

# Dating back to the very earliest history of Jewry in Egypt,

the ceremony of the redemption of the first-born son, consecrated to serve in the Temple of Jerusalem, has mainly fallen into disuse. When prayer books of Sephardic or Ashkenazi Jews include this ceremony it tends to be truncated, often reduced to a few phrases. Here, in almost complete form, are the main ceremonial points of the redemption of the first-born son, *Pidion Ha-Ben*, as transcribed by the late Grand Rabbi of Cairo, Raphael Aharon Ben-Shim'on, and published in *Nahar Misraim*.

The ceremony of redemption takes place on the eve of the 31<sup>st</sup> day of the baby's life. A member of the 'priestly' descent group, a Cohen, arrives at the home, where a feast preceding the ceremony is already underway. He seizes hold of the child. This simulated snatch symbolises an offering to the Temple – destroyed in 70 AD. The child's mother, father and close relatives rush after the Cohen, who questions the mother whether the child really is the first fruit of her womb. She replies "This is my first-born son. Before this birth I was never in labour and have never aborted." If the mother is not present at the ceremony the question must be put to her by a "trustworthy, wise and sure" person.

Then the Cohen turns to the father and asks: "What do you prefer for your first-born – to redeem him for five pieces of pure silver (each weighing at least 90 grams) or to give him to the

clan of Cohens (the descendants of the Biblical Aaron) as the Torah demands?" The father replies: "This is my first-born son whom I love. I'm ready to offer you the five pieces of silver for his redemption as Yahweh requests in the Holy Torah."

The Cohen replies: "This child is a first-born. Yahweh has recognised his consecration and his redemption as is prescribed. You will redeem him for five pieces of silver... You were committed at your mother's breast to your Holy Father and to your forbears. Now you are the subject of your Holy Father and you have entrusted me because I am a Cohen. Your own father had wished to redeem you because you had been blessed at conception, for it is written: 'And the Eternal Father told Moses he should consecrate every first-born, man or beast, to the House of Israel.'"

The father then tenders the five pieces of silver, or silver objects, and says: "This is my oldest son, the first-born from my loins. The Torah tells me to give to a Cohen five pieces of silver for his redemption; this decree is from the King of Kings and I'm ready to obey all my Creator's commandments joyfully, with a light heart."

The father moves to stand beside the Cohen, saying "Blessed is He who commanded the redemption of the first-born, blessed is He who gave us life this very day." He then offers the five pieces of silver to the Cohen, who replies: "I have received from you five pieces of silver and your son is redeemed according to the Law of Moses and Israel."

Then the Cohen moves the hand bearing the silver near to the child's forehead, saying "This is in place of that, this is compensation for that, this replaces him, this voids his debt and absolves him. This has been offered to the Cohen and this son will now start to live his life, start studying the Torah, observing the commandments, the bonds of marriage, good deeds, and this will reflect on his father, his mother, his close relatives and all the house of Israel." Then the Cohen recites the appropriate blessing and verses from the Book of Prophets calling for divine protection of the child.

Normally when the ceremony is practised elsewhere it concludes there. In Egypt, however, it is followed by blessing the wine and distributing fragrant herbs and perfumes to those present.

Then the Cohen adds: "Blessed is He who has sanctified this child which has passed through his mother's breast, who He made with his 248 organs, breathed life into him, dressed him in flesh, gave him a bone structure, commanded him to eat and drink, accorded two angels to protect him while in his mother's womb... His

father has said 'this is my first-born son', his mother has said 'this is my first-born son' and Yahweh has guided his passage between the five rocks of his mother's womb...He has been commanded to redeem for the sum of five pieces of silver the first-born of man or beast, even if impure (a donkey for example). Blessed is he who sanctifies the first-born by redemption."

This bizarre ceremony dates back to the earliest times of the human history of Jews in Egypt, and gives the first-born privileged status. No tie is created between the child and the Cohen who performs this rite. Anonymity is the rule. Occasionally some indiscretion allows an adult to recognise a peddler or a stallholder as the person who performed the ritual of offering pardon and who once had some claim on him.

The fast of the first-born on the eve of Passover, the redemption and expressions underlining differences between the first-born and his siblings, like the proverb 'kol bekhôr hamôr' (the eldest is an ass) are reminders of the price Jews are said to have paid for their freedom when they left Pharonic Egypt: a child had been killed for each one saved.

Everyone practises this ritual, which differs in the way it is conceived and played out but always remains an impenetrable mystery. For some, the five pieces of silver offered to the Cohen are returned an hour after the ceremony. For others the redemption fee is literally donated and put into a coffer to be distributed amongst other Cohens in town. Sometimes details may well have been forgotten, while elsewhere the whole of the performance survives. In mystic circles old people alternate between hymns dedicated to Rabbi Shimo'n Bar-Yohai and studying the text of the Zohar in an attempt to interpret the obscure invocations used during the redemption ceremony.

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