

From the Rabbi's Desk
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Stories with a Twist [318]

Levi bar Darga Redeemed His Daughter with Thirteen Thousand Gold Dinars

Insights into Babylonian Talmud Gittin 45a

With appreciation to Rabbi Joshua Kullock who reminded me of this story.



Background to Our Story

Pidyon Shvuyim – Redemption of Captives



Pidyon shvuyim (Hebrew: פְּדִיּוֹן שְׁבוּיִים, literally: Redemption of Captives) is a religious duty in Judaism to bring about the release of a fellow Jew captured by slave dealers or robbers, or imprisoned unjustly.

The release of the captive is typically secured by reconciliation, ransom negotiations, or unrelenting pursuit. It is considered an important commandment in Jewish law. The Talmud calls *pidyon shvuyim* a "*mitzvah rabbah*," a great *mitzvah*, as captivity is viewed as even worse than starvation and death (Bava Batra 8b).

Maimonides writes: "The redeeming of captives takes precedence over supporting the poor or clothing them. There is no greater *mitzvah* than redeeming captives for the problems of the captive include being hungry, thirsty, unclothed, and they are in danger of their lives too. Ignoring the need to redeem captives goes against these Torah laws: "Do not harden your heart or shut your hand against your needy fellow" (Devarim 15:7); "Do not stand idly by while your neighbor's blood is shed" (Vayikra 19:16). And misses out on the following mitzvot: "You must surely open your hand to him or her" (Devarim 15:8); "...Love your neighbor as yourself" (Vayikra 19:18); "Rescue those who are drawn to death" (Proverbs 24:11) and "... there is no *mitzvah* greater than the redeeming of captives." (Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Matanot Aniyim 8:10-11)¹

The Shulchan Aruch adds: "Every moment that one delays in freeing captives, in cases where it is possible to expedite their freedom, is considered to be tantamount to murder." (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 252:3)

Despite the importance of the *mitzvah*, it should be performed within a number of boundaries, the most significant of which is:

"One does not ransom captives for more than their value because of Tikkun Olam (literally: "fixing the world"; for the good order of the world; as a precaution for the general good) and one does not help captives escape because of Tikkun Olam." (Mishna, Gittin 4:6).

One of the aims of this restriction is to avoid encouraging kidnappers, or those seeking financial gain by capturing Jews and demanding a *Kofer* (a ransom) in exchange, due to the knowledge of how sensitive Jews are to rescuing their prisoners at any price. There are certain instances in which this restriction does not apply, such as when a man wishes to pay an excessive sum for his freedom, or when the prisoner is a Talmid Chacham, or when a husband is attempting to earn the freedom of his wife (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh De'ah 252:4).

A prominent example of the practice of this restriction in reality was the affair of the arrest of Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg, a Gadol of Ashkenazi Jewry in the 13th century, who is said to have forbidden his *pidyon* from prison citing the aforementioned restriction, despite the fact that according to the Halakha it was permitted to pay a substantial sum for his release.

Another restriction is that if a person repeatedly causes his own capture time after time, a *pidyon* is no longer required after the third time. This refers to a situation in which a person has sold himself or has been taken to prison due to a crime committed intentionally. This restriction only applies when the life of the captive is not in danger; if his captors desire to kill him, a *pidyon* is mandatory.

The question of *pidyon shvuyim*, and particularly the amount of ransom to be paid, is a controversial issue in Israel, when captured Israeli soldiers are to be liberated or exchanged for Palestinian prisoners.

Denarius - Dinar

A dinar also had the name zuz, as in the Had Gadya song where the goat is bought for two zuzim.

Aureos – Gold Dinar

1 gold dinar = 25 dinars



The Text: Babylonian Talmud Gittin 45a

Mishna

מתנבי אין פוֹדִין אֶת הַשְּׁבוּיִין יְתֵר עַל כְּדֵי דְמִיָּהוּ, מִפְּנֵי תִיקוּן הָעוֹלָם. וְאִין מְבַרִיחִין אֶת הַשְּׁבוּיִין, מִפְּנֵי תִיקוּן הָעוֹלָם. רַבֵּן שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן גַּמְלִיאֵל אוֹמֵר: מִפְּנֵי תִקְנַת הַשְּׁבוּיִין.

The captives are not redeemed for more than their actual monetary value, for the betterment of the world; and one may not aid the captives in their attempt to escape from their captors for the betterment of the world.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: For the betterment of the captives, so that kidnappers will not avenge the escape of the captives by treating other captives with cruelty.



How do you understand the expression “for the betterment of the world”?

Gemara

גַּמְ' אִיבְעִיא לְהוּ: הָאִי "מִפְּנֵי תִיקוּן הָעוֹלָם" – מִשּׁוּם דּוּחָקָא דְצַבּוּרָא הוּא, אוּ דִילְמָא מִשּׁוּם דְלֹא לְגַרְבוּ וּלְיִיתוּ טְפִי?
תָּא שְׁמַע: דְלוּי בַר דְרָגָא פְרָקָה לְבַרְתִּיהָ בְתַלְיִסָר אֶלְפִי דִינְרֵי זָהָב.
אָמַר אַבְיִי: וּמֵאֵן לִימָא לֹן דְבַרְצוֹן חֲכָמִים עֶבֶד? דִילְמָא שְׁלֹא בְרַצוֹן חֲכָמִים עֶבֶד.

A dilemma was raised before the Sages: With regard to this expression: For the betterment of the world, is it due to the financial pressure of the community? Is the concern that the increase in price will lead to the community assuming financial pressures it will not be able to manage? Or perhaps it is because the result of this will be that they will not seize and bring additional captives, as they will see that it is not worthwhile for them to take Jews captive?

The Gemara suggests: Come and hear an answer based on the fact that Levi bar Darga redeemed his daughter who was taken captive with thirteen thousand gold dinars. This indicates that private citizens may pay excessive sums to redeem a captive if they so choose. Therefore, it must be that the reason for the ordinance was to avoid an excessive burden being placed upon the community. If the ordinance was instituted to remove the incentive for kidnappers to capture Jews, a private citizen would also not be permitted to pay an excessive sum.

Abaye said: And who told us that he [Levi bar Darga] acted in accordance with the wishes of the Sages? Perhaps he acted against the wishes of the Sages.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

? How many *little goats* can your father buy with thirteen thousand gold dinars?

A Math Question ? Why did Levi bar Darga redeem his daughter with thirteen thousand gold dinars?

Answer 1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Bonus ? Abaye said that perhaps Levi bar Darga acted against the wishes of the Sages? Why didn't Levi bar Darga ask for the Sages' opinion regarding the permissibility of redeeming his daughter with thirteen thousand gold dinars?

"The Twist" – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from This Text.

- ! At Any Price! - The illogical logic of Levi bar Darga!



We know very little about Levi bar Darga, only that he had a daughter, whom he redeemed for the exorbitant amount of 13,000 gold dinars. We also know that Levi bar Darga redeemed his daughter without consulting with the rabbinic authorities of his time. He had the money, he loved his daughter, and he did what his heart told him to do.

Abaye's opinion, that perhaps Levi bar Darga acted against the wishes of the Sages, might be correct. However, a father whose child was taken captive will do anything in his power, logical and illogical, to bring him or her back. Perhaps Abaye should have remembered Hillel's adage (Avot 2:4): *Do not judge your fellow man until you have reached his place.*

May Hashem spare us of these terrible vicissitudes.

This shiur was taught for the first time on March 14, 2024; 159 days since October 7, 2023, when 253 Israelis and foreigners were kidnapped by Hamas.