

## **Sanctify to Me every firstborn, the first issue of every womb, among Bnei Yisrael, of man and beast, is Mine. (13:2)**

*Chazal (Pesikta Rabbasi Parsha 14)* cited by *Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita*, relates the following story. A Jew owned a cow. This was his sole source of livelihood. Unfortunately, his small parcel of land was not producing sufficiently, forcing him to sell his cow to a gentile. He received a good price which would sustain him until his economic situation would take a positive turn. The gentile was very happy with the cow, and he had it plow his field on a daily basis. Come *Shabbos*, something strange happened with the cow: it refused to plow. No coaxing, no beating – nothing could get the cow to plow. In contrast, come Sunday, however, the cow returned to the field and plowed away. The gentile assumed that his new purchase was beset with some form of illness, for which he had not bargained. He returned to the Jewish farmer and demanded his money. He had no interest in purchasing an animal that was unwell.

The Jew understood the source of his cow's reluctance to work on *Shabbos*. He walked over to the cow and said, "When you belonged to me, you did not work on *Shabbos*, because I am a *shomer Shabbos* and not allowed to have my animal work. Now, however, you belong to a gentile. You may work on *Shabbos*." The cow complied and worked the following *Shabbos*. The gentile was flabbergasted by what had taken place, suspecting the Jew of performing a magic incantation to get the cow to work. "I want no part of this cow unless you tell me what you did to get her to work. I did not bargain for magic!"

The Jew explained the laws of *Shabbos* which apply to an animal in the possession of a Jew. When the gentile heard, he became shaken to the core. He said, "If a cow that has no intelligence is able to recognize that there is a *Borei Olam*, Creator of the world, how much more so should I, who has been blessed with cognitive ability, acknowledge G-d." The man converted and learned Torah. He earned the name Yochanan *ben Torsah*, and the *halachic* opinions which he rendered were accepted by *Chazal*.

After citing this incredible story, *Rav Zilberstein* relates an intriguing story with which he is personally familiar. *Eliyahu* is a farmer living on a *kibbutz* in the Northern Galil. *Rav Aryeh Stern*, of the Machon Institute for Agriculture, which makes rulings in accordance with *halacha*, visited with him to discuss among other things the laws of *kedushas bechorah*, sanctity of firstborn animals. He successfully convinced *Eliyahu* that, when a cow is carrying a firstborn calf, he should sell that cow to a gentile. Otherwise, since the calf is born to a mother who belongs to a Jew, the calf is *kadosh*, holy, and must be treated as such. In one case, one of *Eliyahu's* cows gave birth prior to the closing of the sale. *Eliyahu* now had a firstborn calf to deal with. This situation did not last long, as the calf died shortly after birth. (Apparently, this was not unusual.)

The *halachah* is clear in such cases: the calf must be buried, since it is Heavenly-consecrated. At this point, *Eliyahu* balked. "I did not agree to this. It is one thing selling a pregnant cow to a

gentile. It is an entirely different situation when I must go and bury a newborn calf. I do not bury animals. I draw the line at this point.”

Eliyahu was obstinate and refused to change his position. *Rav Stern* was unsuccessful in convincing Eliyahu. The dead carcass could not just lay there. Eliyahu had a stone fence which ran behind his barn. Behind the fence, was a hill which was never used. Eliyahu flung the carcass on the other side of the fence where it would be devoured by various fowl and wild beasts.

End of story? No. A week passed, and the *Rav* returned to confirm the sale of Eliyahu's pregnant cows to a gentile. When they arrived, Eliyahu had an unbelievable story to relate to them, “After I threw the firstborn carcass over the fence, another calf died. I threw that carcass into the same place for the animals to eat. The next morning, another calf died. I gave it the same burial that I gave the others: behind the fence. This went on for a few days, each day bringing the death of another calf. Each day, I added a new carcass to the pile of dead calves. Prior to your arrival today, I looked over the fence to see how many carcasses had been devoured. I was shocked by the sight which greeted me. Every single carcass – even the one which I threw over this morning -- had been completely devoured to the bone. There was absolutely nothing left of those calves. The firstborn calf, which was the first carcass that I threw over, however, was completely untouched!

Eliyahu was not the same man. He was totally shaken up. He viewed this scenario as a sign from Heaven informing him that, even if he was not up to burying a dead calf, *halachah* demanded that he do so. He said, “If the wild animals of the field understand that they are not permitted to touch a *bechor*, firstborn, how can I ignore the will of Hashem?”

Eliyahu became a changed person. He started learning in the local *yeshivah* and changed, not only his perspective, but his lifestyle as well. Today he is called *Rav Eliyahu*.