

And now we all know	ועכשיו כולם יודעים
Korah's sin	שחטא של קורח
Was arrogance	היה עתק
And malice	וזדון
Because he said	שהוא אמר
that he	שהוא
that we	שאנחנו
are all holy	כולם קדושים
that within us	בתוכנו
Is Divinity	ה'
Already	כבר
And he was not right?	והוא לא צדק?
I know that	אני יודע ש-
Holy	קדושים
Is what we will be	נהיה
That it is an endless goal	שהיא תכלית אין-סופית
Even though I believed that he was right	אף על פי שהאמנתי שהוא צדק
And I still believe	ואני מאמין עוד
That there is indeed within us	שאכן יש בתוכנו
Sanctity	קדושה
Sacred incense	קטורת
Divine Presence	מלכות
Divine Harmony	תפארת
If one human sins	האיש אחד יחטא
Will You be angry with the whole community?	ועל כליהעדה תקצף?
And will there not be more like Korah and his company?	ולאיהיה כקרח וכעדתו?
And yet	ועוד
Then you shall say to them—you shall be holy, for I am holy	ואמרת אליהם—קדשים תהיו, כי קדוש אני
But what is it to be holy?	אבל מה זה להיות קדוש?
And who—or what—am I?	ומי—או מה—אני?
Holy	קדוש



## Parashat Korah 5776

## פרשת קרח תשע"ו



### Choosing Your Child?

Rabbi Daniel Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS

“Which do you prefer—your firstborn child, or the five coins required to redeem him?”

This disconcerting question is part of the ritual known as *pidyon haben*, the redemption of the firstborn son. Rabbi Asher ben Yehiel (13th–14th centuries) reports this question as part of the liturgy from the geonic period in his Talmud commentary, and it is duly repeated by his son Rabbi Yakov ben Asher and later codifiers of Jewish law.<sup>1</sup>

How does the ritual go?

The mitzvah of *pidyon haben* applies only in a narrow set of circumstances: if a woman from an Israelite family delivers a son in a vaginal birth and has had no previous pregnancies, and the father is not himself a *kohen* (priestly descendant). In that case, on the 31st day of the child's life, the parents are supposed to “redeem” their son from a *kohen*. The *kohen* asks them the “Which do you prefer?” question, and—assuming they answer, as expected, that they prefer their child—the *kohen* agrees to serve as a proxy for the child, in return for the five silver coins. The *kohen* takes the coins and declares them to be in place of the child, then the parents say blessings, and everyone enjoys a festive meal. It is like a *bris*, but without the surgery.

What is the source of this idea that a firstborn child must be redeemed? God explains to Moses that on the day that the Egyptians' firstborn sons were killed in the tenth plague, “I sanctified to Me every firstborn in Israel, whether human

or beast” (Num. 3:13). The law is expanded in our Torah portion, Korah, to clarify that firstborn humans, and also non-kosher animals such as donkeys, must be redeemed with five silver coins, whereas kosher animals are to be presented as gifts to the Temple: “You shall have the firstborn of man redeemed . . . take as their redemption price, from the age of one month and up, the money equivalent of 5 shekels by the sanctuary weight, which is 20 *gerahs*” (Num. 18:16).

While the mitzvah refers specifically to boys because of the association with the tenth plague, in our day we may expand the concept of redemption to girls as part of their own birth rituals. Indeed, baby-naming ceremonies for girls are often scheduled around the one-month mark in order to connect them to this ancient rite of passage.

But let us return to the *kohen’s* curious question, “Which do you prefer, your firstborn child or the five silver coins required to redeem him?” We have learned already that it is a *commandment* to redeem the child with the five silver coins. Why then does the medieval liturgy present this as a choice? When else do we ask Jews whether they would care to perform a mitzvah? Isn’t the essential meaning of *mitzvah* “commandment”?

Already in the 15th century, the parents’ question seemed out of place. Rabbi Israel Isserlein points out in his legal commentary that the child *must* be redeemed (Terumat Hadeshen #235). If not, then what would the *kohen* do with him? He can’t enslave him, and he can’t really adopt him and raise him as a *kohen*—the child belongs with his parents! The question then is rhetorical, not a real choice. But what then does it mean?

The 17th-century sage Rabbi Ya’ir Haim Bachrach addresses this question in his responsa (Hut Ha-shani #92). He says that the point is to endear the mitzvah to the father. Perhaps the father is worried about the expense of the five coins, and also the much greater expense of raising his son. Presenting the moment as a choice is a way of giving him agency in what may be an anxious time. Rabbi Bachrach has second explanation: the father could in fact ignore his obligation and let his son redeem himself when he

grows up. In that sense, the *kohen* indeed presents a valid choice—what do you want more, the kid or the coins? But the former reading seems more likely—the *kohen* is making a point: *Yes, this mitzvah is expensive; in fact, it is only the beginning. As a parent you need to choose, today and every day, to be responsible for this precious child of yours. Are you ready? Then here is your child; take good care of him!*

I find this rare ritual moment to be poignant. At the beginning of the journey of parenthood, a new mother or father is overwhelmed with joy but also with responsibility. A vast realm of obligations has arrived together with their infant child, and thousands of decisions lie before them. Enormous expenses, more than they could have anticipated, are suddenly theirs. Thirty-one days into the journey, they are likely tired, cranky, and bewildered. At this very moment, a representative of our ancient tradition presents them with a choice—which do you prefer, your child or some money?

After a dramatic pause, the parent or parents look at their child—their precious, perplexing child—and they claim it from the priest. They say, “I want my firstborn child—here are your coins.” And so a journey begins. There will be many multiples of those five coins paid—for food and clothes, medicine and education, culture, camp, and hopefully their child’s marriage. But at this early stage, the new parents resolve to set aside their material worries for a moment. They redeem their child, praise God, and give gratitude for the gift of life.

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## אחר דבר | A Different Perspective



All-*Shall Be-Holy*

כולם-קדושים-תהיו

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Then he took  
Perhaps that was the problem  
That he took  
And didn’t give

ויקח  
אולי זאת הייתה הבעיה  
שהוא לקח  
ולא נתן