

Parsha: Shekalim

Resh Lakish said "On the first of Adar, an announcement is made concerning the Shekalim." (Masechet Megillah)

The first of the Four Special Shabbatot is Shabbat Parshat Shekalim. It occurs either on the last Shabbat of the month of Shevat, or on the Shabbat which in that year coincides with Rosh Chodesh Adar, or on a Shabbat early in Adar. A special reading, taken from Parshat Ki Tisa (Shemot 30:11-16) is appended to the regular Torah reading.

The reading describes a census of the Jewish People which was taken while the Jews were in the Wilderness, after their Exodus from Egypt. The Torah, here and in other places, teaches that it is forbidden to count Jews in the ordinary manner; rather, the People should be called upon to contribute items, which would then be counted.

In the case of this census, the item which was contributed, by rich and poor alike, was a half shekel, the "shekel" being the coin in use at the time, roughly equivalent to our dollar. The collected shekels, or "shekalim, in Hebrew, were then used for the construction and upkeep of the Mishkan, the portable Temple, which was used until the Temple found its permanent residence (despite its destruction twice, the place retains its holiness) in Jerusalem.

The equal participation of all the People symbolizes that all Jews must share in achieving national goals, by giving up his selfish, personal interests for the sake of the nation. One who does so gains infinite benefit, because the mission of Israel is dependent upon the unity of the whole. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, cited in the ArtScroll Stone Edition of the Chumash)

The verses also speak in terms of atonement that is achieved by participation in this half-shekel assessment... A solitary human being can seldom survive Divine scrutiny; what person is free of sin and shortcomings? But when a nation becomes one, it ascends to a higher plane, because all its individuals merge their virtues with one another. This is also the reason that it is better to pray with a "minyan," a quorum, to establish a community, whose virtues can merge, instead of praying individually.

Parshat Shekalim recalls the time of Purim, which was also a time of Divine scrutiny and judgment for the Jewish People. The name of the Day of Atonement, Yom HaKippurim, the “Day which is like Purim,” is also suggestive of this relationship, although Purim also contains the word “Pur,” lottery, to suggest how G-d uses what seems to be “chance” in His administration of the world.

At the time of Purim, an edict had been issued by an earthly “court;” namely, the “court” of Haman and Achashverosh (often acting unknowingly as an emissary of the Heavenly Court), calling for the harsh punishment, if not the total destruction, G-d Forbid, of the Jewish People. The Fast of Taanit Esther, combined with the Repentance of the Jewish People, drew the nation into a unity, which was once again able to receive upon itself the “yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven,” and renew their acceptance of the Torah, “the Jews accepted again what they had begun to do,” (Megillat Esther 9:23), and thus merit their redemption.

The Healing Precedes the Wound

Resh Lakish said, “It was revealed and known before the One Who spoke and the world came into being that Haman would spend a large sum of money in order to destroy Israel, as it is so written in the third chapter of Megillat Esther. Therefore, He preceded Haman’s silver by Israel’s silver. And this accords with what the Talmud says in Masechet Megillah, “On the first of Adar, an announcement is made concerning the Shekalim.”

A Fiery Coin

If a person commits a grave transgression and forfeits his life to the government, can he ransom himself with money? And even if there were a monetary ransom for one found guilty before a king of flesh and blood, is there a monetary ransom for one found guilty before the King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed-be-He? And even if he were able to ransom his life with money, could he do so with some small coin? And Israel was found liable to a death penalty before the King of Kings, but G-d bade them only to give half-a-shekel!

Moshe was perplexed and could not understand this matter. How could this small coin suffice to be a life ransom for those who bowed down to the calf, and said to it: 'This is your god, O Israel, which has brought you forth from the Land of Egypt?' Rabbi Meir said: 'G-d brought forth the likeness of a fiery coin from underneath the Throne of His Glory: He showed it to Moshe and said to him: 'This they shall give.' The likeness of this they shall give' (Jerusalem Talmud, Shekalim Chapter 1).

We are taught thereby: A person may give much silver and gold without attaining any forgiveness for his sin, if he fails to repent, and remains immersed in sin. On the other hand, a person may give a small coin as ransom for his soul and attain complete forgiveness, provided that he has completely 'uprooted' himself from his sin, and has repented with all his heart. In such an instance, even the inanimate silver coin which he gives in quest of forgiveness, rises upwards (though it normally is pulled downwards), till it becomes likened in his hand to fire (which ascends upwards). And even this coin, though it is small, attains forgiveness for him.

The Desire to Perform a Mitzvah

There is benevolence in action, and benevolence in will and desire. Our sins have caused us the loss of the Sanctuary; there are no sacrificial offerings; the Mitzvah of the half-shekel does not apply. Nevertheless, the Mitzvah of reading the portion of Shekalim from the Torah has not ceased. For the essence of the Mitzvah of the half-shekel is to awaken the benevolent desire of a person's heart towards the fulfillment of his Creator's will; and this awakening of the heart's desire always applies, and it is achieved when a Jew reads from the Torah the passages on this theme.

Furthermore, at times the desire to give is greater than the contribution itself. And though we are not capable of contributing towards the services of the Sanctuary, nevertheless, since we yearn to do so and rejoice in the Mitzvah as we read it in the Torah, the Torah regards it as if we had fulfilled the Mitzvah. Thereby, may we also merit its practical fulfillment, speedily, in our days.