

Bekhorot 20 Detailed Summary

Coverage: Bekhorot 20a - 20b

Bekhorot 20 develops the statistical and biological assumptions introduced at the end of the previous daf. The Gemara first asks whether Rabbi Yishmael's age-based rule follows Rabbi Meir's concern for a minority, or whether even the Sages can agree because the relevant majority depends on an act - mating and conception. A baraita then records Rabbi Yehoshua's tradition about a goat's first-year birth and introduces חֲמִשָּׁה as a decisive sign. The discussion becomes a careful reconstruction of what Rabbi Yehoshua received from his teachers and what he reasoned independently.

The daf measures reproductive time with unusual precision. Zeiri teaches that חֲמִשָּׁה prevents renewed conception for thirty days, and the Gemara asks whether births can occur with incomplete months, whether part of the last day counts as the whole day, and how these assumptions change the status of a young animal that gives birth within its first year. These are not abstract chronological questions: they determine whether the present offspring can possibly be the first true birth or whether an earlier conception may already have exempted the womb.

The second half turns to milk as evidence. Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Yehoshua dispute whether the fact that an animal is producing milk proves that it has already given birth. The Gemara tests their attitudes toward majority and minority from the laws of yibbum and ultimately reverses the initial attribution: Rabbi Yehoshua accepts milk as evidence, while Rabbi Akiva does not rely on milk alone. The daf ends with the striking baraita of a young goat that bears three daughters, each of which produces three daughters, so that the entire group can enter the animal-tithe pen in one year. This launches the next daf's analysis of how quickly repeated reproduction can occur.

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

Does Rabbi Yishmael follow Rabbi Meir?

The Gemara first states that Rabbi Yishmael's position is most straightforward if he agrees with Rabbi Meir, who is concerned for a minority. If most animals of a certain age have already conceived or given birth, a strict majority rule might allow us to assume that an older animal is no longer a first-time mother. Rabbi Yishmael nevertheless leaves the case doubtful, which can reflect concern for the minority that has not yet reproduced.

Ravina says the Mishnah can still follow the Sages. The Sages follow a majority where the majority exists on its own, but this majority depends on a prior act: the animal must have mated and successfully conceived. Because that act may never have occurred, the statistical presumption is weaker.

Rashi (ד"ה רובא דתלי במעשה)

Rashi emphasizes that pregnancy is not a passive biological condition that simply appears with age. It requires mating, and therefore the majority is contingent upon an event whose occurrence is itself uncertain.

Rabbi Yehoshua: received tradition and independent reasoning

A baraita discusses a goat that gives birth within its first year. Rabbi Yehoshua distinguishes between what he learned as a received tradition - גמריה - and what he says as his own reasoning - סבריה. The Gemara asks what practical difference exists between the two formulations. One possibility is whether טינוף itself exempts the animal from future firstborn status. Another is the precise timing of the reproductive cycle after such a discharge.

Zeiri teaches that after טינוף an animal does not accept a male for at least thirty days. If the discharge occurs late enough in the first year, and a full pregnancy must then follow, a later birth inside that same year may be impossible. A birth that nevertheless occurs can therefore reveal that the earlier discharge was not a true fetal event.

Can gestation end with incomplete months?

The Gemara next asks whether an animal can give birth after partial rather than complete pregnancy months - יולדת למקוטעין. According to one reconstruction, Rabbi Yehoshua's received tradition requires complete months, while his independent reasoning allows the last month to be incomplete. Another reconstruction makes the issue מלקצת היום ככולו: whether part of the final day can count as the whole day for completing the relevant period.

The practical effect is whether a sequence of discharge, waiting, conception, and gestation can still fit within the first year. Small differences in how the final month or day is counted determine whether the present birth proves that no earlier exempting conception occurred.

Does milk prove a previous birth?

The Mishnah’s rule is then compared with a different biological sign: lactation. Rav Chanina of Sura initially explains that Rabbi Akiva treats milk as proof of an earlier birth because most animals do not produce milk without giving birth, while Rabbi Yehoshua remains concerned for the minority that can lactate without a birth.

The Gemara challenges this attribution from Rabbi Yehoshua’s ruling in yibbum. A woman whose mother-in-law went abroad does not ordinarily have to fear that a new brother-in-law was born, because the chain of possibilities is statistically unlikely. That ruling shows that Rabbi Yehoshua does not simply fear every minority. The Gemara therefore reverses the positions: Rabbi Yehoshua says milk exempts, while Rabbi Akiva says milk alone does not.

Tosafot (ד"ה חלב פוטר איכא בינייהו)

Tosafot use this sugya to analyze when a minority combines with a pre-existing presumption. Rabbeinu Tam’s discussion is important because it shows that “follow the majority” is not a one-line rule: the strength of the minority, the existing חזקה, and the practical severity of the outcome can all matter.

The remarkable goat and one-year animal tithe

A baraita tells of a young goat that gave birth to three daughters, and each daughter then gave birth to three daughters. All of them can enter the pen together for animal tithe. Rabbi Shimon says he personally saw a goat that “tithed within its year.” The Gemara asks why the baraita needs every daughter to produce three; mathematically fewer births from some of them could still produce the necessary total for tithing.

The answer is partly stylistic: because at least one daughter must bear three in order to reach the required number, the baraita describes all of them uniformly. The larger significance is chronological. For mother, daughters, and granddaughters to belong to one animal-tithe year, the reproductive cycle must fit into an extremely compressed period. That fact becomes the basis for the next daf’s dispute about Zeiri’s thirty-day rule, incomplete gestation, partial days, and whether an animal that is still מחוסר זמן can enter the tithe pen.

Glossary

Hebrew term	Transliteration	Meaning in this sugya
גמריה	Gemarei	A teaching received as tradition from one’s teacher.
סבריה	Sevarei	A conclusion reached through one’s own reasoning.
טינוף	Tinuf	A reproductive discharge indicating a possible conception or miscarriage.

Hebrew term	Transliteration	Meaning in this sugya
יולדת למקוטעין	Yoledet le-mekuta'in	Giving birth after an incomplete final gestational month.
מקצת היום ככולו	Miktzat hayom ke-kulo	Treating part of a day as legally equivalent to the whole day.
חלב פוטר	Chalav poter	The proposition that lactation proves a previous birth and exempts the next offspring from firstborn status.
חזקה	Chazakah	An established legal presumption.
מעשר בהמה	Maaser behemah	The tithe of animals, counted through a pen in yearly groups.

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