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COINS OF KAPPARAH

There were few things that Moshe did not know. In fact, the Gemara (*Menachos* 29a) records that there were only three things that Hashem needed to demonstrate to Moshe because of Moshe's lack of understanding: the intricacies of the Menorah, the image of the new moon that called for the declaration of Rosh Chodesh, and the exact *sheratzim* or crawling creatures that were deemed impure. Yet Rashi on Parshas Shekalim (*Shemos* 30:13) references the medrash (*Tanchuma* 9) that describes how Moshe was troubled by a coin! On the words “*zeh yitnu*” Rashi writes that Moshe was shown a coin of fire to demonstrate the mitzvah of *machatzis hashekel*. Tosafos (*Menachos* 29a and *Chullin* 42a) wonders why the shekel was not included in the original list. But more perplexing is how a simple coin joined the list of such complicated topics. What was too complex? What did Moshe not understand?



The *Shitah Mekubetzes* on *Menachos* comments that Moshe found it difficult to comprehend how a small coin could atone for the great sin of the golden calf. Indeed, it is hard to understand. What, then, is the answer?

There is another enigmatic Gemara about the *machatzis hashekel* that also requires explanation. The Gemara (*Megillah* 13b) writes that Hashem knew that Haman would pay *shekalim* to destroy Bnei Yisrael and as such, Hashem preempted Haman by

commanding the mitzvah of *machatzis hashekel*. When did Haman's *shekalim* become his “secret weapon” against the Jewish people? Furthermore, how could the mitzvah of *machatzis hashekel* become Bnei Yisrael's first line of defense against destruction? What about this mitzvah was so special?

The medrash (*Shmos Rabbah* 41) comments that it was beautiful when Bnei Yisrael said the words “*naaseh venishma*” — “We will do and we will hear,” but it was quite the opposite when they said about the golden calf “*eileh elohecha Yisrael*” — “Israel, this is your god!” Why does the medrash juxtapose these two seemingly unrelated statements?

The *Beis Halevi*, *Mishpatim*, explains that the beauty of the statement of “*naaseh venishma*” was that it was in the plural; “**we** will do and **we** will hear.” Bnei Yisrael accepted the mitzvot upon themselves in a remarkable demonstration of unity as they took

responsibility for each other. The statement of “*eileh elohecha Yisrael*” was just the opposite. Even though many in Bnei Yisrael did not succumb to idol worship themselves, they turned to their neighbor and said, “this is **your** god!; not mine, but yours.” The sin of the golden calf was in fact the undoing of everything wonderful that had occurred when Bnei Yisrael said “*naaseh venishma*” as they shirked the responsibility that they should have had for their neighbors.

With this understanding we can perhaps understand how a coin could atone for such a sin. The Alshich, *Toras Moshe, Ki Sisa*, asks why we are charged with giving half a shekel. Why not give a full shekel? The Alshich explains that by giving half a shekel we demonstrate that the only way to be complete is with someone else’s half shekel. A Jew can only be complete with the help of another Jew.

This, in fact, is how a coin can atone for the sin of the golden calf. While the golden calf represented the epitome of a lack of unity, the mitzvah of *machatzis hashekel* represents the necessity of Jews remaining as one.

With this, we can understand the Gemara in *Megillah* about our *shekalim* and Haman’s *shekalim*. Haman claimed that Bnei Yisrael were a nation that was “*mefuzar umeforad*” — scattered and divided. He understood that Bnei Yisrael suffered from a lack of unity, a problem that threatened their existence. Rava, in *Megillah* (13b), commented that this was the *lishna bisha*, or *lashon hara* that Haman used to prosecute Bnei Yisrael before Hashem. Esther, in response, declared that Mordechai should “*lech kenos es kol haYehudim* — go and gather all of the Jews together.” This reunification of the

people, coming together in teshuva and tefilla, is what saved Bnei Yisrael from Haman’s decree. Haman gave his *shekalim*, symbolic of Bnei Yisrael’s lack of unity, to encourage their destruction. Hashem preempted this by commanding the mitzvah of *machatzis hashekel*, which represented the ultimate unity of Bnei Yisrael.

The Gemara (*Shabbos* 88a) describes how Bnei Yisrael’s acceptance of the Torah on Har Sinai was “forced,” since the mountain was raised over their heads. However, Bnei Yisrael reaccepted the Torah during the days of Mordechai and Esther following the salvation of the Purim story. What specifically about the Purim story led to an acceptance of Torah? True, it was a joyful moment in history and one that demonstrated Hashem’s love for His nation. But why did that translate, now more than ever, into an acceptance of Torah like none other?

Perhaps the explanation is based on the above. If Purim was indeed a time of the reunification of Bnei Yisrael, as signified by the *shekalim*, then there was no greater time for acceptance of Torah. Just as on Har Sinai Bnei Yisrael were “*ke’ish echad belev echad*” — like one man with one heart — a prerequisite for the acceptance of Torah, so too here, the unification of Bnei Yisrael allowed for a new acceptance of Torah. The Vilna Gaon comments that the words in the *Megillah* (9:16), “*ve’amod al nafsham* — they stood up for their lives — is stated in the singular to demonstrate that they were “*beachdus gemura*” — in complete unity. On the *passuk* (9:23), “*Vekibel haYehudim*” — the Jews accepted — the Gaon comments again that the singular demonstrates “*shekulam kiblu ke’echad*” — they all accepted as one — a reference to

the unity at the original acceptance of Torah on Har Sinai. Bnei Yisrael’s original unity when they said “*naaseh venishma*,” which was lost when they said “*Eileh elohecha Yisrael*” by the sin of the golden calf, was recreated in the days of Purim allowing for a complete *kabalas haTorah*.

This demonstration of unity emphasized in the *Megillah* also explains the peculiar emphasis on the mitzvos of *chessed* on Purim. What do *matanos laevyonim* and *mishloach manos* have to do with Hashem’s salvation on Purim? There are other joyous days throughout the year when we are not commanded to perform similar mitzvos. Why are they appropriate here?

In the Nesivos’s commentary on the *Megillah*, *Megillas Setarim* (9:19), he explains that:

ואח"כ כששבו בתשובה שלימה נעשה אחדות ביניהם ונקהליו בעריהם וחיבבו זה את זה, ולזה אנו עושין ומשלוח מנות איש לרעהו להורות שע"י החיבוב לחבירו בא הגאולה.

Afterward when they did complete teshuva there was complete unity and they gathered in their cities and they loved one another. And it is for this reason that we give mishloach manos each man to his friend, to demonstrate that because of this love for one’s friend, the salvation arrived.

Parshas *Shekalim*, the month of Adar, and the day of Purim are a time to remember that our secret to survival and success is the unity of Bnei Yisrael and our responsibility to encourage and inspire one another. Let us use the message of the *shekalim* and *mishloach manos* to reinforce this idea. In this way, we can recreate the unity felt at Har Sinai and on Purim so that our acceptance of Torah will be complete, and our service of Hashem can be *keish echad belev echad*.