



Bekhorot 4

Detailed Summary

Coverage: Bekhorot 4a line 1 through 5a line 7

From the exemption of Kohanim and Leviim through the completed debate over firstborn sanctity in the wilderness

לעילוי נשמת הרב נחמיה בן הרב יוסף הכהן זייע'יק זצ"ל

A clear guide to the tribal exemption, the wilderness exchange, redemption with a lamb, one lamb redeeming many donkeys, and the dispute over firstborn sanctity in the wilderness.

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Detailed Summary

The central idea

Bekhorot 4 explains how a one-time wilderness exchange became an enduring tribal exemption, then traces the legal mechanics of redeeming firstborn donkeys and the debate over whether firstborn sanctity continued throughout the wilderness years.

The question left by the Mishnah

Bekhorot 4 opens in the middle of the Mishnah's explanation of why Kohanim and Leviim are exempt from pidyon haben (פְּדִיּוֹן הַבֵּן), redemption of a firstborn son, and peter chamor (פֶּטֶר חֲמוֹר), redemption of a firstborn donkey. The Mishnah said that if the Leviim released the Israelite firstborn in the wilderness, they should certainly release their own firstborn. The Gemara immediately asks us to slow down. Human beings did not redeem animals: the Leviim themselves replaced Israelite firstborn people, while the Leviim's sheep replaced Israelite firstborn donkeys.

That distinction matters because a kal vachomer (קַל וָחֹמֶר) can only work when we know exactly which legal force did the exempting. Was it the personal sanctity of the Levi, the ownership of a sheep, or the general status of the tribe? The daf will test all three possibilities and eventually show that the enduring exemption belongs to the legal identity of Kehunah and Leviyah, not to a person's private historical contribution.

Abaye reads the Mishnah through the animals

Abaye first explains the Mishnah on the animal side. If a Levi's sheep was strong enough to remove the firstborn status of an Israelite donkey in the wilderness, then surely that same category of sheep should remove firstborn status from the Levi's own donkey. This makes the historical exchange itself the engine of the exemption.

Rava objects on two grounds. First, the Mishnah says that “they” exempted the Israelite firstborn, language that points to the Kohanim and Leviim as people, not merely to their animals. Second, if the animals of Leviim generate a broad kal vachomer, their firstborn kosher animals should also be exempt. Yet another Mishnah explicitly teaches that Kohanim and Leviim remain obligated in the laws of a firstborn kosher animal. Their exemption is limited to firstborn sons and firstborn donkeys.

Rava rebuilds the exemption in two steps

Rava therefore begins with the human firstborn. The personal kedushah (קְדוּשָׁה), sanctified status, of the Leviim replaced the firstborn sanctity of the Israelites in the wilderness. If Levi status can release someone else's firstborn sanctity, it can certainly prevent that same firstborn obligation from resting on a Levi himself.

That kal vachomer directly establishes only the human exemption. The donkey exemption comes from a hekesh (שְׁקָה), a Torah linkage. The verse places the firstborn person beside the firstborn non-kosher animal: “You shall surely redeem the firstborn of man, and the firstborn of the non-kosher animal you shall redeem.” The Gemara reads the pairing precisely: whoever is included in the law of a firstborn son is included in the law of a firstborn donkey; whoever is excluded from the human obligation is excluded from the donkey obligation.

This also explains why a firstborn kosher animal is different. The Torah linked the firstborn person to the firstborn non-kosher animal, not to the firstborn ox, sheep, or goat. The exemption follows the Torah's defined connection rather than a loose comparison.

Rashi integrated

Rashi explains Rava's structure precisely: the kal vachomer establishes the exemption of Leviim from human firstborn redemption. The exemption of their donkeys is then learned from the Torah's juxtaposition. This prevents the argument from accidentally exempting their firstborn kosher animals.

A tribal status rather than an individual reward

Rav Safra presses the logic. If Abaye is correct, perhaps only a Levi who personally owned a sheep that redeemed an Israelite donkey should be exempt. If the Levi had no sheep, perhaps his donkey should remain obligated. The same challenge reaches Rava: perhaps only Leviim who were at least one month old and actually counted in the wilderness exchange should be exempt. A younger baby did not replace anyone.

The Gemara adds two sharper cases. A Levite woman was not counted among the men, yet Rav Adda bar Ahavah rules that her firstborn son is exempt from the five sela redemption payment. Aaron himself was not included in the census, as the dots over his name indicate, yet no one suggests that Aaron's firstborn obligations remained.

The first answer explains the Levite woman through *peter rechem* (פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם), the first opening of the womb. Human firstborn status is determined through the mother, so her Levite identity controls. The broader answer is the word “the Leviim” (הַלְוִיִּם): Scripture connects every member of the Levi class. Once the Torah assigns the result to the tribe, the exemption is not recalculated person by person. Kohanim are included because Tanakh repeatedly calls Kohanim “Leviim,” including “the Kohanim, the Leviim, the sons of Tzadok.”

Tosafot integrated

Tosafot asks how a firstborn Levi can be exempt through a kal vachomer when that firstborn Levi did not personally release a different firstborn. The answer is that the sanctity of Leviyah within him displaces his own firstborn sanctity. The argument concerns the power of Levi status, not a one-for-one historical transaction.

Why the exemption continues forever

The historical exchange occurred only once, in the wilderness. The Gemara therefore asks how we know the exemption continues for later generations (לדורות). The answer comes from “and the Leviim shall be Mine” (וְהָיוּ לִי כֹהֲנִים). The word וְהָיוּ, “they shall remain,” teaches continuity: they remain in the legal status created for them.

This is an important transition. The wilderness event explains the origin of the status, but the verse makes the status permanent. A modern Kohen or Levi does not need to prove that his ancestor owned a sheep or personally replaced an Israelite firstborn. He inherits the halachic identity of the tribe.

How the firstborn donkeys were redeemed

The Gemara next verifies that sheep were actually used for the firstborn donkeys in the wilderness. Rav Chisda first compares the two permanent redemption systems. A firstborn son is redeemed with money in later generations and the surplus Israelite firstborn were redeemed with money in the wilderness. A firstborn donkey is redeemed with a sheep in later generations, suggesting that sheep were also used in the wilderness.

The comparison is challenged because money has a special power: it can redeem consecrated property (הקדש) and maaser sheni (מעשר שני). Perhaps money worked in the wilderness because money is a universal redemption instrument, while a sheep is not. The final proof again uses the Torah's pairing of a firstborn person and a firstborn non-kosher animal. Just as the human firstborn was redeemed with money both then and in later generations, the firstborn donkey was redeemed with a sheep both then and later.

Tosafot integrated

When the Gemara says money redeems hekdesh but a sheep does not, Tosafot clarifies that any valuable sheep can be used as monetary value. What is unique to firstborn-donkey redemption is that a sheep of any value works because the Torah names “sheep” as the special redemption object.

One sheep could release many donkeys

Rabbi Chanina teaches a surprising detail: one sheep belonging to a Levi could release several Israelite firstborn donkeys. Abaye points to the Torah's accounting. The Torah counts 273 surplus Israelite firstborn people who had no corresponding Levi and therefore required five-shekel redemption. It records no parallel surplus among the animals, even though the tribes possessed enormous herds.

The Gemara strengthens the inference from the wording “the animal of the Leviim in place of their animals.” The singular and plural are deliberately mismatched, indicating one animal in place of multiple animals. This is not an ordinary one-for-one sale. It is a Torah-created act of release.

Rava connects this to the later Mishnah that allows the same sheep to redeem many firstborn donkeys when the owner lawfully acquires the sheep again from the Kohen. Rabbi Chanina is not describing a historical curiosity. He is explaining why a sheep can function repeatedly as the redemption object.

Did firstborn sanctity continue in the wilderness

The daf then moves to a larger historical question. Rabbi Yohanan says that firstborn people and animals born in the wilderness remained sanctified. Reish Lakish initially appears to say that only those sanctified in Egypt retained their status, while new firstborn born in the wilderness were not sanctified. Rabbi Yohanan relies on “Sanctify to Me every firstborn.” Reish Lakish reads “when Hashem brings you into the land ... you shall set apart every firstborn” as locating the renewed obligation upon entry into Eretz Yisrael.

A series of proofs follows. Before the Mishkan, the firstborn performed sacrificial service. Reish Lakish answers that these were the older firstborn who had left Egypt. On the day the Mishkan was erected, firstborn offerings were brought. Again, those animals could have been born in Egypt. Even the phrase “on that day” can be read in opposite ways: it may limit the offerings to that day, or it may mean that the new sacrificial system began that day and continued.

A baraita says that firstborn were sanctified in Egypt, the wilderness, and upon entry into the Land. Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak tries to reinterpret it as three occasions of command, not three continuous periods of actual sanctification. Rav Pappa blocks that reading because the Torah explicitly commanded Moses to count the firstborn in the wilderness, and the census was carried out.

The debate is refined, not erased

The Gemara therefore reformulates the dispute. Rabbi Yohanan says קִדְּשׁוּ וְלֹא פָּסְקוּ: the firstborn became holy and their sanctity never stopped. Reish Lakish says קִדְּשׁוּ וּפָסְקוּ: firstborn were holy through the wilderness census, but new firstborn stopped becoming sanctified afterward until entry into the Land. This refined version preserves the evidence that firstborn existed in the wilderness while still giving force to the land-dependent verse.

Rabbi Elazar supports Rabbi Yohanan from “Mine they shall be” (לִי יִהְיוּ), which sounds permanent. Rabbi Yohanan reads the land verse not as postponing the command but as a promise: fulfill this mitzvah and in its merit you will enter the Land.

Why exact wording matters

Rav Mordechai reports the names in the opposite order: Rabbi Yohanan said the firstborn “were not sanctified,” and Reish Lakish said they were. Yet he explains “were not sanctified” to mean “did not need an additional act of verbal sanctification” because firstborn status already arose automatically. In substance, his Rabbi Yohanan agrees with the other tradition.

Why preserve a wording that sounds opposite? The Gemara answers: a student must repeat the language of his teacher (תַּיִב אֲדָם לֹמֵר בְּלִשׁוֹן רַבּוֹ). Faithful transmission includes the exact formulation, even when explanation is needed to prevent misunderstanding.

Rashi integrated

Rashi explains the alternate phrase “the firstborn were not sanctified” as “they did not need to be consecrated.” Their holiness arose automatically at birth. The wording is negative, but its meaning supports continuous sanctity.

The full picture in plain language

The daf begins by asking who truly created the exemption of Kohanim and Leviim. It answers that Levi identity releases the human firstborn obligation, while the Torah's linkage extends the result to the firstborn donkey. The exemption belongs to the whole tribe and continues for every generation. The same unit then reconstructs the wilderness redemption: sheep were used, one sheep could release several donkeys, and the Torah's accounting supports that conclusion.

The final discussion asks whether firstborn holiness continued without interruption in the wilderness. The Gemara refuses a simplistic answer. It tests verses, sacrifices, censuses, and alternate traditions until the dispute is stated precisely: continuous holiness according to Rabbi Yohanan, and a period in which new sanctity ceased according to Reish Lakish. Even an apparently reversed tradition is preserved because exact transmission matters.

Glossary

Hebrew term	Transliteration	Meaning in this sugya
פְּדִיּוֹן הַבֵּן	Pidyon haben	Redemption of a firstborn son through five sela given to a Kohen.
פֶּטֶר חֲמוֹר	Peter chamor	A firstborn male donkey that is redeemed with a sheep.
קַל וָחוֹמֶר	Kal vachomer	An inference from a less obvious case to a more obvious one.
הֶקֶשׁ	Hekesh	A Torah juxtaposition that links two legal categories.
קְדוּשַׁת לֵוִי	Kedushat Leviyah	The sanctified tribal status of a Levi.
פֶּטֶר רֶחֶם	Peter rechem	The first opening of the womb; the mother determines the human firstborn category.
לְדוֹרוֹת	Ledorot	For later generations, not only for the original wilderness event.
הֶקְדֵּשׁ	Hekdesh	Property consecrated to the Temple.
מַעֲשֵׂר שֵׁנִי	Maaser sheni	Second tithe produce, which can be redeemed onto money.
שֶׁה	Seh	A sheep or goat used to redeem a firstborn donkey.

Hebrew term	Transliteration	Meaning in this sugya
קָדְשׁוֹ וְלֹא פָסְקוּ	Kadshu velo pasku	They became sacred and their sanctity did not cease.
קָדְשׁוֹ וּפָסְקוּ	Kadshu ufasku	They became sacred, but the ongoing sanctification later stopped.
לִי יִהְיוּ	Li yihyu	“Mine they shall be,” read as language of continuing status.
בְּלִשׁוֹן רַבּוֹ	Bilshon rabbo	In the exact wording received from one's teacher.

Acknowledgment and contact

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The Rashi and Tosafot insights are integrated in English so the document reads as one continuous summary. The words of the Mishnah are reproduced in Hebrew when the covered range contains a Mishnah.

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