

## And you shall redeem every human first born among your sons. (13:13)

The *mitzvah* of *Pidyon HaBen* is a rite of passage *mitzvah* in which the firstborn son is redeemed for five silver coins. This is an important *mitzvah*, in that the child/*b'chor*/firstborn is like a *Kohen*, since the priesthood was once the domain of the firstborn. They lost it, and it was transferred over to *Shevet*/Tribe of *Levi*, of which the *Kohanim* became the replacement *b'chorim*. Thus, every firstborn harbors a degree of sanctity which must be redeemed, since he cannot use it. In the following incident, we see exactly how important the *mitzvah* of *Pidyon HaBen* really is.

Rav Meir Gruzman is *Rav* in Tel Aviv and also teaches a Judaism course for Israeli soldiers in the military academy. This course covers basic Judaism, its history and *hashkafah*, philosophy, heralding back to the Revelation at *Har Sinai*, and continuing on to the issues confronted by Jews in modern times. One day, following an especially spirited class explaining the concept of *nevuah*, prophecy, and the unique nature and distinction of those chosen by Hashem to be His prophets, he was asked by one of his students, a captain, "Do we still have such men of stature who represent the spiritual elite to the Jewish People?" Rav Gruzman responded with a short discourse on the thirty-six *tzaddikim*, righteous Jews, in whose merit this world is sustained. He talked for a few minutes about the truly righteous Jews of past generations and their achievements. He saw, however, that the student was not buying his reply: "I am not asking about the past. I want to know about the here and now. Do we have such righteous people today?"

Rav Gruzman was about to navigate the topic to a different subject, when, suddenly, one of the students raised his hand to speak. He was a decorated colonel by the name of Samuel: "I would like to share with the class a perspective to which I was personally privy. It is a story of a great man, who, I think, will fit the bill.

"Let me first introduce myself. I was born in Bucharest, Romania, during the Communist occupation. The country was agnostic, G-d playing no role whatsoever in the lives and outlook of its citizens. My parents were no different. We knew that we were Jewish, but we did not know what being Jewish meant – other than being reviled by the Communists. As a young child, I was healthy physically. My first three years of life were no different than that of any other young boy.

"Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, I began fainting whenever I heard a noise. The slightest sound, even a cup falling to the ground, would cause me to faint. If a bus passing my house would make a loud noise, I would convulse and faint. My parents feared the worst. They stuffed my ears with cotton and took me from doctor to doctor. There was no specialist that we did not see. They exhausted me with tests covering my entire body – all to no avail. They remained clueless to my illness. No one knew why an otherwise healthy boy was constantly fainting when he heard noise.

"We finally returned to Bucharest, exhausted and wasted. My mother wanted to keep on hoping for

some type of cure, but the doctors were not very reassuring. They could not figure out the source of my problem. My mother was sitting there one day, bemoaning her life and my predicament to a close family friend, who, albeit also assimilated, did have some knowledge of Judaism. 'Have you gone to a *tzaddik*, righteous person, for a blessing?' the woman asked my mother. 'Never,' my mother replied. 'What can a *tzaddik* do that the greatest specialist could not do? Is he a doctor? Does he know anything about medicine? How could he help me?'

"The friend was adamant: 'You cannot give up hope until you have tried everything. Go to this *tzaddik* and petition his blessing. What do you have to lose?' she asked.

"We went to this holy Jew. I was a four-year-old boy, but I remember his eyes. They were piercing – yet soft and caring. His entire countenance and bearing bespoke a man who carried enormous responsibility on his shoulders. I never saw an angel, but, if I had to imagine the appearance of an angel, I would describe the image of this *tzaddik*.

"He asked my mother various questions concerning my symptoms, who the doctors were with whom we had consulted, and which medical centers we had visited. Finally, after obtaining a complete image of my medical picture, he asked my mother, 'Since he is your firstborn, did you perform the *Pidyon HaBen* rite with him?' My mother had no idea what he was talking about, and she said so. 'What is a *Pidyon HaBen*, and what impact does it have on my son's health?' she asked somewhat impatiently.

"The holy *tzaddik* was very patient as he described the entire procedure to my mother, explaining the significance of the *mitzvah*. Meanwhile, worshippers were entering the building on their way to the *shul* to pray the *Minchah*, afternoon service. The *tzaddik* called in a *minyán*, quorum of ten men, including among them a *Kohen*, and performed the *mitzvah* of *Pidyon HaBen*. I remember that, at the conclusion of the ceremony, the *tzaddik* took my hand in his and said, 'In the merit of the *mitzvah* you will be healed.'

"From that day on, I became a changed person. Noise no longer bothered me. The windows of my house could now be kept open; no more cotton in my ears. I no longer needed them."

Obviously, everyone wanted to know the name of this holy *Rebbe*. Samuel said it was the *Buhasher Rebbe*. Samuel added that every year on *Erev Rosh Hashanah* he, together with his family, visit the *Rebbe* and petition his blessing for a healthy new year.