

Torah Thoughts Bemidbar

5778:

In American law, being the first born son does not compel any kind of behavior or responsibility. The oldest son in a family has no legal obligation to support aging parents or make end-of-life decisions, to take a lead in managing family finances or otherwise tend to affairs that affect his extended family. Despite the total absence of any sort of legal requirement to do any of these things, many first born sons and daughters voluntarily take on those roles. While the law does not recognize being born first as having special significance, our society seems to have other expectations. But what if we could exempt our eldest children from having to take on such responsibilities? Would doing so be a good idea? Would we take that option if we could?

The Torah has something like that in mind this week in its stipulation that firstborn non-Levites be redeemed from religious service, since those duties were performed by the Levites themselves. The ritual by which the redemption from priestly obligations, *pidyon haben*, is still performed, though less often among progressive Jews than in the past. *Pidyon haben* recognizes that there are certain responsibilities that a first born son should assume, while also providing a mechanism by which those responsibilities can be transferred to a professional class.

The existence of that Levitical class and the *pidyon haben* ritual fulfill our wishes to make life easier for our own firstborn when it comes to serving in the Temple. But there is no such class of professionals to deal with ‘head of the family’ issues. We naturally look to those who are oldest to set an example, to lead and to decide. Despite what can sometimes be the unwanted burden of such responsibilities, there is often no other choice but for the first born child to take them on, just as we voluntarily take on the responsibilities of being spouses or parents, with all that those roles entail. The Torah text reminds us that some things in life are beyond our control, and that sometimes we must simply accept who we are and strive to do our best.