכורי ישראל דשמע מנה שאם לא היו חוטאים הבכורות היתה העבודה בהם ולא בשבט לוי, ונהרי קנימא לן שיעקב הפריש לוי למעשר מכל בניו, ושבט לוי לעולם הנה בחלקו של מקום "אני חלקך ונתתך" וכו'. ואף המצריים לא נשתעבדו בשבט לוי מפני שהיו יודעים שהם חלק ה' שאפשר שהיו מקובלים כדכאיתא במדרשים.

According to our way of understanding, we will solve the question of the world that from here, it appears that since Israel erred with the Golden Calf, because of this, the Levites were chosen for the sacrificial service of G-d instead of the firstborn of Israel. For we hear from this that if they hadn't erred with the Golden Calf, the firstborn would have had the sacrificial service and not the tribe of Levi. Here, we hold that Jacob set aside Levi as a tithe of all of his sons, and the tribe of Levi would always be the Omnipresent's portion. This is as the L-rd said to Aaron: "You shall, however, have no territorial share among them or own any portion in their midst; I am your portion and your share among the Israelites."¹⁹ Even the Egyptians didn't enslave the tribe of Levi, because they knew they were a part of G-d, and it's possible that they accepted this view, as is brought by the commentators.

ועוד שפרש רש"י על פסוק "על-כן קרא-שמו לוי" ששלח הקב"ה גבריאל והביאו לפניו וקרא לו שם זה ועל שם שלוהו במתנות קראו לו עכ"ל. ויש לומר שאין הכי נמי שאם לא היו חוטאים הבכורות היו קדושים לעבודה אבל לא היו זוכים בכ"ד מתנות פהוזה, שאלו אינם ראויים אלא לשבט לוי ונקא. ואין הכי נמי שעקר העבודה והקרבנות היתה בפניהם אלא שאף הבכורות היו ראויים לעבוד עבודה במקום שאין פהו זה או להקריב קרבנות שלהם, ולאחר שחטאו נקטלו לגמרי.

Also, Rashi interpreted the verse, "Therefore, he was called by the name Levi,"²⁰ that "the Holy One, Blessed be He, sent Gabriel, who brought [Levi] before Him, and called him by this name and gave him the 24 presents of the priesthood, and because he was accompanied [לְהוֹנִי] [*livahu*], He called him Levi."²¹ It can be said that it is indeed so that if [the Israelites] had not sinned, the firstborn would have been holy for the sacrificial service, but they wouldn't have merited the 24 gifts of the priesthood, for these are only suited specifically for the tribe of Levi. It is indeed so that the principal of the service and the sacrifices were with the priests, but the firstborn would have been permitted to perform the sacrificial service in a place where there were no priests, or to offer their sacrifices, but after they sinned, they were completely disqualified.

אי נמי אם לא חטאו בעגל היו מקריבים הבכורים עד שיבאו אל הארץ, שהרי מצות פדיית הבכורים לא נהגה בנולדים במדבר שהרי "וכל בכור אדם בבגיד תפדה" פתיב בפרשת "והיה כייבאך" וכו', אמנם לאחר שחטאו "החליפם בלויים וצנה בפדיון העדפים", ועיין בפרוש הרמב"ן פרשת בא.

Alternatively, if they hadn't sinned with the Golden Calf, the firstborn would have brought the sacrifices until they would come to the Land of Israel. That is because the mitzvah

¹⁹ Num. 18:20.

²⁰ Gen. 29:34.

²¹ Rashi on Gen. 29:34.

of redeeming the firstborn, which transferred the firstborn's holiness to the redemption funds, was not practiced by those born in the wilderness, "And you must redeem every firstborn among your children,"²² is written in the section, "and when the L-rd has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, as He swore to you and to your fathers, and has given it to you."²³ Indeed, after they sinned, "He exchanged [22,000 of the 22,273 firstborn]²⁴ for the [22,000] Levites²⁵ and He commanded the redemption [of the 373 firstborn] that were over and above [the number of the Levites],"²⁶ and see the explanation of the Ramban in parashat Bo.²⁷

ולפי דרך זו נבין מדרש תמוה על פסוק "החודש הזה לכם", דבר אחר, בנים של מי שנטל את הבכורה ונהו בני בכורי ישראל. והוא תמוה מה בא להשמיענו. אמנם בפרק כ"ב דשבת אמרינו ישראל שעמדו בהר סיני פסקה זוהמתם. ופליגא דר' חייא בר אבא דאמר עד שלושה דורות לא פסקה זוהמתו אברהם הוליד וכו' יעקב הוליד י"ב שבטים שלא היתה בהם שום דפי. נמצא שבימי יעקב פסקה זוהמא, ולפי שפרעה הביא ראיה שלא יש קדושה בבכורים מפני שעשו נולד ראשון כמו שכתבתי למעלה, לכן אמר להם בנים של מי שנטל הבכורה, שפסקה בנימיו הזוהמא ולא נולד ראשון כדי שישקו עשו תשלום הזוהמא, ואם פן ישראל קדושים הם שהם בכורים ואתה שלחת ידך בהם וראוי אתה ללקות.

According to this way of viewing the matter, we will understand a strange Midrash on the verse, "This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months": "Alternatively: 'Israel is My firstborn son' [means] sons of the one who took the birthright. This is my firstborn son, Israel."²⁸ This is strange; what is it coming to inform us?

Indeed, in the 22nd chapter of tractate Shabbat, it is said that for the Israelites who stood at Mount Sinai, their moral contamination ceased. Rabbi Chiya bar Abba [sic] disagreed, for he held that the contamination had ceased much earlier. He said, "until three generations [passed, the moral] contamination did not cease from our forefathers: Abraham fathered Ishmael; Isaac fathered Esau; Jacob fathered twelve tribes in whom there was no flaw."²⁹ Therefore, it's found that the contamination ceased in the days of Jacob.

Pharaoh could have brought a proof that there was no holiness in the firstborn from Gen. Rabbah 63:8, as Esau was born first, as I wrote above. Therefore, [G-d] said about them, "They are sons of [Jacob], the one who took the birthright," as the contamination ceased in his days. He was not born first, so that Esau would take the complete contamination. Afterward, the Israelites were holy, for by that point they were the firstborn, as Jacob had acquired the birthright. G-d thus said to Pharaoh: "You sent your hand against them; and it's appropriate for you to be beaten."

²² Ex. 13:13.

²³ Ex. 13:11.

²⁴ Num. 3:43.

²⁵ Num. 3:39.

²⁶ Ramban on Ex. 13:11.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ex. Rabbah 15:27

²⁹ Shabbat 146a. Our edition, and all those on <https://bavli.genizah.org>, quote Rabbi Abba bar Kahana instead of Rabbi Chiya bar Abba.

אֵלָא שְׁיֵישׁ לְדַקְדָּק עַל הַמִּדְרָשׁ הַזֶּה"ל. אֲמַאי נִקְט רְאָיָה שֶׁל בְּכוֹרוֹת בְּהֵמָה, הִיָּה לֹו לֹוֹמֵר שֶׁחֲבַב הַבְּכוֹרוֹת מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהַעֲבוּדָה בְּבָכוֹרוֹת, שֶׁכֵּן יַעֲקֹב נָתַן נַפְשׁוֹ עַל הַבְּכוֹרָה מִפְּנֵי הַעֲבוּדָה. אֵלָא לְפִי שֶׁפְּרָעָה הִיָּה רוֹאָה שֶׁעֲתִידִין יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲשׂוֹת עֲגָל בַּמִּדְבָּר כְּמוֹ שֶׁאָמַר לָהֶם "רְאוּ פִי רַעְיָה נִגְדַּ פְּנֵיכֶם", וּמִמְעֵשָׂה הַעֲגָל וְאֵילָךְ מֵאִס בְּבָכוֹרוֹת לְפִי שֶׁלֹא הָיוּ רְאוּיִים לַעֲבוּדָה הוֹאִיל שֶׁעֲבָדוּ עֲבוּדָה זָרָה, מִשׁוּם הִכִּי אִם הִיָּה אוֹמֵר לֹו שֶׁחֲבַב אֶת הַבְּכוֹרוֹת מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהַעֲבוּדָה בָּהֶם לֹא הִיָּה מִקְפִיד כְּלוּם לְשִׁלוֹחַ יָד בָּהֶם, לָכֵן אָמַר לֹו מִפְּנֵי שֶׁכְּתוּב בַּתּוֹרָה "לֹא תַעֲבֹד בְּבָכֹר שׁוֹרְךָ" דְאֶפִּילוֹ עַל בְּכוֹר בְּהֵמָה חֲבַב עָלָיו, דְשָׁמַע מִיָּנָה שֶׁחֲבַב הַבְּכוֹרוֹת אֵינֹו תְלוּי בַּעֲבוּדָה אֵלָא סוּד פְּרִטִי יֵשׁ בּוֹ וּמִכָּל שֶׁכֵּן עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל.

But it is necessary to check the above-mentioned Midrash. Why did it take the proof of the firstborn of cattle as showing that G-d loved the firstborn? It should have said that He loved the firstborn because of the sacrificial service of the firstborn. For Jacob risked his life for the birthright, because of the sacrificial service that the firstborn can offer. Why didn't the Midrash cite Jacob's actions, instead of citing the firstborn of cattle?

Rather, the reason is because Pharaoh saw that in the future, Israel would make the Golden Calf in the wilderness, as it was said to them, "Clearly, you are bent on mischief."³⁰ From the incident of the Golden Calf and onward, [G-d] rejected the firstborn, because they were not suited for the sacrificial service, as they had worshipped idolatry. Because of this, if He had said to [Pharaoh] that He loved the firstborn because of the sacrificial service, [Pharaoh] would not have been afraid to lay his hands upon them, knowing they were destined to lose the right to conduct the service.

Therefore, He said to him, because it is written in the Torah, "you must not work your firstborn ox," that even the firstborn of cattle are loved by [G-d], and we hear from this that the love of the firstborn does not depend upon sacrificial service, rather there is some unique esoteric secret there, and even more so with Israel.

* * *

³⁰ Ex. 10:10.