

Shekalim

Chavruta Mekorot

The parsha of Shekalim is fascinating and rich and an ideal opportunity for a productive chavruta. Find some time over Shabbat and sit down to learn for an hour!

1. Study the parsha: Shemot 30:11-16.

- Looking at the peshat of the parsha and paying attention to recurring phrases, what do you identify as the major objective of the half-shekel contribution?
- Under what circumstances does Am Yisrael make this donation? – To where does the money go?
- Can you identify MULTIPLE purposes within this parsha?
- Is this an annual tax? Maybe this happened only once i.e. in the 1st year of the Midbar. Can you bring a proof from the pesukim?

2. See **Rashi** on passuk 15 who determines that THREE contributions were made.

- Identify the NATURE and PURPOSE of each contribution. Can you find the TEXTUAL proof for each.
- In this context, make sure that you see Shemot 38:25

3. If you can get hold of a **Mishna**, you might find it interesting to see the mitzva of the Shekalim from the perspective of Chazal.

- See Mishnayot: 4:1; 1:1-3; chapter 3. (I know, it's a weird order, but you will understand things better this way.)

4. See the **Haftara for Parshat Shekalim**. (see Melachim II 11:17-12:18)

- Does this perspective conform more with the parsha in SHEMOT or with the view of the MISHNA? Give some proof for your answer.

5. If you have some time, then see the long RAMBAN (the 1st half) on 30:12 and the interesting opening Seforno.

SHIUR

Here is just a sort of shorthand shiur regarding Parshat Shekalim which we shall be reading this week. Why this week? I am sure that many of you are aware of the opening Mishna in Massechet Shekalim: (Shekalim 1:1-3)

"On the first of Adar an announcement is made regarding the Shekalim and Kilayim.
On the fifteenth of Adar, the Megilla is read in the towns, they begin to repair the roads, the cisterns and Mikvaot... and they mark the graves
On the fifteenth, the tax collectors are present in the cities,
On the twenty-fifth of the month, they sit in the Temple..."

What is happening here? Mishna Shekalim describes the technical details of the annual half Shekel tax. The collection of the money began on 15th Adar, and to give some advance warning, a public announcement was made on the 1st of Adar. We read Parshat Shekalim on the Shabbat prior to Rosh Chodesh Adar to remember this practice.

What was this donation used for? The Mishna (4:1) tells us that it was used for the Korbanot Tzibbur – the "public sacrifices" – for the Temple service. What are these "Public Korbanot"? It's very simple. There are korbanot brought by individuals: for sins, for celebrations, for all manner of ritual purification purposes. However there are

certain korbanot – the Tamid, daily sacrifice; the Mussaf etc. – that are not on behalf of any particular individual, but rather, on behalf of Klal Yisrael, the nation as a single entity. Hence these public offerings must be bought from a communal account.

The Shekalim account is specially designed to ensure no differentiation between rich and poor, and it collects the funds for the year's public korbanot. Why was this method of taxation used? Very simply, the Korbanot Tzibbur have to be donations of the entire nation of Israel. Each year, the half shekel becomes the fund that pays for these public sacrifices. The collection is renewed each Nissan. Adar becomes the month of collection in advance of Nissan.

Just as a side point, one can see, by looking at the Mishnayot mentioned earlier, that other preparations were made in advance of the month of Nissan and the Aliya LaRegel that would be happening for Pesach. They would fix the roads and clean up the wells after the damage of the winter. All this in anticipation of the masses who are to make their way to Yerushalayim for Chag. To meet a different need, the Mikvaot are fixed and cleaned so that the people can purify themselves on the way to Yerushalayim, and gravesites are clearly marked so that people will not come into contact with them thereby becoming ritually impure. The Shekalim are also part of this wider mobilization towards Chag, as there will be a greater need for Korbanot Tzibbur over the chag.

BACK TO PARSHAT SHEKALIM

In Shemot ch.30, Parshat Shekalim would seem to offer a variety of reasons for the half-shekel donation, and it is most difficult to identify one particular objective.

First let us note recurring phrases:

- The root PK"D – v.12(x3),13,14
- KOFER NEFESH/LECHAPER AL NAFSHOTEIHEM – v.12,15,16(x2)
- TERUMA L'HASHEM – v.13,14,15
- The root NT"N (give)- v.12,13,14,15 as opposed to LK"CH (take)- v.16

What does this tell us? Each phrase that is repeated here gives us a different indicator as to the nature of these Half-Shekels. PK"D indicates "counting" that the Shekels are used for census purposes. The KOFER tells me that these shekels atone in some way. How? For what? The TERUMA tells me that this is somehow a donation to the Mishkan. What exactly was the Half Shekel donating towards. And how do these elements merge into a single conceptual understanding of the Half-Shekel tax?

Now we understand how the both peshat, and the Mefarshim identify a variety of strands in which to understand this Mitzva. We shall attempt to delineate some of these:

1. The half-shekel as a method of counting the people. This is clearly indicated by the use of the verb PK"D which indicates the process of counting. In addition, both the verb PK"D, and the phrase "TISSA ET ROSH BNEI YISRAEL" have explicit parallels in the classic census in Sefer Bamidbar 1-2.

But what role might the Half Shekel play in counting the nation?

Counting, plagues and the Evil Eye:

Within this aspect of counting, we have an additional detail. We are informed that by using this half-shekel method: "that there not be a plague when counting them". Why should counting a nation incur a plague? The obvious example would be the story of David Hamelech in Shmuel Bet ch.24 in which King David performs a national census that precipitates God's ire.

Now of course, this is a difficult concept. What is wrong with counting people? And why might it precipitate danger, why would God find counting the nation objectionable. Rashi connects this understanding with the philosophy of the Evil eye, "Ayin Hara."

"Once something is numerically defined, the evil eye takes control, and death comes to the world as we find in the days of (King) David." (Rashi verse 12)

In fact my Grandfather once related how his Grandmother in Poland used to say: Three things you don't count – your age, your money, and your children. And although she apparently knew how many children were in the family, no one in the family knew their true age! Somehow, this superstitious approach of Rashi found a popular echo. (In this context see the very interesting and more rational approach of Shadal.)

In a different but related direction, the Sephorno (passuk 12) states:

"The very NEED to count people comes from the different fates that befall human beings: birth and death. And this is a product of sin, as the Rabbis state: There is no death without sin (Shabbat 55a). Hence, every census is a reminder of (mortality which is a reminder of) sin. It is then suitable that one offer atonement for ones very life."

War:

The Ibn Ezra (HeAroch on passuk 12,) understands the verb PK"D very differently, and consequently he reframes the notion of the "plague." Ibn Ezra reads the verb PK"D in a military context. Hence, only when you go to war, **in order to gain atonement**, one donates the half Shekel.

What happens if Am Yisrael go to war without this mode of preparation? Then they are liable to suffer a plague. Here, we might add the phrase that appears in passuk 16 – ZIKARON – which is also used in the context of war in Bamidbar 10:9.

2. The half-shekel as a means of donating to the construction of the Mishkan.

This is emphasised by the phrase TERUMA LHASHEM. But Sefer Shemot explicitly records the fact that the silver sockets for the Mishkan came from the half-shekel donation (see 38:25-8). The Ibn Ezra sees this in conceptual terms:

"The Mishkan stands on none other than the atoning silver – a constant ZIKARON (memory, reminder, presence) for Bnei Yisrael."

The Ibn Ezra clearly sees the half shekel base for the Mishkan structure as more than coincidence. Our Half-Shekels at the very foundation of the boards of the Mishkan, weave the essence and the intense presence of the community of Israel into the very fabric of the Mishkan.

3. The half-shekel as a means of contributing to the purchase of Korbanot. This might be the meaning of passuk 16. See also Rashi on passuk 15; the second "Teruma L'Hashem."

The discussion here as to the various uses and motives in the donation of the Mishkan will have critical ramifications in the degree to which this mitzva is viewed as a timeless mitzva or a timely one.

- If it is about the donation to the construction of the Mishkan, then this Mitzva took place only ONCE.
- If it is about counting the nation, then it will take place, on an INFREQUENT basis, for all time.
- If it is about supporting the yearly korbanot, then it is a regular ANNUAL donation.

4. Atonement : The theme of atonement is repeatedly emphasised by the phraseology here. Once again, our understanding of this phrase is going to depend upon our reading of the general thrust of the Parsha.

In the Midrash, this notion of atonement is related to the sin of the Golden Calf:

"Half a Shekel: Because they sinned at the hour of six, a HALF of the day ... Rabbi Yochanan: because they transgressed the Ten Commandments, they each bring TEN gera – a half shekel..." (Tanchuma)

Maybe for a further twist on the "atonement theme" and a connection with Chodesh Adar, we should be aware of the Gemara in Massechet Megilla 13b which plays upon the use of the verb SH"K"L in the Megilla (Esther 3:9):

"Reish Lakish said: God was fully aware that Haman was going to weigh out Shekels for (the lives) of (the people of) Israel. Therefore, He put their (Israel's) shekalim before His (Haman's) as it states in the Mishna: On the 1st of Adar they announce the collection of the shekels."

Reish Lakish is drawing a parallel between the symbolism of the half-shekel and the shekels that Haman paid out to Achashverosh in order to buy the rights to kill the Jews. In each case, a coin represented a life. Our shekels atone for our lives. Haman's shekels threatened our lives. There is a clear symmetry. Is Reish Lakish suggesting a causal relationship? – that our shekels annulled the effect of Haman's shekels?

A WORD FROM THE SEFAT EMET

We have not presented an exhaustive review of the topic but I hope we have opened a variety of avenues of thought, and offered certain angles for the "half-shekel" to be understood with greater depth.

In conclusion, let us bring a few lines from the Sefat Emet, one of the Gerer Rebbes in Europe, who weaves together many themes in a very original direction.

"On the first of Adar an announcement is made regarding the Shekalim and Kilayim¹: Why in Adar? It would appear that Adar is a time of Teshuva. Just as Ellul is the end of the year, (leading to Rosh Hashana) so Nissan is the advent of a new year (and Adar precedes Nissan, prepares for it).

In Adar we practice Teshuva MeAhava (from love) hence we increase in joy (marbim be'simcha) in order to arouse the spirit of generosity in every Jew. This is the concept of the shekalim which is the awakening of "giving" in Israel, because God has no need for a half shekel but rather, the awakening of Israel to their father in heaven ... Nissan is the first of months (chodashim) which indicates renewal which can come through joy and love." (5631)

"On the first of Adar an announcement is made regarding the Shekalim and Kilayim.: as it states (Mishlei 18:16) "A man's gift will create expanse for him, and will place him before the great." For by the very decision that a person takes to keep a Mitzva, he becomes in some way, free ... and even though the donation is in the month of Nissan, the decision is taken in Adar.

This "announcement" is relevant to every individual, that when one hears Parshat Shekalim, one should take a decision to give... because via the very commitment a person expands himself from restriction. This is the meaning of the word "kilayim" from the word "Beit Kelleh – a prison." Through the shekalim we become free." (5637)

Adar is seen as the time of preparation for Nissan. Nissan, Pesach, is the time of release, freedom. By us opening ourselves to the notion of "giving", indicated by the concept of the Half-Shekel, we prepare to release ourselves, to free ourselves, on Pesach. The joy and giving of Adar are a prelude to the month of Nissan which is a release from slavery and the start of a relationship with God.

Of course many Mitzvot of Adar relate to giving: Matanot l'evyonim, Mishloach Manot.

Let us open our hearts to other Jews. Let us go beyond the boundaries of self, so that we may facilitate our own renewal, our own freedom, our personal redemption.

¹ As the Spring approaches, there might have been wild seeds that have sprouted in the fields causing Kilayim, mixed crops of different species in a field, a phenomena that the Torah forbids. Hence as the Spring arrives, we are instructed to be check our fields for Kilayim.

Shabbat Shalom