

The Torah gives instruction on the Leviim's role in the Mishkan service and explains:

כִּי נִתְּנִים נִתְּנִים הֵמָּה לִי מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּמְחַת פֶּטֶרֶת כָּל־רֵחֶם בְּכוֹר כֹּל מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
 לְקַחְתִּי אֲתֶם לִי:

“Because surely given they are to Me from within the Bnei Yisroel. Instead of the initial issuance from the womb of every firstborn son of all Bnei Yisroel, I have taken them to Me.” (Bamidbar 8:16).

Simply, the pasuk is saying that Hashem took the Leviim to service instead of every firstborn of Bnei Yisroel. Why did Hashem take the Leviim instead of the firstborn? Why is it important that the Leviim were taken in place of the firstborn? What exactly are the Leviim substituting for? If our pasuk refers to Leviim then why does a later pasuk (Ibid 8:18) repeat it? Also, why does the pasuk commence with “give” and conclude with “take?”

Gemara Bechoros 4b says *the firstborn were sanctified three times. Once in Mitzrayim, once in the midbar, and once upon entering Eretz Yisroel.*

Gemara Yerushalmi 1:11 says *Rabbi Yochanan learns that the firstborn sons were designated for service in the Mishkan. It says, “I surely took them (the Leviim) in place of the firstborn...because I smote the firstborn of Mitzrayim.” (Bamidbar 8:16-17). And “Rivka took the desirable garments” to give to Yaakov. (Bereishis 27:15). Rivka made Yaakov firstborn to make him fit for the Holy service.*

Midrash Bamidbar 8:16 says, *it says “surely given” the double expression, because the Leviim served in two ways, by carrying and by singing. Midrash Lekach Tov 8:16 adds that later it also said to designate the Leviim to Aharon and his sons. (Ibid 8:19). These three expressions are for the three times the firstborn were designated (see Gemara Bechoros 4b).*

Rashi says, “פֶּטֶרֶת” means *opening of the womb.*

Ibin Ezra says, *פֶּטֶרֶת here and פֶּטַר in Shemos are different words. Like Tzedek and Tzedaka.*

Sforno says, *the Leviim are given to Hashem because they responded to the call of “who is for Hashem.” They are also given from the Bnei Yisroel because they are supported by the people. Originally, the firstborn males were assigned these duties but now the Leviim do them.*

Chizkuni says, *the Leviim are a gift from the people to Hashem who then gifted them to Aharon and his sons. "I have taken them." Hashem accepted them.*

To understand this pasuk we read the next pasuk. כִּי לִי כָל-בְּכוֹר בְּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֶדָם וּבְבֶהֱמָה. "Because to Me are every firstborn of the Bnei Yisroel, man and beast. On the day I smote every firstborn in the Land of Mitzrayim, I consecrated them to Me." (Ibid 8:17). It is curious to note that the final mako in the Mitzrayim created this obligation. Because Hashem smote the firstborn of Mitzrayim, all firstborn of man and beast belong to Hashem. What is the connection? There were nine previous makos. Why isn't all water consecrated to Hashem because he turned the water to blood? Why didn't the mako of *dever* - pestilence, create the obligation for all animals to be sanctified to Hashem?

The mako of smiting the firstborn was the final piece to giving freedom to the Bnei Yisroel. What is more, is that the plain (pshat) reading of the pesukim of the makos makes it understood that whenever a mako hit Mitzrayim it would have also hit Goshen – where Bnei Yisroel resided. Hashem had to create a safety protection for Bnei Yisroel in order for them not to suffer. For example, all the water that Aharon waved his staff over turned to blood. (Shemos 7:19). Bnei Yisroel were warned and stored water. Aharon also did not wave his wand over the parts of the Nile that fed the Ivri wells. Frogs and lice were similarly controlled as to *where* Aharon struck the water or dusts. (Ibid 8:2 and 13 respectively). With the *arov*, "they came to Pharaoh's house." (Ibid 8:20). This way they avoided Goshen. So on for all the makos.

With the final mako, Hashem struck the firstborn of Mitzrayim from Pharaoh's house to the imprisoned woman's eldest, and every firstborn animal. (Ibid 12:29). There was a decree that every firstborn that was *physically* in the Land of Mitzrayim had to die; Egyptian or foreign visitor, even foreign captive. It was only because the Bnei Yisroel put blood on their doorposts that they lived. (Ibid 12:23). The firstborn animals of the Bnei Yisroel also lived because of this. Hashem saved the firstborn of Bnei Yisroel and therefore, they now *owed* themselves to Hashem. Further, it is not just the firstborn in

Mitzrayim that owe this debt. It is every firstborn man and male animal in perpetuity. Further, as payment for saving them, He consecrated them to Him forever.

Now that the reason for the firstborn consecration is understood, our pasuk can be properly read. “Because given given.” Both the firstborn and the Leviim are given. The firstborn sons owe their debt. The Leviim are being designated, voluntarily. They volunteered for this service and they are being supported by the public. “Because given given they are to me.” Both the firstborn and the Levvim are now unto Hashem, *consecrated* and/or designated for service.

“From within the Bnei Yisroel.” The Leviim are part of the Bnei Yisroel. Their firstborn sons are also consecrated to Hashem. All firstborn and all Leviim are surely given to Hashem. “In exchange for the initial opening of every womb by a firstborn.” *Pitras* and *bechor* both mean first or firstborn. *Pitras* is the initial opening of the womb. *Bechor* is the product, the son. *Bechor* qualifies the *pitras*. It is not a first issue but only a firstborn male issue. Practically, a womb is not “opened.” Nothing changes in a woman’s body after the firstborn is birthed. There is no “closed” womb that is now “open.” Instead, it is the initial issue of the woman making her a mother for the first time, issuing her first youngling; and in these cases, a male youngling. Like first fruits, the mother gives over her firstborn son to Hashem.

Again, it is the firstborn of the “entire Bnei Yisroel.” The pasuk does not say, *remainder* of Bnei Yisroel. Accordingly, the firstborn sons of the Leviim are also consecrated. “I have taken them to me.” Who is them? It appears that “instead of” qualifies this statement and indicates the Leviim are taken instead of the firstborn of the Bnei Yisroel. Additionally, the context of this pasuk within this parsha also refers to the Leviim. However, *תָּקַח* can also mean a financial arrangement – in place of as in the sense of an exchange. This is taken for that. The pasuk is really saying, *as payment for the initial issuance of firstborn sons from the womb of the entire Bnei Yisroel, I have taken them – the firstborn – to Me.* The next pasuk corroborates this reading because it says, “Every firstborn of Bnei Yisroel – man and beast – are Mine.” (Bamidbar 8:17). If our pasuk refers

to the Leviim being taken lieu of the firstborn, why are the firstborn still Hashem's? Also, if here it means Leviim, here, why would the pasuk repeat it? (See Ibid 8:18).

To understand this, it is important to differentiate "consecrate" from "designated for Mishkan service." The firstborn sons are "consecrated" while the Leviim are being taken for Mishkan service. As a result of makos bechoros, every firstborn son that was the initial issue of a womb was sanctified to Hashem. "Sanctify to Me every firstborn, every one that opens the womb among the Bnei Yisroel, among man and among animals; it is Mine." (Shemos 13:2). There was no Mishkan service at this time so the sanctification was not about the Mishkan service. It was about some sort of holy isolation or designation of some sort. The firstborn donkeys were either decapitated or redeemed. Every male human issue was to be redeemed. (Ibid 13:13). This consecration connotes a designation of sacred seclusion.

Our pasuk is teaching that the Leviim are now being designated for service to Hashem as a payment for Hashem allowing all the firstborn of Bnei Yisroel to be redeemed from this consecration. Hashem already said they can be redeemed. Hashem is now "taking" His part of the transaction.

"The Leviim shall thus be qualified for the Mishkan service." (Bamidbar 8:15). This is because *the firstborn sons were given to Hashem as payment for the initial opening of every womb by firstborn son. Hashem took the firstborn sons.* "Taking" connotes a financial transaction. "Now I take the Leviim, instead of the firstborn sons of Bnei Yisroel." (Ibid 8:18). It is *that* pasuk that closes the transaction. The service that the Leviim will now do, and the fact that the Bnei Yisroel are supporting them, allows for the firstborn to be redeemed and then live their lives. As payment for their ability to be redeemed, the Leviim are giving themselves, and Hashem is taking them, to complete this transaction.