

Parsha Ponders

Pesach | March 25, 2021 | 11 Nissan 5781

*Fast of the firstborn*¹

הבכורות מתענין בערב פסח בין בכור מאב בין בכור מאם ויש מי שאומר שאפילו נקבה בכורה מתענה: (ואין המנהג כן)

The firstborns fast on the day before Pesach, whether they are the firstborn of their father or firstborn of their mother. Some say even firstborn women fast (*Gloss*: but this isn't the custom)²

There's an ancient custom³ for the firstborn to fast on *Erev Pesach*, the day before Pesach. The common explanation⁴ for this fast day is that it's in commemoration of The Plague of the First Born. The last of the Ten Plagues, all the firstborn Egyptians died at midnight. All the firstborn of the Jews were miraculously saved, so every year right before Pesach the firstborn fast. This sounds like it's due to the gratitude of the firstborns that they fast.

However, this explanation at first glance is very hard to fathom. If there's a desire to express gratitude for a miraculous salvation, why are the firstborn fasting? Every other similar situation in the calendar involves feasting and rejoicing, not fasting⁵. This is the only fast that expresses gratitude. Furthermore, why should the firstborn of today be grateful? They have nothing to do with the original firstborn Jews who were saved. Only their direct descendants should have to fast, and who says someone who is today a firstborn is one of their descendants?

Perhaps another explanation can be suggested⁶. There's an interesting *mitzvah* that occurs the day before Pesach, on the fourth year of the seven-year *Shemittah* cycle⁷. It's called *Vidui Ma'aser*, literally the confession of the tithes. The *mitzvah* involves removing all tithes from one's possession, by giving certain ones to the Kohen or the Levi, and by consuming some in the proper manner. Afterwards the person announces that they fulfilled all the laws properly. *Chazal* describe⁸ this as a confession. Why is so? It would seemingly be better labeled a declaration of fulfillment.

One suggestion⁹ is that this *mitzvah* is an implied rebuke. The task to ensure the Kohanim and Leviim have all of their tithes is something that didn't have to be. Originally, the firstborn had the status of Kohanim. They were Hashem's spiritual agents in this world. They would have been able to keep all of their tithes for themselves. Because, as we shall see, the Jews sinned. As a result, the firstborn lost their lofty status. Now only those who descend from Levi or Aharon can receive tithes. By declaring that we successfully cleared our houses of tithes, we are in effect confessing that our firstborn lost this status. This is why it is called *Vidui Ma'aser*.

¹ Based on *Be'er Yosef Inyanei Pesach*

² *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim* 470:1

³ The *Tur* ad. loc. brings it from *Soferim* 21:3, brought by *Tosafos* to *Pesachim* 108a s.v. רב ששת. *Sefer HaManhig Hilchos Pesach* § 48 brings from *Yerushalmi Pesachim* 10:1 that some say Rabbi Yehudah HaNassi didn't eat on *erev Pesach* because he was a firstborn

⁴ *Tur* and *Sefer HaManhig loc. cit.*; *Magen Avos Inyan* 23 by the *Meiri*

⁵ It's further problematic because the custom is to refrain from fasting in Nissan (*Soferim loc. cit.*)

⁶ The *Be'er Yosef* only suggested this והפוסקים לולי דברי הסור, only if the other authorities hadn't given their approach

⁷ *Rashi* to *Deuteronomy* 26:12, quoting *Sifrei Devarim* § 302

⁸ Such as in *Megillah* 2:5 and *Sotah* 32b

⁹ *Tosafos Yom Tov* to *Ma'aser Sheni* 5:10, quoting *Seforno* to v. 13

What's significant about specifically this *mitzvah* that it recalls the sins which caused the firstborn to lose their status? The date it occurs on¹⁰. *Erev Pesach* is the busiest time of year in the Holy Temple. Millions of Jews converge to Jerusalem to partake of the Pesach offering. They bring their lamb to the Temple where the Kohanim perform the Temple service. They're running all over the place, bringing this instrument there and that receptacle here¹¹. There's a lot of work to do, and not a lot of time. *Erev Pesach* is where it is most pronounced that the Kohanim are Hashem's holy agents, and not the firstborn. They work in full force, in view of the entire nation. It's no wonder then that this is the proper time to reflect on why the Kohanim work in the Temple and not the firstborn.

When Hashem spared the firstborn from the final plague in Egypt, He sanctified them for His service¹². What caused them to lose this status? The sin of the Golden Calf¹³. The Jews worshipped a false god, and as a result everyone's firstborn son became like every other Jew. Only the tribe of Levi refrained from this idol worship, and were then granted this special status. In fact, the firstborn were the most zealous of worshippers of the Golden Calf¹⁴. It makes sense then that it was specifically them who had an everlasting punishment.

It's very reasonable then to suggest that the firstborn would fast every *Erev Pesach*. Not due to gratitude, but in mourning. They realized what they had lost. Every firstborn from then until now could have had a special status. Had there been a Temple, they would have performed the Temple Service. They would have received tithes from the nation. *Erev Pesach* is when their loss is most pronounced. They could have had much more, had they not sinned with the Golden Calf. Even though today we don't have the Temple Service on *Erev Pesach*, the custom to fast never stopped. Perhaps this is why the firstborn fast even until day¹⁵.

Good Shabbos and Chag Sameach!

¹⁰ This is the Be'er Yosef's addition to what the Seforno explained

¹¹ See Pesachim 5:5

¹² Numbers 3:13

¹³ Rashi ad. loc. v. 12, and Zevachim 112b. For more on the sin of the Golden Calf, see Exodus Chapter 32

¹⁴ Yerushalmi Megillah 1:11 and Bamidbar Rabbah 4:8, as pointed out by the Be'er Yosef's son

¹⁵ See the rest of the Be'er Yosef, where he goes on to try to explain the more commonly known reason for the fast. He suggests that the firstborn in Egypt fasted as a form of prayer that they be spared from the plague of the firstborn. Therefore, we fast in commemoration of that, quite similar to *Ta'anis Esther*. See also the additional comments of the Be'er Yosef's son. He notes that this latter approach also appears in the (then newly printed) Chiddushei Chasam Sofer to Pesachim 108a s.v. כל מעלי יומא דפסחא. He also cites many sources to support the Be'er Yosef's first approach. He brings the various opinions about which kind of firstborn has the custom to fast (male or female, from father or mother, etc.), and how that connects to which firstborn served in the Temple. See there