

The Fast of the Firstborns

תענית בכורים

I. Throughout the month of Nissan we do not say Tachanun, Hespelim etc., and we do not fast. On Erev Pesach it certainly should be forbidden to fast, as that was the day of bringing the Korban Pesach¹. However, Chazal tell us that Erev Pesach is an exception, and that all Bechorim (firstborns) should fast. This minhag is mentioned in Meseches Sofrim², and brought in Shulchan Aruch (ט"ו) as well. Furthermore, the Yerushalmi³ tells us that Rebbe (R' Yehuda Hanasi) fasted every year on Erev Pesach. However there is a question as to the reason for his fasting. One reason suggested is that Rebbe was a Bechor. Some Rishonim bring this as the source for Taanis Bechorim⁴. Others argue that the Yerushalmi concludes contrary to this reasoning, that Rebbe only fasted in order to have an appetite for the Seder and not because he was a Bechor⁵.

There are a number of reasons given for this fast:

1) The Tur (ט"ו) writes that the reason is that the Bechorim in Klal Yisrael were spared from Makas Bechoros. However, if this is the reason, it would seemingly be more appropriate to have a celebration on this day, than to fast⁶. (Some even suggest that there is a typographical error in the Tur, and in place of מתענים it should say מתענים, however this isn't plausible.)⁷

2) The Chasam Sofer⁸ explains that just like Taanis Esther, which is a commemoration of the day of fasting and prayer that they observed before Purim, similarly, the Bechorim in Mitzrayim also fasted before Makas Bechoros so that they would be spared. Therefore it is commemorated every year as a fast day. Some say that this is the Tur's reasoning as well.

3) R' Moshe Shternbuch שליט"א explains the reason as follows. The Bechorim received the status of Kohanim the night of Makas Bechoros. They later lost this status at the Cheit Haegel. Therefore, every year on the anniversary of their receiving this honor, Bechorim fast as an atonement for forfeiting their status.⁹

4) Others explain that on the anniversary of Makas Bechoros there is a particular danger to Bechorim. Therefore Bechorim fast as a protection.¹⁰ (The full explanation of this concept is beyond the scope of this article.)

II. There is a discussion in the Poskim as to exactly who falls into the category of a Bechor. The basis for the question is, that although for other halachos a Bechor is classified as a male firstborn from his mother (e.g. Pidyon Haben), or from his father (e.g. double inheritance), by Makas Bechoros a much broader spectrum of people fell into the category of "Bechor". The following are a few examples of these exceptions:

1) The Medrash¹¹ tells us that in Makas Bechoros female firstborns were also killed. (With the exception of Basya, Pharaoh's daughter, who was spared in Moshe's merit). The Chida goes even further to say that Bechoros were originally assigned to do the Avodas Hakohanim as well, just like Bechorim. In light of this, many Poskim say that Bechoros are required to fast on Erev Pesach¹². In fact many say that this was the prevalent minhag where they

¹ ע' רמב"ם הל' כלי המקדש פ"ו ה"ט ובמל"מ שם ד"ה ודע

² כ"א ג' הובא בתוס' פסחים ק"ח

³ פסחים פ"י ה"א

⁴ רא"ש ומרדכי שם וריטב"א ריש פ"ד דפסחים

⁵ ערוך השלחן וברכי יוסף

⁶ זכרון יהודא הובא במקראי קודש

⁷ נימוקי או"ח בשם ס' פאר יצחק, וע"ש שכתב עליו דאינו אלא דברי בורות

⁸ ח' לפסחים ק"ח וע' מקראי קודש

⁹ מועדים זמנים ח"ז קס"ט ותשובות והנהגות ח"ג ק"ג, וע' אור החיים עה"ת במדבר ג' מ"ה שלעתיד לבא יחזור לבכורות ודלא כהרמב"ם סוף הל' מלכים

¹⁰ כן משמע מהאלף לך שלמה ס' שט"ז בשם ספרים, וע"ע מגיד מישרים פר' ויקהל ד"ה אור

¹¹ פסיקתא פר' בא י"ז ד"ה וה' וע"ע במכילתא שם פר' י"ג

¹² מחזיק ברכה, אגודה ב"ח וב"י דאף הן היו באותו הנס, וכ"פ המחבר. דעת המהר"ל אינה ברורה, בס' המנהגים משמע דאינו מכריע ובד"מ כתב בשמו

דאין נוהגין, אבל בתשובותיו כתב דמתענין ושכן צוה חמיו את גרושתו וכן כתב הב"ח וב"י והחק יעקב בשמו, וע"ע

resided.¹³ However, the Rama and others say that the minhag is that Bechoros do not fast, since she is not a Bechor for any other Halachos¹⁴. Even so, some had a minhag that Bechoros attended a Siyum on Erev Pesach¹⁵.

2) Another question posed is regarding Kohanim and Leviyim, whom are not required to perform Pidyon Haben and did not lose the Avodah. Most Poskim say that they are definitely required to fast¹⁶. On the other hand, others argue that they are exempt¹⁷.

3) One who is neither a Bechor from his mother nor from his father, but is the oldest child to his parents jointly (i.e. they both have a child from a previous marriage), is a Machlokes Haposkim. The Mishne Brura rules that they are not required¹⁸, others however say that they are, since such a person was included in Makas Bechoros¹⁹. Some are of the opinion that the Chasam Sofer was of this category and even so fasted every year²⁰.

4) A final example, is one who was born via Caesarean Section (יוצא דופן). Such a person is not halachically a Bechor, but was certainly included in Makas Bechoros. R' Moshe Shternbuch says that in fact it would depend on the reason for fasting. If the reason is because of Makas Bechoros, they would be required. However, if the reason is for losing their status as Kohanim, they would not. The general consensus in the Poskim, is that such a person does not have to fast²¹.

A minor does not have to fast. However, the Shulchan Aruch (ת"ע) writes that the minhag is that his father fasts in his stead. If the father is also a Bechor, his mother fasts. The Gra explains the reason for this is that Makas Bechoros was actually also intended as a punishment to the parents, as we say in Davening - למכה מצרים בבכוריהם - "who struck Mitzrayim with their firstborns", and not "who struck the firstborns of Mitzrayim". Therefore, the parents also have reason to fast, and if the child cannot fast, they should²². The question is, who is considered fasting, the father or the son. For example, if only the minor attends a Seudas Mitzva etc. and not the father, can we say that since the father is only required in place of his son, if the son is exempted due to his attending the Seuda, so is the father, or must the father also attend. The Brisker Rav says that in such a case the father is exempt. Others say that the father should attend the Seudas Mitzva as well, along with his son²³.

Another Machlokes is regarding a baby that is less than 30 days old. Some say that even for a one day old infant, the father is required to fast²⁴. However, the Mishne Brura and others say there is no Chiyuv until 30 days have passed²⁵.

III. The prevalent minhag nowadays is that all Bechorim attend a Siyum or other Seudas Mitzva and eat there. The question is asked, that although they may be permitted to eat at the Siyum itself, why are Bechorim allowed to eat for the rest of the day, if on a regular fast even one who ate is still forbidden to continue eating? The answer given is that different from other fasts which are to afflict oneself, Taanis Bechorim is to publicize the miracle that they were saved. Therefore, once one is not fasting there is no reason to continue to afflict oneself and he can eat the rest of the day²⁶.

The actual Heter of eating at a Siyum (or any Seudas Mitzva which does not have to be done on that day) is subject to a vehement dispute in the Acharonim. The Node Biyehuda and R' Akiva Eiger both issued a proclamation that Bechorim should not rely on this Heter²⁷. The Chasam Sofer himself fasted and did not attend a Siyum. (Some say that towards the end of his life when it was difficult for him to fast, he would eat at a Seudas Bris Mila if he was the Mohel.²⁸) Others say that if one did eat at a Seudas Mitzva he would be required to fast after Pesach to make up for

¹³ סמ"ק, מהרי"ל בתשובות, ובנוהג כצאן יוסף כתב דנוהגין אבל יש מקילין

¹⁴ מהרי"ל בשם שאר פוסקים, וכו"ה ברוקח ס' ע"ר, שו"ע הרב, ישו"י, ערוה"ש, יפה ללב, שו"ת ויצבר יוסף ס"ז, וכ"פ הרמ"א

¹⁵ ברכת הפסח ס"ט, חק לישראל עמ' ל"ד שכן נהגו בק"ק פרעסבורג, וע' שו"ת יביע אומר ח"ד או"ח ס' מ"ב

¹⁶ נוהג כצאן יוסף דלא נפטרו מפדיון עד שבאו למדבר כדאיתא בבכורות ד' ובלא"ה תלוי במכת בכורות ולא בזה, וכ"כ בשו"ת מהריל ס' י"ד, סידור יעב"ץ,

שו"ע הרב, הערוה"ש והמ"ב

¹⁷ דעת תורה למהרש"ם בשם יוסף דעת

¹⁸ כשיטת הראב"ה דכולי האי לא מחמרין

ערוך השלח

²⁰ מפי נכדו בעל שו"ת התעוררות בתשובה הובא במנהגי חת"ס בהג"ה בליקוטים שבסוף הספר

²¹ תשובות והנהגות ח"ג ק"ג, וחק יעקב ס' ת"ע

²² רמ"א שם ביאור הגר"א שם, אבל במהר"ש ס' קס"ח כתב דאינה צריכה והובא דבריו בד"מ.

²³ הגדה לבית בריסק ותשובות והנהגות

²⁴ שבות יעקב ח"א ס' י"ז וכ"ה הברכי יוסף, ושע"ת שהתענית יגן בעדו וכ"כ בחי' חת"ס בפסחים ק"ח

²⁵ מ"ב שם וקרנן נתנאל פסחים פ"י י"ט, בחת"ס סופר בהג"ה לשו"ע כתב דתלוי במח' רש"י ותוס' בבכורות מ"ט והכריע כהשבו"י

²⁶ שו"ת ארץ צבי ס' ע"ט וכ"ה במקראי קודש בשם ס' הר המורה. וצ"ע לטעמו של המועדים זמנים דלעיל

²⁷ ע' שו"ת תשובה מאהבה ח"ב ס' רס"א

²⁸ מנהגי חת"ס בהוספות אות כ

it²⁹. In spite of all this, the latter Poskim say that the prevalent minhag is to make or attend a Siyum³⁰. Some explain the reason for this is because our generation is weaker and would be unable to perform the mitzvos properly at night³¹. Others say that since this minhag is not mentioned in the Gmara it is not so stringent³². Furthermore, there was a custom by idol worshippers to fast on the day before their holidays, therefore we wish to show that we are not fasting like them³³. Certainly if one knows that he will not be able to eat the Matza with an appetite or will be unable to perform any other mitzva properly, it is a mitzva for him not to fast and to attend a siyum.³⁴

Some also explain that since there are many leniencies for this fast, one may rely on a Siyum. For example, some Rishonim (שיטת המרדכי) permit eating fruit even if one is fasting Taanis Bechorim³⁵. Others say that there is no requirement to complete the fast until nightfall, rather one should drink something in the afternoon³⁶.

As far as what is considered a Siyum, some bring proof from the Gmara that even on a Mesechta of Mishnayos one can make a siyum³⁷. However, the Acharonim say that this would only be if one learnt the mishnayos with the discussions and understanding of the Amoraim. Therefore, they say, nowadays this is really only feasible by learning a Mesechta of Gmara³⁸. Some say that on completion of one book in Tanach (or possibly any Sefer) one may make a Siyum³⁹. However, R' Shlomo Kluger זצ"ל says, that this is only if he finished it in his regular course of learning and not specifically to make a siyum⁴⁰.

R' Moshe Feinstein זצ"ל paskens that if one learnt any sefer in depth over a long period of time, the completion of the sefer would qualify as a Seudas Mitzva⁴¹.

The ר"ט says that only a person that would have gone anyway to attend this Siyum can be considered a part of the Seudas Mitzva and is permitted to eat. One who would not have gone otherwise is not permitted⁴². Others say only if one participated in the actual learning may one attend the Seuda⁴³. Therefore, it is preferable that the person making the Siyum should personally invite all the Bechorim, and that they should listen to the last part of the Mesechta so as to be a part of the learning⁴⁴. If one did not attend the actual Siyum, but ate at the Seudah, according to R' Yaakov Kaminetsky זצ"ל, he may continue to eat the rest of the day⁴⁵. However, other Poskim, including R' Elyashiv שליט"א, disagree. If one only attended the Siyum and did not eat a shiur of a כותבת or drink מלא לוגמיו at the Seuda, there is yet another Machlokes if he may eat later at home⁴⁶. Therefore, preferably one should both listen to the Siyum and partake in the Seuda. (שם)

Regarding whether one may postpone or rush the completion of a Mesechta in order to make a siyum, see אליה רבה ס' תקנ"א, ערוך השלחן שם, כף החיים שם, ובשו"ת ארי' דבי עילאי או"ח ס' י"א וע"ע שו"ת אבן ישראל ח"ט ס' ל"ז.

מאיר הלוי הלמן
פעיה"ק תובב"א

²⁹ חק יעקב וע' במג"א דהמחמיר תבא עליו ברכה, וע"ע שו"ת התעוררות בתשובה ס' רמ"ה
³⁰ פרי חדש וכ"כ בסידור יעב"ץ דהמיקל לא הפסיד, וע' שו"ת ריב"א או"ח ס' ל"ח, ערוגת הבושם קל"ט, וע"ע בבאה"ט
³¹ נימוקי או"ח ושו"ת ר"ט ווייל ס' ל"ח
³² ערוך השלחן אבל ע"ש דהניח בצ"ע ומשמע דאין להקל
³³ אוצר טעמי המנהגים, וכעין זה מצינו בער"ה, ע' רמ"א תקפ"א ס"ב
³⁴ שו"ת האלף לך שלמה ס' שט"ז וכ"כ בשו"ת החיד"א ס"ב ומ"ב סק"ב
³⁵ כ"כ המ"ב סק"ג ושעה"צ אות ד' דמיני תרגימא היינו פירות לבד ויכול לסמוך על זה במקום שלא יוכל לקיים מצוות הלילה, אבל בשו"ע הרב ובערוה"ש
כתבו דגם מזונות הוה בכלל מיני תרגימא. וע' בהגדת השל"ה שכתב דאין זה כוונת המרדכי בכלל ואסור לאכול מיני תרגימא אפילו לדעתו
³⁶ הובא בשו"ת ר' טיאה ווייל בשם אביו הקרבן נתנאל שהורה לשתות קאפע אחר ט' שעות ואסור להשלים, וכ"כ באורחות חיים בשם עולת שמואל ס' נ"ח
³⁷ שבת קי"ח, אמר אביי כי חזינא צורבא מרבנן וכו', ושם ודאי היה סיום רק על מס' משניות דלא היה להם גמ' כתובה, כ"כ שו"ת בית ישראל ס' מ"ז ע"ש
וכ"כ בס' ברכת הפסח ס' ט' ובדעת תורה ס' תקנ"א
³⁸ שו"ת פני מבין ס' ק"ג, שו"ת פרי השדה ח"ב ס' צ"ב
³⁹ פנ"י ברכות י"ז על הא דאיתא שם דר"י כי הוה מסיים ספרא דאיוב וכו' ע"ש, וכן משמע מלשון הדרן "להתחיל ס"א ולסיימם". וע"ע בתולדות קול אריה
אות ל"ג בשם הגר"א על מה דכתב הרמ"א ס' תקנ"א דבסיום מסכת וסעודת אירוסין אוכלים בשר אחר ר"ח אב, ותמה עליו המ"א דאסור לעשות סעודת
אירוסין, ואמר הגר"א דהיה כתוב אצל המדפיסים ר"ת וס"א - וספרים אחרים וטעו להדפיס סעודת אירוסין, ודפח"ח
⁴⁰ האלף לך שלמה שפ"ו
⁴¹ אגרות משה או"ח ח"א ס' קנ"ז
⁴² או"ח תקנ"א ס"י על דברי הרמ"א שם
⁴³ סידור יעב"ץ, אבל במ"ב כתב דאפי' לדבריו אותן שמסייעין לעשות הסעודה ג"כ נחשב בכלל
⁴⁴ תשובות והנהגות וכן משמע במ"ב שישמעו הסיום עכ"פ לכתחילה
⁴⁵ וכ"מ מהים של שלמה ב"ק פ"ז סקל"ז, וכ"כ הרשב"ע או"ח קס"ח, וכן אומרים בשם הסטייפלר
⁴⁶ רבבות אפרים ותשובות והנהגות