

Parshas Pekudei 5771

COIN OF FIRE: AN ELUCIDATION OF THE MACHTZIS HASHEKEL (HALF-SHEKEL)

This is the first in a series of Shabbosos that garner a specially designated Torah reading (in addition to the standard weekly *parshah*). The section detailing the mitzvah of the *machtzis hashekel* contribution is read this week. The relevance of this particular section to the current time period is apparent from the Mishnah in Shekalim (1:1):

בְּאֶחָד בְּאֶדָר מְשַׁמְעִין עַל הַשְּׁקָלִים.

“On the first of Adar, an announcement was made concerning the *shekels*.”

The *shekels* went toward the financing of the daily sacrifices brought in the Beis Hamikdash. As this pool of revenue was renewed every Nisan, a call was issued the prior month to apprise the people of their pending obligatory *machtzis hashekel* contribution. In proximity to Rosh Chodesh Adar, then, the process is commemorated through the Torah-reading.

In any event, the *machtzis hashekel* obligation is brought into focus at this time, allowing us to better scrutinize and understand this rather curious institution. The very notion of the uniform levying of this denomination is itself a cause for study; one may have thought that a nice round number like a full *shekel* would have been more sensible and practical. Yet, the Torah demands strict adherence to the specific amount of a *machtzis hashekel*, to which “the rich man shall not exceed” and from which “the poor man shall not detract,”

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(*Shemos 30:15*). Why the insistence on this fractional sum?

HARD LESSONS

One of the teachings most revealing of this topic is found in the Medrash Tanchuma (*Ki Sisa 9*), which relates what took place when Hashem instructed Moshe in this mitzvah. There was an apparent need for a visual display, and so Hashem showed Moshe a coin of fire taken from under His Throne of Glory. This was not the first such occurrence, as the Menorah also came with a visual demonstration. Rashi explains the verse, “And so shall you make the Menorah” (*Bamidbar 8:4*) in a literal fashion; since Moshe was having difficulty grasping the intricacies of the Menorah, Hashem pointed with His “finger” to an actual Menorah, stating “*This is how you should fashion it.*”

R’ Dovid Parvasky (*Bad Kodesh al HaTorah*) was somewhat mystified by the aforementioned Medrash. It is understandable why Moshe might have needed extra assistance in clarifying the many intricate details associated with the Menorah; but the matter of the *machtzis hashekel* (one might have thought) should be relatively straightforward. What exactly was so complicated about a simple coin that necessitated a whole elaborate display? Furthermore, if Moshe did in fact require assistance in understanding the *machtzis hashekel*, how did this particular demonstration help? After all, the coins that B’nei Yisrael were to give were made out of metal, not fire! What was the message and significance of the fiery coin?

The Chasam Sofer (*D’rashos, parshas Shekalim, year 5591*) takes a novel approach to this Medrash. He explains that Moshe’s confusion related to the inscription that was to adorn the coin, and his issue was one of humility, not comprehension. The standard coin usually bears an inscription relating to the monarch or government issuing

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the currency. Moshe was actually the king of B'nei Yisrael but was loathe to publicize this fact on the coins. The fiery image displayed by Hashem revealed a coin on which was inscribed, "Moshe, Rabban Shel Yisrael (Rabbinic Master of Yisrael)," and the matter was settled. (However, the need for a fiery image is not altogether clarified according to this explanation and requires further study.)

The Alshich offers another approach, which goes to the very heart of the *machtzis hashekel* requirement. There seems to be a recurring theme in this section: the terms "atonement" or "redemption of the soul" appear repeatedly therein. This indicates that the *machtzis hashekel* was intended to atone for the major transgression perpetrated in the adjacent section: the sin of the golden calf. What vexed Moshe was the seeming incongruity of the crime and its restitution: how could a mere coin – and a relatively "cheap" one at that – possibly compensate for the enormity of this heinous act? Hashem responded by displaying a coin of fire, taken

from under the Throne of Glory. The implication was that Hashem viewed the exchange as much more than just small change. Rather, in His eyes, it was accounted to the Jewish people as if it was their very souls (which are formed from spiritual "fire" originating from the Throne itself) that they were relinquishing to the Almighty. And why only half? Recall that it was only the men who took part in this sin; the women refused to donate their jewelry to the idolatrous project. As every soul is composed of male and female counterparts, it emerges that only *half* of each soul required rectification.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

How, exactly, was the payment of the *machtzis hashekel* considered a gift of their very souls? Perhaps the idea can be explained in light of R' Moshe Shternbuch's exposition of the subject (*Ta'am V'Da'as*). He provides a most amazing insight: there actually was a second "half" to the *machtzis hashekel*, and this was the intent of the "coin of fire."

As mentioned, Moshe wondered how such a miniscule amount – a mere half-*shekel* – was sufficient "restitution" for the sin of the golden calf. With the flaming display, Hashem meant to convey that they were supplying a lot more than the value of that coin. The essential component was *hislahavus* – the *fire of enthusiasm*. When a Jew would give with a full heart, and fulfill Hashem's command enthusiastically, this "fire" was worth more than the coin itself. In fact, it was for this very reason that the amount of a half-*shekel* was mandated in the first place. The first half was the *physical* coin; the other "half" was comprised of the *hislahavus* of the giver, a spiritual entity reflecting the heart and soul of the servant of Hashem. In a sense, the other half of the *shekel* was a coin of fire.

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