



Bekhorot 5

Detailed Summary

Coverage: Bekhorot 5a line 8 through 6a line 6

From the questions of Kontrokos through the Torah's exclusion of firstborn horses and camels

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

A clear guide to the missing Leviim, sacred accounting, the Temple maneh, why donkeys are unique, the Mishnah of cross-species offspring, and the exclusion of horses and camels.

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Detailed Summary

The central idea

Bekhorot 5 joins careful Torah arithmetic with firstborn law. It defends Moshe's accounting, defines the sacred maneh, explains the donkey's unique status, and then begins a new Mishnah about how the identities of mother and offspring control firstborn and dietary law.

The first puzzle: three hundred missing Leviim

Kontrokos, a Roman official, challenges Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai from the Torah's arithmetic. Adding the three Levite families separately produces 22,300 people, but the Torah's total is only 22,000. Where did three hundred Leviim go?

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai answers that the additional three hundred were themselves firstborn. The counted Leviim were being used to release the firstborn sanctity of Israelites. A firstborn Levi could not perform two jobs at once: first he needed his Levi status to remove his own firstborn sanctity. Only then could an ordinary Levi stand in place of an Israelite firstborn. Abaye phrases the principle simply: it is enough for the firstborn Levi to release his own sanctity (**דַּי לְבָכוֹר שֶׁיִּפְקֶיעַ (קְדוּשַׁת עַצְמוֹ**).

Rashi integrated

Rashi spells out the family totals: 7,500 descendants of Gershon, 8,600 of Kehat, and 6,200 of Merari equal 22,300. The Torah's rounded tribal total of 22,000 excludes the three hundred firstborn Leviim because they could only release their own firstborn sanctity.

The accusation against Moshe and the answer

Kontrokos then compares the half-shekel collection with the silver used in the Mishkan. His calculation appears to produce 201 talents and eleven maneh, while the Torah speaks of one hundred talents used for the silver sockets. He mockingly asks whether Moshe was dishonest, reckless, or unable to calculate.

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai answers directly: Moshe Rabbeinu was a trustworthy treasurer (**גִּזְבָּר וְנֶאֱמָר**) and an expert accountant. The apparent gap comes from a different measurement system. A sacred maneh (**מָנֶה שֶׁל קֹדֶשׁ**) was double the ordinary maneh. Therefore, one hundred sacred talents accounted for roughly two hundred ordinary talents. The challenge was not exposing missing money; it was mixing two different units and calling them the same name.

How the Gemara proves the sacred maneh was doubled

The Gemara does not simply accept the answer. Rav Achai asks where the doubled unit is proven. The verses first mention 1,775 leftover silver shekels used for hooks and fittings. If the ordinary maneh were being used, that amount could have been expressed as another talent plus maneh. The fact that the Torah leaves it in smaller coins suggests it did not reach a complete sacred talent.

The Gemara challenges that proof: perhaps the Torah states only the major round total in talents and leaves every smaller remainder in shekels. A second attempt uses 2,400 copper shekels, which would equal more than one ordinary talent. Again the Gemara says the Torah may use talents only for very large totals.

Rav Chisda therefore turns to Yechezkel's explicit formula: "the shekel shall be twenty gerah; twenty shekels, twenty-five shekels, ten and five shekels shall be your maneh." The numbers add to sixty shekels. Since the earlier sacred maneh was fifty shekels, the verse reveals both the doubled base and a later authorized increase.

Rashi integrated

Rashi explains the Temple calculation using dinars and shekels. The sacred maneh was a doubled two-hundred-dinar unit, and Yechezkel's sixty-shekel maneh adds one-sixth from the final amount. The apparent contradiction disappears once every unit is defined.

Three rules hidden inside one calculation

The Gemara draws three conclusions. First, the sacred maneh was double the standard one: two hundred dinars rather than one hundred. Second, a community may increase official weights and measures when there is a recognized need. Third, the increase may not exceed one-sixth.

The phrase *מִלְבַּר שְׁתִּיתָא* means that the one-sixth is calculated from the final total, "from the outside." Moving from fifty shekels to sixty adds ten. Ten is one-sixth of the new sixty, though it is one-fifth of the old fifty. The Gemara is teaching both law and mathematical vocabulary: always ask whether the fraction is measured against the original amount or the completed amount.

Why the Torah chose the donkey

Rabbi Chanina asks Rabbi Eliezer why the Torah gives firstborn sanctity to donkeys but not to horses and camels, even though all are non-kosher animals. The first answer is *gezerat hakatuv* (גְּזֵרַת הַכָּתוּב): this is the precise category chosen by the Torah.

Rabbi Eliezer adds historical meaning. Donkeys helped the Jewish people carry Egypt's silver and gold during the Exodus. The Gemara describes every Israelite as leaving with ninety high-quality Libyan donkeys laden with wealth. The number emphasizes the extraordinary scale of the Exodus treasure and the donkey's special service. The halachah comes from the Torah's decree; the historical explanation helps us appreciate why this animal was singled out.

Tosafot integrated

Tosafot explains that “Libyan donkeys” means especially fine Egyptian donkeys. The geographic description is not incidental; it emphasizes that the animals carrying Egypt's wealth were strong and valuable.

Rephidim and Shittim: place names and moral readings

Rabbi Chanina asks whether the names Rephidim (רְפִידִים) and Shittim (שִׁטִּים) merely identify locations or also describe what happened there. Rabbi Eliezer says they are ordinary place names. Rabbi Yehoshua reads them as moral descriptions.

Rephidim hints that the people weakened their hold on Torah (רָפוּ עֲצָמָן מִדְּבַר תּוֹרָה), leaving them vulnerable to Amalek. Shittim hints that they became occupied with foolishness (דְּבַר שְׁטוּת), leading toward immorality and idolatry. The verse saying that the Moabite women “called” the people is also read in two ways: Rabbi Eliezer stresses the physical encounter, while Rabbi Yehoshua reads the wording as an allusion to the arousal it produced.

The larger lesson is that the Gemara can preserve both peshat, a real geographic name, and derash, a name that captures the spiritual character of the event.

The words of the Mishnah

פָּרָה שֶׁיָּלְדָה מִן חֲמֹר, וְחֲמֹר שֶׁיָּלְדָה כְּמִין סוֹס — פְּטוּרָה מִן הַבְּכוּרָה, שְׁנֹאֲמַר: “פֶּטֶר חֲמֹר” “פֶּטֶר חֲמֹר”. שְׁנֵי פְעָמִים, עַד שֶׁיֵּהָא הַיּוֹלֵד חֲמֹר וְהַנּוֹלֵד חֲמֹר.

וַיֵּמָּה הֵם בְּאֶכִילָה? בְּהֵמָה טְהוֹרָה שֶׁיָּלְדָה כְּמִין בְּהֵמָה טְמֵאָה — מוֹתֵר בְּאֶכִילָה, וְטְמֵאָה שֶׁיָּלְדָה כְּמִין בְּהֵמָה טְהוֹרָה — אָסוּר בְּאֶכִילָה, שֶׁהַיּוֹצֵא מִן הַטְּמֵא — טְמֵא, וְהַיּוֹצֵא מִן הַטְּהוֹר — טְהוֹר.

The Mishnah: the mother and child must match

The new Mishnah begins a different legal unit. A cow that gives birth to something shaped like a donkey, or a donkey that gives birth to something shaped like a horse, does not create the ordinary firstborn obligation. For peter chamor, both sides of the birth must fit: the mother must be a donkey and the newborn must have the form of a donkey.

The Mishnah then separates firstborn law from dietary law. If a kosher mother gives birth to an offspring that looks non-kosher, the offspring is still permitted to eat. If a non-kosher mother gives birth to something that looks kosher, the offspring remains forbidden. The rule is הַטְּמֵא מִן הַטְּמֵא יוֹצֵא: what emerges from a non-kosher source is non-kosher, and what emerges from a kosher source is kosher. Appearance does not replace biological and halachic origin.

Two Torah routes to the resemblance rule

Rav Yehudah derives the resemblance requirement for kosher firstborn animals from the repeated wording “firstborn of an ox,” “firstborn of a sheep,” and “firstborn of a goat.” The phrasing implies that the mother and the newborn must belong to the same recognizable kind. The limiting word אָךְ then teaches that some maternal signs are enough; perfect visual identity is not required.

The Mishnah, however, cites the repeated phrase peter chamor (פֶּטֶר חֲמוֹר). Rabbi Yosei HaGelili uses the verses about kosher firstborn animals as his primary source and extends the principle to the donkey. The anonymous Mishnah begins with the donkey, whose sanctity is kedushat damim (קְדוּשַׁת דָּמִים), sanctity expressed through monetary redemption, and extends it to a kosher firstborn animal, whose body has kedushat haguf (קְדוּשַׁת הַגּוּף), inherent sacrificial sanctity.

Rabbi Yosei HaGelili moves in the opposite direction: the Torah reveals the rule in the more intense category of inherent bodily sanctity, and he applies it to monetary sanctity. They agree on the practical resemblance rule but disagree about which Torah passage is the foundation and which direction the comparison travels.

Why ox, sheep, and goat are each written separately

The anonymous Mishnah still needs the repeated word “firstborn” beside ox, sheep, and goat. Rabbi Yosei son of Rabbi Chanina explains that each species has unique sacrificial portions (אֵימורִים) and unique features, so the altar law cannot be derived safely from only one species.

An ox has larger wine libations. A sheep contributes the fat tail (אֶלְיָה). A goat has special prominence in offerings for idolatry. Even combining two species cannot automatically prove the third: sheep and goats are used for the Korban Pesach, ox and goat appear in communal idolatry offerings, and ox and sheep each have an added altar feature. Therefore, the Torah teaches the required burning of the portions for all three explicitly.

Why horses and camels are completely excluded

Rabbi Yosei HaGelili uses the repeated peter chamor passages to exclude firstborn horses and camels. One mention could have taught only that a donkey is redeemed specifically with a sheep while another non-kosher animal might be redeemed with something else. The second repetition shows that horses and camels do not enter firstborn sanctity at all.

Rav Achai explains why both mentions are needed. Without the repetition, one might use the hermeneutic rule that a specific case singled out from a general category teaches about the entire category, making all non-kosher firstborn animals redeemable with sheep. The extra wording blocks that expansion.

The anonymous Mishnah reaches the same conclusion through a general-and-specific formulation (כָּלֶּל וּפְרָט): “all your livestock males” is the general term; “ox, sheep, and donkey” is the specific list. The law includes what the Torah names and excludes other species. The unit ends with a clean boundary: the firstborn laws apply to kosher cattle, sheep, and goats, and among non-kosher animals only to the donkey.

Rashi integrated

Rashi reads the second occurrence of peter chamor as excluding horses and camels from the entire firstborn category, not merely from sheep-redemption. Without that repetition, we might think they are sacred but redeemed through another object.

The full picture in plain language

The daf begins with numbers that seem wrong: missing Leviim and missing silver. Each problem is solved by identifying the legal category or measurement system that the critic ignored. A firstborn Levi is occupied releasing himself; a sacred maneh is not the same size as an ordinary maneh. The Torah's accounting is internally exact once the units are understood.

The daf then asks why the donkey alone carries firstborn sanctity among non-kosher animals and connects the law to the Exodus. The new Mishnah broadens the theme of identity: appearance, biological origin, sanctity, and Torah wording do not always line up. The Gemara therefore defines each category carefully, distinguishing bodily sanctity from monetary sanctity and excluding horses and camels completely.

Glossary

Hebrew term	Transliteration	Meaning in this sugya
בְּכוֹר לֵוִי	Bekhor Levi	A firstborn Levite; his Levi status first releases his own firstborn sanctity.
גִּזְבָּר נְאֻמָּן	Gizbar neeman	A trustworthy treasurer, the Gemara's description of Moshe.
כֶּכָר	Kikkar	A talent, a large biblical weight or monetary unit.
מָנֶה שֶׁל קֹדֶשׁ	Maneh shel kodesh	The sacred maneh, valued at double the ordinary maneh.
שְׁתוּתָא מִלְבָּר	Shetuta milbar	A sixth calculated from the final total, not from the original base.
גְּזֵרַת הַכְּתוּב	Gezerat hakatuv	A law whose defining boundary is established directly by Scripture.
חֲמוֹרִים לִוְיִים	Chamorim Luvim	High-quality Libyan or Egyptian donkeys.
רַפְיוֹן יָדַיִם	Rifyon yadayim	Weakening of effort; here, becoming lax in Torah.
דְּבָרֵי שְׁטוּת	Divrei shetut	Foolish conduct, associated with the sin at Shittim.
הַיּוֹצֵא מִן הַטָּמֵא	Hayotzei min hatamei	What emerges from a non-kosher source retains non-kosher status.

Hebrew term	Transliteration	Meaning in this sugya
קְדוּשַׁת דָּמִים	Kedushat damim	Sanctity expressed principally through monetary value or redemption.
קְדוּשַׁת הַגּוֹף	Kedushat haguf	Inherent sanctity of the animal itself for altar service.
אֵימורִים	Eimurim	The sacrificial portions burned on the altar.
כָּלֵל וּפְרָט	Kelal uferat	A general term followed by specifics, limiting the law to the named category.

Acknowledgment and contact

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