

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

Ki Tissa tells of one of the most shocking moments of the forty years in the wilderness. Less than six weeks after the greatest revelation in the history of religion -- Israel's encounter with God at Mount Sinai -- they made a Golden Calf. Either this was idolatry or perilously close to it, and it caused God to say to Moses, who was with Him on the mountain, "Now do not try to stop Me when I unleash My wrath against them to destroy them" (Ex. 32:10).

What I want to look at here is the role played by Aaron, for it was he who was the de facto leader of the people in the absence of Moses, and it was he whom the Israelites approached with their proposal: "The people began to realise that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Make us a god [or an oracle] to lead us. We have no idea what happened to Moses, the man who brought us out of Egypt.'" (Ex. 32:1)

It was Aaron who should have seen the danger, Aaron who should have stopped them, Aaron who should have told them to wait, have patience and trust. Instead this is what happened: "Aaron answered them, 'Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.' So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made it a molten Calf. Then they said, 'This, Israel, is your god, who brought you out of Egypt,' When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the Calf and announced, 'Tomorrow there will be a festival to the Lord.' So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented peace offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry." (Ex. 32:2-6)

The Torah itself seems to blame Aaron, if not for what he did then at least for what he allowed to happen: "Moses saw that the people were running wild and that Aaron had let them get out of control and so become a laughing-stock to their enemies." (Ex. 32:25)

Now Aaron was not an insignificant figure. He had shared the burden of leadership with Moses. He had either already become or was about to be appointed High Priest. What then was in his mind while this drama was being enacted?

Essentially there are three lines of defence in the

Midrash, the Zohar, and the medieval commentators. The first defence, as suggested by the Zohar, is that Aaron was playing for time. His actions were a series of delaying tactics. He told the people to take the gold earrings their wives, sons and daughters were wearing, reasoning to himself: "While they are quarrelling with their children and wives about the gold, there will be a delay and Moses will come." His instructions to build an altar and proclaim a festival to God the next day were likewise intended to buy time, for Aaron was convinced that Moses was on his way.

The second defence is to be found in the Talmud and is based on the fact that when Moses departed to ascend the mountain he left not just Aaron but also Hur in charge of the people (Ex. 24:14). Yet Hur does not figure in the narrative of the Golden Calf. According to the Talmud, Hur had opposed the people, telling them that what they were about to do was wrong, and was then killed by them. Aaron saw this and decided that proceeding with the making of the Calf was the lesser of two evils: "Aaron saw Hur lying slain before him and said to himself: If I do not obey them, they will do to me what they did to Hur, and so will be fulfilled [the fear of] the Prophet, 'Shall the Priest [Aaron] and the Prophet [Hur] be slain in the Sanctuary of God?' (Lamentations 2:20). If that happens, they will never be forgiven. Better let them worship the Golden Calf, for which they may yet find forgiveness through repentance." (Sanhedrin 7a)

The third, argued by Ibn Ezra, is that the Calf was not an idol at all, and what the Israelites did was, in Aaron's view, permissible. After all, their initial complaint was, "We have no idea what happened to Moses." They did not want a god-substitute but a Moses-substitute, an oracle, something through which they could discern God's instructions -- not unlike the function of the Urim and Tummim that were later given to the High Priest. Those who saw the Calf as an idol, saying, "This is your god who brought you out of Egypt," were only a small minority -- three thousand out of six hundred thousand -- and for them Aaron could not be blamed.

So there is a systematic attempt in the history of interpretation to mitigate or minimise Aaron's culpability -- understandably so, since we do not find explicitly that Aaron was punished for the Golden Calf (though Abarbanel holds that he was punished later). Yet, with all the generosity we can muster, it is hard to see Aaron as anything but weak, especially in the reply he gives to Moses when his brother finally appears and demands an

explanation: "Do not be angry, my lord," Aaron answered. 'You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, 'Make us a god who will go before us...' So I told them, 'Whoever has any gold jewellery, take it off.' Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this Calf!' (Ex. 32:22-24)

There is more than a hint here of the excuses Saul gave Samuel, explaining why he did not carry out the Prophet's instructions. He blames the people. He suggests he had no choice. He was passive. Things happened. He minimises the significance of what has transpired. This is weakness, not leadership.

What is really extraordinary, therefore, is the way later tradition made Aaron a hero, most famously in the words of Hillel: "Be like the disciples of Aaron, loving peace, pursuing peace, loving people and drawing them close to the Torah." (Avot 1:12)

There are famous aggadic traditions about Aaron and how he was able to turn enemies into friends and sinners into observers of the law. The Sifra says that Aaron never said to anyone, "You have sinned" -- all the more remarkable since one of the tasks of the High Priest was, once a year on Yom Kippur, to atone for the sins of the nation. Yet there is none of this explicitly in the Torah itself. The only proof-text cited by the Sages is the passage in Malachi, the last of the Prophets, who says about the Kohen: "My covenant was with him of life and peace... He walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin." (Malachi 2:5-6)

But Malachi is talking about priesthood in general rather than the historical figure of Aaron. Perhaps the most instructive passage is the Talmudic discussion (Sanhedrin 6b) as to whether arbitration, as opposed to litigation, is a good thing or a bad thing. The Talmud presents this as a conflict between two role models, Moses and Aaron: Moses's motto was: Let the law pierce the mountain. Aaron, however, loved peace and pursued peace and made peace between man and man.

Moses was a man of law, Aaron of mediation (not the same thing as arbitration but considered similar). Moses was a man of truth, Aaron of peace. Moses sought justice, Aaron sought conflict resolution. There is a real difference between these two approaches. Truth, justice, law: these are zero-sum equations. If X is true, Y is false. If X is in the right, Y is in the wrong. Mediation, conflict resolution, compromise, the Aaron-type virtues, are all attempts at a non-zero outcome in which both sides feel that they have been heard and their claim has, at least in part, been honoured.

The Talmud puts it brilliantly by way of a comment on the phrase, "Judge truth and the justice of peace in your gates" (Zech. 8:16). On this the Talmud asks what the phrase "the justice of peace" can possibly mean. "If there is justice, there is no peace. If there is peace, there is no justice. What is the 'justice of peace'? This means arbitration."

Now let's go back to Moses, Aaron and the Golden Calf. Although it is clear that God and Moses regarded the Calf as a major sin, Aaron's willingness to pacify the people -- trying to delay them, sensing that if he simply said "No" they would kill him and make it anyway -- was not wholly wrong. To be sure, at that moment the people needed a Moses, not an Aaron. But under other circumstances and in the long run they needed both: Moses as the voice of truth and justice, Aaron with the people-skills to conciliate and make peace.

That is how Aaron eventually emerged, in the long hindsight of tradition, as the peace-maker. Peace is not the only virtue, and peace-making not the only task of leadership. We must never forget that when Aaron was left to lead, the people made a Golden Calf. But never think, either, that a passion for truth and justice is sufficient. Moses needed an Aaron to hold the people together. In short, leadership is the capacity to hold together different temperaments, conflicting voices, and clashing values.

Every leadership team needs both a Moses and an Aaron, a voice of truth and a force for peace. *Covenant and Conversation is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl zt"l* ©2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Torah Lights

“**W**hen you take the sum of the children of Israel after their number, each one shall be counted by giving an atonement offering for his life. In this manner, they will not be stricken by the plague when they are counted. Everyone included in the census must include a half-shekel.” (Exodus 30:12–13) To count or not to count is not the question, but rather how to count! And whom you cannot count! At first glance, one of the more curious laws in the Torah is the prohibition to count Jews. The Talmud records: “R. Elazar said, “Whoever counts an Israelite, transgresses a [single] prohibition, as it is written, ‘And the number of the children are as the sand of the sea which cannot be measured’” (Hosea 2:1). R. Nahman bar Isaac says, “He transgresses two prohibitions, as the verse concludes, ‘and cannot be counted.’” (Yoma 22b)

Given this, how are we to understand the opening of the portion of Ki Tisa, where God commands Moses to count the Israelites? Count, but not by counting heads, but rather by counting the half-shekel coins which every Israelite was commanded to bring. But isn't this actually a subterfuge, a kind of legal fiction?

Moreover, what is the significance of a half-shekel? If you're using coins, would a whole shekel not better represent the “whole” person?

Furthermore, how are we to understand the word “tisa?” The Hebrew root implies “lifting up.” Rashi,

citing Targum Onkelos, informs us that it means to obtain, or to receive, which is how most translations treat the word: "When you take sum of the children of Israel..." The Midrash (Pesikta Rabati 11) picks up on the idea of "lifting" but goes one step further; more than to lift, Ki Tisa is about uplifting, not just to raise but to exalt. And in this count of counts, we are exalting not only Israel, but also the God of Israel. "In whatever manner you can uplift this nation, uplift. For it says, ki tisa et rosh bnai Yisrael [When you lift up the head of the children of Israel]. And there is no head of the Jewish people except for God."

How are we exalting God by counting half-shekels? Perhaps a fascinating Talmudic discussion between the two religio-political parties of the Second Commonwealth, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, will help us understand the importance of a census in the first place. Everyone agrees that we are forbidden to mourn during the first week of the month of Nisan because this marks the original establishment of the tamid, the daily sacrifice, in the Temple, but they disagree as to how the daily sacrifice should be funded. The Sadducees, who represented the aristocracy, believed that specific donors could, of their own free will, defray the cost of the daily offering, while the Pharisees insisted that the universal half-shekel payments be used for these offerings (Menaḥot 65a).

Apparently, the Pharisees, forerunners of Rabbinic Judaism, which gave us the Talmud, wanted the daily offering to remain a national enterprise, a gift to God from every single Jew. And the only way to guarantee its "democratic" spirit would be to insist on equal contributions, where the Rothschilds and Tevyes had equal input: "The rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less than one half-shekel when giving an offering before the Lord, to atone for your souls." (Exodus 30:15)

This idea is implicitly discussed and further illuminated in the Jerusalem Talmud, where we find the sages debating the reason for the Torah's choice of the half-shekel in this portion. R. Yehuda explains that "since they sinned at half-day [the celebration of the golden calf began at mid-day] they had to give a half-shekel." R. Pinhas, in the name of R. Levi, attributes it to the selling of Joseph. "Since the brothers sold the first son of Rachel, Joseph, for twenty silver pieces – and with Benjamin being too young and Joseph not being a recipient, each of the ten brothers received one-half shekel" (Shekalim, 2:3).

I would like to suggest that both of these opinions are two sides of the same coin: both idolatry and sibling rivalry reflect a world in which the value of national unity and togetherness is of paltry significance.

Idolatry results from feeling impotent in a world controlled by external and irrational forces which we humans can at best "bribe," but can never work with in partnership. And the sale of Joseph, the expulsion of one

brother from a family, expressed the view that one segment of a nation has the right to destroy, banish, or delegitimize other segments of the nation with whom they ideologically disagree and over whom they can exercise political or physical control.

The half-shekel census for the daily Temple sacrifice is a specific remedy for national feelings of internal fractiousness and ultimate impotence. The very taking of a census affirms national pride and self-confidence; it asserts the importance of every individual member as contributing to the whole.

And why a half-shekel? Simply stated, we are being taught that every Jew is incomplete without every other Jew. Every Jew must be brought closer, not pushed away. The whole is comprised of the sum of its parts, and every part is unassailably precious.

A story is told about two Hassidic masters who had spent their youth studying together in a yeshiva and sharing every imaginable adventure and crisis. Upon going their separate ways, they exchanged photos by which to remember each other. But one of the young men took the photo of himself and tore it in half, and then he tore the photo of his friend in half as well. It's not enough, he explained, to remember the other; it is far more important to always remember that without the other, each of us is only half a person, an incomplete specimen.

But, if the half-shekel contribution is such a laudatory act, a symbol of Jewish national strength and unity, why should the Torah consider it a sin to count Jews? Indeed, the very pride of the nation seems to be in the counting!

To answer this question, and to deepen our entire attitude towards the census, we must interpret the midrashic image in the name of R. Meir: "God removed a coin of fire from under his throne of glory and He showed it to Moses, saying, 'This is what they shall give.'" (Tanḥuma, Ki Tisa, 9)

How are we to understand this coin of fire? Did not Moses know what a half-shekel coin looked like? Fire symbolizes the spirit of God which resides within the nation of Israel, the Shekhinah who dwells in the midst of each individual of the nation. Israel was forged and formed by the divine voice at Sinai and is best described as a burning bush [The biblical word used for the burning bush is sneh which has similar letters to the word Sinai], which is never consumed by the inspiring sparks and flames of fervor that emerge from its depth; much the opposite, it is that very fire of the divine which provides the fuel for Israel's eternity.

From this perspective, the whole is not merely comprised of each of its parts; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The whole is not only the Jewish nation; it is also the God who resides in our nation, the very God who is uplifted together with His people when each of them is counted – and when it is thereby understood that every Jew counts! And the whole is not

merely the Jewish nation today. It is also the Jewish nation of yesterday and tomorrow. It is not only klal Yisrael, the entire nation; it is also kneset Yisrael, historic and eternal Israel. Yes, the nation as a united whole is significant – but that is only part of the story. The children of the patriarchs and matriarchs and the parents of the Messiah must always include their forbears as well as their progeny in a total assessment of where we stand and what we stand for.

And this “eternal” aspect of our existence is really the reason why we do not count Jews. We don’t count because we can’t count. Since the Jewish people are an eternal people, all those Jews who have lived before us, and all those Jews who haven’t even been born yet, are part of our nation, part of kneset Yisrael. In the words of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the daily sacrifice is not an offering of partnership (korban shutfut), but rather an offering of historic community (korban tzibbur). And if Israel includes within it the metaphysical idea of a historic nation, how can we ever count eternity? *The above article appears in Rabbi Riskin’s book Bereishit: Confronting Life, Love and Family, part of his Torah Lights series of commentaries on the weekly parsha, published by Maggid. ©2024 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Even after millennia of analysis, commentary and sagacious insights, the story of the Jewish people creating and worshiping the Golden Calf, as recorded for us in this week’s Torah reading, remains an enigma and a mystery. After all of the miracles of Egypt and the splitting of Yam Suf, manna from heaven and the revelation at Sinai, how is such a thing possible?

The fact that our great sainted priest Aharon, the most beloved of all Jews and the symbol of Jewish brotherhood and service to God and man, is not only involved but is described as being the catalyst for the actual creation of the Golden Calf, simply boggles our minds. One is almost forced to say that there is no logical or even psychological explanation as to how and why this event occurred.

The Torah tells us the story in relatively dry narrative prose. Apparently it comes to teach us that there is no limit to the freedom of thought and behavior of human beings, to act righteously or in an evil fashion as they wish. No logic, no series of miracles, no Divine revelations can limit the freedom of choice that the Lord granted to humans.

The assumption of Western man and his civilization and society was and is that there is a logic and rationale for everything that occurs. This assumption is flawed and false. History is basically the story of the follies, mistakes and irrational behavior of individuals and nations. This week’s Torah reading is merely a prime illustration of this human trait. Our freedom of choice is

so absolute that we are able to destroy ourselves without compunction, thought or regret.

Nevertheless, I cannot resist making a point about what led up to Israel’s tragic error in creating and worshiping the Golden Calf. The Torah emphasizes that perhaps the prime cause for the building of the Golden Calf by Jewish society then was the absence of Moshe.

While Moshe is up in heaven, freed of all human and bodily needs and restraints, the Jewish people are in effect leaderless. It is true that Aharon and Chur and the seventy elders are there in the midst of the encampment but they do not have the qualities of leadership that can guide and govern an otherwise unruly, stiff-necked people.

Successful nation building is always dependent upon wise, patient, strong and demanding leadership. The leader has to be able not only to blaze the trail ahead for his people but he also must be able to stand up to his people in a manner that may be temporarily unpopular. The failures of both Aharon, as recorded for us in this week’s Torah reading, and of King Saul as described for us in the Book of Samuel, are attributed to their inability to withstand the popular pressure of the moment.

Moshe, the paragon for all Jewish leadership throughout the ages, is cognizant of the wishes and wants of the people but he does not succumb to that pressure. The Torah describes Moshe as one whose “eye never dimmed.” He always sees past the present with a penetrating view and vision of the future. The absence of such a person, and leader, can easily lead to the creation and worshiping of a Golden Calf. ©2024 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Rabbi Yehudah Halevi suggests that in the sin of the golden calf, “The people did not intend to give up their allegiance to God” in violation of the first of the Ten Declarations. Rather, they wanted to create a physical figure representative of God, thus violating the third of the Ten Declarations, which prohibits the making of a graven image (Exodus 20:4, Kuzari 1:97).

But the mainstream opinion is that, in building the golden calf, the Jews violated the first of the commandments. At Sinai, Am Yisrael (the Jewish People) were introduced to the concept of pure monotheism, belief in the One God, with no intermediary between the human being and the Almighty. The role of Moses was that of the prophet of prophets, but he was in no way a divine being.

When Am Yisrael thought Moses would not descend from Mount Sinai, they assumed that the model of pure monotheism would be replaced by a system of advanced polytheism, i.e., belief in a god with multiple

sub-deities. Having emerged from Egypt, where animals were venerated as gods, Am Yisrael concluded that the golden calf would be an appropriate mini-god.

For this reason, argues Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk in his *Meshech Chochmah*, Moses broke the tablets. At first blush, this seems to be a sacrilegious act. But Moses feared that if he only destroyed the golden calf and not the tablets, perhaps the people would conclude that the tablets were sub-deities.

In the words of Rabbi Meir Simcha quoted by Nehama Leibowitz: There is nothing intrinsically holy in the world, save the Holy One, blessed be He, to Whom alone reverence, praise, and homage is due.... Now we may understand why Moses, upon perceiving the physical and mental state of the people, promptly broke the tablets. He feared they would deify them as they had done the calf. Had he brought [the tablets] intact, they would have substituted them for the calf and not reformed their ways.

A core belief of Judaism is that there is only One God. As we recite in the Yigdal prayer summarizing Maimonides's Thirteen Principles of Faith, "He is One – and there is no unity like His Oneness." ©2024 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

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Prosecutor and Defender

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

The principle of "*Ein kategor na'aseh sanegor*" ("A prosecutor cannot become a defender") means that items which contributed to Jews sinning cannot be used as part of the divine service to bring the Jews atonement. Thus, the Rosh Hashanah *shofar* is not made from the horn of a cow, because it brings to mind the sin of the Golden Calf. However, according to the Talmud, this principle is limited to articles that were used for the divine service in the Temple (such as a *shofar*, which was blown there daily). Thus, the *Parah Adumah* (Red Heifer) could be used to atone for the sin of the Golden Calf, since the ceremony involving it took place outside the Temple.

If this is correct, why can't a *Kohen* who committed murder recite the priestly blessing? *Tosafot* (*Yevamot* 7a) suggests that the reason he is excluded is "*Ein kategor na'aseh sanegor*." But this blessing is recited outside the Temple, so he should be permitted to do so! It would seem that outside the Temple, what is permitted for the divine service is the use of an object (such as gold or a cow's horn) even though it might bring to mind a certain sin. In contrast, the sinner himself (such as a *Kohen* who committed murder) may not perform the divine service, even outside the Temple.

If this is correct, how do we explain the command to Aharon to take a calf during the eight days

of the dedication of the Tabernacle (*Vayikra* 9:2)? Rashi answers that this was done to indicate that G-d had forgiven the Jewish people for the sin of the Golden Calf. But based on what we just said, a calf itself should not have been allowed! It would seem that when asking forgiveness for a specific sin, the chance of true repentance increases when the very item which was used to commit the sin is used for atonement. This is why the gold donated to make the Tabernacle was able to atone for the gold which people had enthusiastically donated to make the Golden Calf. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and *Encyclopedia Talmudit*

RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

The Hebrew words *panim* and *achor* (as in *lifnei* and *acharei*) are used in both a spatial and temporal sense -- either as "front" and "back" or as "before" and "after."

One approach to the mysterious revelation of Hashem's glory to Moshe as he gazed from a cleft in a rock (*Shemos* 33: 18-23) sees forms of those words as referring not, as they most simply read, to the dimension of space but, rather, that of time.

"You will see My 'back' but My 'face' [or 'front'] will not be seen" is what Hashem tells Moshe. The Chasam Sofer and Rav Tzadok HaCohein both understand that along the lines of "You may understand My ways when they are behind you in history, but the future (and even present) will not be perceptible."

I wonder if what permeates and drives both the past and the future might lie in what Chazal comment on the word for "My back": "He showed Moshe the *keshel shel tefillin*, the 'knot at the back of the phylactery [placed on the head]" (*Berachos* 7a).

And indeed, the Gemara (*ibid*, 6a) says that Hashem, in some sense, "wears tefillin."

What occurs is that the word *keshel* can mean not only knot but also "bond." The Gemara tells us that, while our own tefillin contain *pesukim* praising Hashem, the divine tefillin contain a *pasuk* praising His people (*ibid*).

Might "*keshel shel tefillin*," here, be a pun of sorts, referring to the eternal bond binding Hashem to Klal Yisrael? And may that bond be the essential thread that runs through human history -- past, present and future? ©2024 Rabbi A. Shafran and *torah.org*

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

The Gift of the Half-Shekel

Parashat Ki Tisa is one of the most difficult parshiot of the Torah. Many of the sections within our parasha appear to be in reverse order of occurrence. The parasha begins with the yearly tax set on everyone for the upkeep of the Temple and its sacrifices and offerings. Many Midrashim from this section explain that the amount of the tax and other

aspects of the coin used indicate that this was an atonement for the Golden Calf which does not take place until later in the parasha. There is a concept of ein mukdam um'uchar baTorah, there is no chronological order to the Torah, yet there are many important Rabbis who do not agree with that concept. Aspects of the Half-Shekel are interpreted differently by these Rabbis.

The Torah teaches: "When you will take a census of the B'nei Yisrael according to their counts, every man shall give Hashem an atonement for his soul when counting them, and there will be no plague among them when counting them. This is what they shall give – everyone who passes among the counted – half of the shekel, by the Holy shekel, the shekel is twenty geirah, half of the shekel as a portion to Hashem. Everyone who passes among the counted, from the age of twenty years on up, shall give the portion of Hashem. The wealthy shall not increase and the destitute shall not decrease from half of the shekel – to give the portion of Hashem, to atone for your souls. You shall take the silver of the atonements from the B'nei Yisrael and give it for the work of the Tent of Meeting; and it shall be a remembrance before Hashem for the B'nei Yisrael, to atone for your souls."

This census of the people was in contrast to the census in Vayikra of the families and tribes. There, Moshe and Aharon approached each family tent within the tribe of Levi, and asked for the members of that family to call their names from their tent. The Ramban explained that this same procedure was used for the counting of the other tribes. In our parasha, however, the census that was taken did not involve counting by tribes or families. Every male from the age of twenty years and above brought a half-shekel to the Temple on his own to atone for his sin. This money would be used for the upkeep of the Temple. The Ramban explains that this was the reason that the Kohein Gadol, Aharon, and the Princes of each tribe did not need to be present when these coins were brought. Here, the census was not accomplished through the names of the people, but instead it was accomplished through counting the coins. This was not a tribal responsibility but an individual responsibility.

One indication of the half-shekel being an individual responsibility is discussed by HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch. Hirsch explains, "That the Sanctuary is not an institution which has to be erected and then stands there once for all and thereafter its work can be carried on by priests (Kohanim), but that its purpose can not be achieved without the constant ever fresh and lively participation of the nation. And, equally so, that the importance of each individual, and of the nation as a whole, only consists in the contribution which is made individually and collectively, towards making the Sanctuary of the Torah achieve its practical realization."

The half-shekel was brought by every male above the age of twenty. This included a freed slave or

a convert. The Ramban also says that a young boy over the age of thirteen who exhibited signs of maturity, must also bring the half-shekel. Women and children who wished to do so, could also bring the half-shekel as a donation but not as an obligation. The Ramban extended the half-shekel to include women and children only because of the atonement aspect of the half-shekel. Neither could be counted as part of the census.

As mentioned earlier, there is a question about the order of the parasha. The section of the half-shekel is mentioned before the Golden Calf, yet the Midrash explains that the half-shekel was given in atonement for the half-day sin of the Golden Calf. The Ramban argues that the command for the half-shekel occurred before the Golden Calf. In his view, the half-shekel given here was to atone for our regular sins, not the Golden Calf. One proof that he brings is that the Leviim were required to bring this half-shekel, yet they did not sin at the Golden Calf. This half-shekel was first primarily used as a census rather than an atonement. The Torah speaks of "an atonement of his soul," and this was the second purpose of the half-shekel. One third of the half-shekel supply was taken out of the treasury three times each year prior to the Pilgrimage Festivals, Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot, to be used for the purchase of the sacrifices for those holidays and the regular sacrifices brought each day in the Temple. The atonement that the Torah speaks of comes as part of these daily sacrifices that were bought with the half-shekel.

One of the most discussed sentences of our section is, "The wealthy shall not increase and the destitute shall not decrease from half of the shekel – to give the portion of Hashem, to atone for your souls." Several Midrashim deal with the fact that the half-shekel is a relatively small amount. HaRav Moshe Sternbuch explains that Hashem showed Moshe a fiery half-shekel when Moshe "couldn't understand why Hashem wished each Jew to donate a paltry half-shekel." Hashem explained that it was not the amount that was important but the fiery enthusiasm through which it was given. Another Midrash equates the half-shekel directly with the sin of the Golden Calf. A rich man (rich in fulfilling the commandments) might say to himself, "I am a Tzaddik but I was enticed by the Golden Calf. My sin is too great to give such a small amount." The poor man (lacking in commandments) might then say, "I sin all the time. This sin was not so great that I should have to give the same as the Tzaddik." But the reverse might also be true. The man rich in commandments might say, "I am a Tzaddik. The poor man is wicked. I will extend myself more than the poor man to show Hashem that I am more loyal." The poor man might then answer, "He has more righteousness to save him than I. My paltry amount of good cannot save me. I will give nothing as it is useless." The Torah insists that it is not the amount that is important or why one might wish to give more or feel that he cannot atone. Hashem views the enthusiasm which

one shows in giving this half-shekel as the value of one's atonement.

Many people become depressed when they look at their lives and feel that they are not on the right path or have not progressed enough on that path to accomplish their goals. The half-shekel can uplift the person once he understands its true meaning. Perhaps this is why the Rabbis tell us that the phrase, "When you will take a census" is written literally, "When you will raise up the head." When you seek out Hashem, Hashem will raise up your head and give you the encouragement you need to reach your goals. © 2024 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

The wealthy man shall not give more, nor the poor person less, than half a shekel for Hashem's tribute, to atone for your souls." (Shmos 30:15) At certain times in our history, it was necessary to take a census of the nation. There is, however, a prohibition against counting Jews. The reason for the prohibition, as explain by Rashi in our Parsha, is so that a plague not strike the Jews. Were people to be counted, this could lead to ayin hara, an evil eye, which could be dangerous.

This fear is explained elsewhere by commentaries, that when we are counted as a group, we are subject to more lenient judgment in Heaven. By avoiding counting people individually, we do not "separate" and perhaps become liable due to the stricter judgment applied to individuals. Instead, each person gives an item, and when the items are tallied, the count of the Jewish People is known.

[One nice idea why we don't count Jews is that we cannot actually quantify the value of an individual, for there may be so much more to them than meets the eye. This prohibition reminds us that there is no real way to completely "count" a Jewish person.]

Since the purpose of giving the half-shekel was so the sum could be tallied and divided in half to give us the number of people in the nation, it makes sense that a rich person could not give more nor a poor person less. If they did so, it would throw off the count.

One might wonder, though, that there was a way for the count to come out correctly. If the rich man were to give two shekel, and "pay for" three poor people, they would all be counted. Why, then, can they not make such a deal? The census would work.

However, this is not the only reason. The census was part of it, but the Ibn Ezra says they could not vary the amount they gave because this was an atonement for their souls. Everyone needed to give. Therefore, the rich person couldn't give to "cover" the responsibility of the poor one, so he could not give more.

Everyone gave the same amount because it was an atonement for their souls. Each soul is precious and special, regardless of what they possess, how they look,

or any other physical attributes or disadvantages they might have. We are all creations of Hashem and must view ourselves and others this way.

Since we are put here to achieve a specific purpose and to rectify our souls, no one has it easier than anyone else so we don't compare our missions. A rich man can't get to the goal faster by giving more, and the poor man can't take the easy way out by pleading poverty. We each have to give whatever we can and make the most of who we are. I guess you could say, we are required to make our lives... count.

In 1948, When Babe Ruth died, a group of boys in the Mir Yeshiva in Brooklyn were huddled in a corner discussing the news. The Mashgiach, R' Chatzkel Abramsky z"l came over and asked what was going on. They told him that the great baseball player had died.

Later that week, after maariv, R' Chatzkel got up to speak. Surprisingly, his topic was none other than Babe Ruth! "I asked about his funeral," said the sage. "And I asked what eulogizers said about him."

"People said that since he had been an orphan, throughout his life he was kind to orphans."

"Do you hear?" he asked the assemblage of boys. "Even the gentiles, to whom this man was royalty because of his baseball playing in this life, know that after death, it's meaningless. What matters is how he treated other people!" © 2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

RABBI YISSOCHER FRAND

RavFrand

Transcribed by David Twersky

Edited by Dovid Hoffman

At the end of the parsha, the pasuk (verse) says, "Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the L-rd, Hashem, the G-d of Israel" (Shemos 34:23). This is the mitzva of "aliyah l'regel" -- going up (to Jerusalem) for the Festival. Three times a year, on Pesach, Shavuot, and Succos, the Jews were commanded to go up to the Beis HaMikdash to see and be seen by the Shechinah (Divine Presence of G-d).

The pasuk continues "...and no man shall covet your land when you go up to appear before Hashem your

G-d, three times a year." Hashem guaranteed that we have nothing to fear while everyone is in Yerushalayim. We might have been nervous about leaving no males at home because it would be an open invitation to thieves and enemies. The pasuk says to have no fear -- no one will covet our land while we go up to Yerushalayim to see the Shechinah.

The Gemara derives a halacha from this. Whoever does not own land is not obligated to go up to Yerushalayim on the Shalosh Regalim (Pesachim 8b). The whole halacha of going up three times a year is only for someone who owns land.

The Kotzker Rebbe (1787-1859) asked, "Why is it that someone who does not own land is excused from going up to Yerushalayim?" The Kotzker Rebbe

answered, "Because he doesn't need to."

Only a person who owns land, who has a connection to this world, who is into materialism, needs to go up to Yerushalayim to see the Shechinah. The person who is unencumbered by materialism does not need to go anywhere to see the Shechinah, because he sees the Shechinah everywhere.

Someone who has property, a mortgage, two garages and a Jacuzzi, etc., etc., needs to go to Yerushalayim to see the Shechinah. However, someone who is free of the materialism of this world sees the Shechinah everywhere, so he is excused from the mitzvah of 'Reiyah,' -- going to be seen. ©2024 Rabbi Y. Frand and torah.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Jewish Geography

Although there are slight variations (depending on the source), the timeline surrounding the sin of the golden calf starts with Moshe ascending Mt. Sinai on the 7th of Sivan, staying there for 40 days and 40 nights, and descending with the first set of Luchos on the 17th of Tammuz, whereupon he saw the golden calf and broke the Luchos. The second (middle) set of 40 days began on the 18th or 19th of Tammuz, when Moshe went back up to ask for forgiveness, while the third set of 40 days started on the last day of Av or first day of Elul and ended on Yom Kippur, when Moshe came down with the second set of Luchos.

We know that Moshe stayed on top of Mt. Sinai for the entire first set of 40 days (Shemos 24:18 and Devarim 9:9) and for the entire third set of 40 days (Shemos 34:28 and Devarim 10:10), but what about the middle set? Rashi (Shemos 18:13/33:11 and Devarim 9:18) says that Moshe was on top of Mt. Sinai for the entire middle set of 40 days too. Some Midrashim (e.g. Tanchuma Ki Sisa 31) and other commentators (e.g. Ramban on Shemos 33:7) also say that Moshe was on top of Mt. Sinai for all three sets of 40 days. There are several indications, though, that he wasn't, at least not the entire time.

When the first and last sets of 40 days are mentioned, the Torah says explicitly that Moshe was on the mountain, whereas when the middle 40 days are referenced (Devarim 9:18 and 9:25), there's no mention that he was there. Many discuss how each set of 40 days could contain a full 40 days and 40 nights on Mt. Sinai. After all, Moshe came down after the first set of 40 days with the first set of Luchos (Shemos 32:15 and Devarim 9:15), causing the clock to reset, and carved the second set of Luchos below before climbing back up for the third set of 40 days (Shemos 34:4 and Devarim 10:3), requiring another clock reset. If, however, the middle 40 days were not spent entirely atop Mt. Sinai, the clock could restart as soon as Moshe came down on the 17th of Tammuz, rather than when he went back up a day or two later, and these 40 days wouldn't end until he went

back up for the third set of 40 days, rather than when he came down to make the second set of Luchos (see Netziv on Shemos 32:30 and R' Yaakov Emdin on Seder Olam 6).

A straightforward reading of Moshe moving his tent outside the camp (Shemos 33:7-11) would have it occurring between the first and third sets of 40 days, in which case he couldn't have been on top of Mt. Sinai for the entire middle set. Granted, Ramban (33:7) and Rashi (33:11, see Mizrachi) have most of this narrative occurring after Yom Kippur, with only the setting up of his tent occurring right after the first set of 40 days. Still, the chronological adjustment (of 33:8-11) is only necessary if Moshe was atop Mt. Sinai for the entire middle set of 40 days; it flows much more easily if he wasn't. Besides, why would Moshe call his tent "אהל מועד" (Shemos 33:7) if his intent was to convince G-d to allow the plan for the real אהל מועד (the Mishkan) to be reinstated, in which case he wouldn't be using this one at all? If, on the other hand, he knew he was definitely going to use it, at least temporarily (because he wasn't going to stay on top of the mountain), using the same term is understandable.

Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer 46 (see also Tana d'Vei Eliyahu Zuta 4) has Moshe "in the camp" (rather than on the mountain) for the middle set of 40 days. The Vilna Gaon (Seder Olam 6, see also Shemos 33:18) agrees, and says that Moshe went up every day during those 40 days to pray, but came down after he finished praying. Netziv (Shemos 32:30) says the same, adding (Devarim 9:25) that he went up to pray every day and every night, but returned afterwards. R' Yaakov Emdin (Seder Olam 6) is unsure whether Moshe went up to pray or prayed in his tent, but either way most of his time (during the middle 40 days) was spent with the nation, in the camp below, trying to get them to repent. ©2024 Rabbi D. Kramer

