

Bekhorot 17 Detailed Summary

Coverage: Bekhorot 17a - 17b

Bekhorot 17 begins by completing the 'צאן ברזל' debate and then develops one of the tractate's most conceptually rich themes: when an animal is biologically descended from one species but physically resembles another, which identity controls? A baraita about a sheep descended from a goat, or a goat descended from a sheep, leads the Gemara through several possible explanations of Rabbi Meir's and the Sages' disagreement. The issue may involve firstborn sanctity, the wool-gift of ראשית הגז, paternal contribution, or the status of a "resembling" animal (נדמה) across multiple generations.

The daf then broadens the principle of "change." Even where an animal remains genealogically a sheep, wool that has materially changed from the normal created form can lose legal classifications that depend specifically on ordinary wool: the Gemara discusses sha'atnez, techelet, and clothing-affliction laws. Rav Ashi applies a parallel idea to wine from a vine trained over a fig tree, arguing that a change in smell can disqualify the wine for libations. The thread connecting these topics is that halachah sometimes asks not only where an object came from, but whether it still possesses the defining form or quality named by the Torah.

The Mishnah at the end of the daf turns that concern with precision into a different problem: a ewe gives birth to two males whose heads emerge apparently at the same instant. Rabbi Yosei HaGelili says both are firstborn; the Sages say exact simultaneity cannot be established, so only one belongs to the Kohen. Rabbi Tarfon and Rabbi Akiva then disagree over how to allocate the doubtful animals. This launches the sugya of אפטר לצמצם - whether exact equality or simultaneity is halachically possible, especially in events produced by nature versus measurements made by people.

The detailed summary begins on the next page and follows the daf in sequence, explaining the questions, answers, proofs, distinctions, and conclusions needed to understand the full discussion.

Detailed Summary

Finishing the generations of tzon barzel

The opening lines complete the dispute from the previous daf. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says that exemption can continue even for ten generations while responsibility to the non-Jew remains. The Gemara uses his wording to clarify whether the Tanna Kamma had already been discussing multiple generations. Rav Yehuda is challenged by a baraita that says the offspring are exempt but the offspring of the offspring are not; he can answer by reading the text so that “they and their offspring” are the exempt classes, with liability beginning only afterward. An alternate version creates the corresponding challenge to Rav Huna. The discussion confirms that the dispute is fundamentally about how far the non-Jewish financial hand extends.

A sheep that looks like a goat

The Mishnah’s case of a sheep giving birth to a goat-like offspring and a goat giving birth to a sheep-like offspring is expanded by a baraita: a sheep that is itself the daughter of a goat, or a goat that is the daughter of a sheep, is subject to a dispute between Rabbi Meir and the Sages. The Gemara asks what obligation Rabbi Meir could be imposing. It cannot simply mean ordinary firstborn law if the Torah requires both the mother and the offspring to fit the named species. Nor can it easily mean ראשית הגז, because unusually coarse wool may not qualify as the wool contemplated by that mitzvah.

One proposed explanation makes the dispute about whether we take account of the father’s genetic contribution (חוששין לזרע האב) in the prohibition of slaughtering an animal and its offspring on the same day. The Gemara rejects making this local baraita merely a repetition of the known dispute of Chananya and the Sages on paternal lineage.

Multigenerational resemblance and returning to the species

The Gemara therefore returns to firstborn law and constructs multigenerational cases. If an ewe is the daughter of an ewe that was itself the daughter of a goat, Rabbi Meir can say we follow the immediate mother, so the present animal is no longer treated as a נדמה. The Sages can look back to the maternal grandmother and preserve the unusual-species status. In the reverse ancestry - an ewe descended through a goat from an ewe - the issue becomes whether normal sheep identity has “returned to its place” (חזרה שיות למקומן).

Rav Ashi gives a more direct explanation: the animal has only some of the identifying features of the maternal species, and the “Sages” in the baraita are Rabbi Shimon, who requires the head and majority of the body to resemble the mother. The dispute can therefore be located not in ancestry but in the threshold of physical resemblance.

A unique goat for the Rosh Chodesh offering

Rabbi Yochanan states that even Rabbi Meir agrees that the goat offered for Rosh Chodesh must be a true, unaltered member of its species. The verse's language of "one" is read as requiring an animal unique in the same created form that existed from the six days of creation. The Gemara asks why this is needed when other verses already exclude hybrids and unusual resemblances from offerings. Both derivations are necessary: one prevents us from saying that after several generations the deviation has normalized; the other prevents limiting the rule only to obligatory offerings while allowing such animals as voluntary offerings.

Changed wool: sha'atnez, techelet, and tzaraat

Rabbi Acha bar Yaakov teaches that all agree that the wool of such a changed animal does not trigger lashes for wearing שטטנז. The Torah's juxtaposition of wool and linen teaches that the wool, like ordinary linen, must remain in its standard form. Rav Pappa applies the same textual comparison to wool used for תכלת in tzitzit: wool that has changed from its defining species form is not suitable. Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak applies it again to the laws of garment tzaraat, where the Torah names a wool garment or linen garment.

The conceptual point is not that the fiber has become a different chemical substance. Rather, Torah categories can demand an object matching the ordinary identity invoked by the verse. An anomalous product may retain biological origin while losing a particular halachic name.

Wine changed by the tree that supports the vine

Rav Ashi extends the principle to a vine trained over a fig tree. He says its wine can be disqualified for libations because the verse links offerings and libations: as the sacrificial animal must not be a changed form, so the libation must not be materially altered. Ravina challenges from flax trained over a thornbush: would that too count as changed flax and undermine the earlier comparison? Rav Ashi distinguishes them by an observable effect. The fig support changes the wine's aroma; the thorn support does not change the flax's aroma. The relevant שינוי must be real, not merely a different growing arrangement.

The Mishnah: two males emerging together

רחל שלא בכרה וילדה שני זכרים, ויצאו שני ראשיהן כאחת...

Rabbi Yosei HaGelili says that if both heads emerged together, both males are given to the Kohen; he reads the Torah's plural language as allowing more than one male to be treated as the womb-opening firstborn when the emergence is truly simultaneous. The Sages disagree because אי אפשר לצמצם: exact simultaneity cannot be established, so one animal is certainly the owner's and one is transferred to the Kohen because one of them must be the firstborn.

Rabbi Tarfon says the Kohen selects the better animal. Rabbi Akiva says משמנין ביניהן, a phrase the next daf will define more precisely, and the doubtful animal remaining with the owner must graze until it develops a blemish. The Mishnah also introduces the dispute over priestly gifts from that animal: the anonymous view obligates the foreleg, jaw, and maw, while Rabbi Yosei exempts in the relevant case. If one of the two animals

dies, Rabbi Tarfon says they divide; Rabbi Akiva applies **המוציא מחבירו עליו הראיה**. If a male and female are born, the Kohen receives nothing because the female may have emerged first.

Can exact equality exist?

The school of Rabbi Yannai frames the question. Rabbi Yosei HaGelili clearly believes exact simultaneity is possible in events caused by Heaven (**בידי שמים**), and therefore certainly in measurements deliberately performed by people. The Sages deny exactness in the natural birth case. But what do they hold where human beings measure and intend to make two things exactly equal?

The Gemara begins testing the question from Temple practice. A scarlet line encircles the altar at its midpoint to separate blood applications above from those below. If people cannot locate the midpoint exactly, perhaps blood assigned to the upper half could actually be placed below the true midpoint. The Gemara can answer that the line was made with enough width to create a safe boundary. It then turns to the precisely specified dimensions of the Temple vessels and altar; those may prove only that the Torah commanded the builders to do the best humanly possible, not that mathematical exactness can be guaranteed. The question continues onto the next daf.

ד"ה אפשר לצמצם בידי שמים Tosafot

Tosafot sharpens the issue: “possible to be exact” need not mean that nature can never accidentally produce equality. The central halachic problem is whether exact equality can be identified and verified. This distinction explains why natural simultaneity and deliberate human measurement may be treated differently.

Glossary

Hebrew term	Transliteration	Meaning in this sugya
נדמה	Nidmeh	An animal whose physical appearance resembles a species different from its halachic lineage.
מקצת סימנין	Miktzat simanim	Some physical features of the maternal species.
חוששין לזרע האב	Chosheshin le-zera ha'av	Taking the father's lineage into account.
חזרה שיות למקומן	Chazrah siyut limkomah	Normal sheep identity has returned after an anomalous generation.
ראשית הגז	Reishit hagez	The gift of the first portion of sheep wool to a Kohen.
שעטנז	Sha'atnez	The Torah prohibition against wearing a wool-linen mixture.
תכלת	Tekhelet	The blue-dyed thread used in tzitzit.
אפשר לצמצם	Efshar letzamtzem	

Hebrew term	Transliteration	Meaning in this sugya
		The possibility of achieving or determining exact equality or simultaneity.
המוציא מחבירו עליו הראיה	Hamotzi mechaveiro alav hara'ayah	The claimant seeking to take property must bring proof.

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