

Silver & Atonement: The Half Shekel

Karen Koenig Schochet

The Mishnah in Rosh Hashanah teaches that there are four dates every year which are considered to be the first day of the new year.¹ While the most well-known New Year (Rosh Hashanah) occurs on the first of *Tishrei*, the first of *Nissan* is in fact the only New Year referred to as such in the Bible. Shortly before the exodus, God commanded Moses and Aaron to begin the year from *Nissan*.² *Nissan* marked the beginning of the existence of the Jewish nation and it continues to serve as the beginning of the Jewish holiday season.

As a lead up to this important date, there is a special *maftir* (additional Torah reading after the portion of the week) read in shul on each of the four Sabbaths preceding the first of *Nissan*. Shabbat *Shekalim* is the first of these four Sabbaths. The *maftir* reading for Shabbat *Shekalim* contains the mitzvah to contribute half a shekel toward the *mishkan*, the temporary structure which served as a portable temple, before the permanent Temple (*mikdash*) was built. The commandment to donate the half-shekel is the second of two commandments in the book of Exodus concerning donations to the *mishkan*.

Why are there two distinct commandments to donate to the *mishkan*? What is the relevance of this fundraising event occurring during the lead up to the month of *Nissan*?

The following portion is read on Shabbat *Shekalim*:³

¹ Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:1.

² Exodus 12:1-2.

³ Exodus 30:11-16.

יא) וַיְדַבֵּר יְקֹוֹק אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר
יב) כִּי תִשָּׂא אֶת רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְקֻדֵיהֶם וְנִתְּנוּ אִישׁ
כֹּפֶר נַפְשׁוֹ לַיְקֹוֹק בַּפְּקֹד אֹתָם וְלֹא יְהִי בָהֶם נֶגֶף
בַּפְּקֹד אֹתָם
יג) זֶה יִתְּנוּ כָּל הָעֶבֶר עַל הַפְּקֻדִים מִחֻצֵי הַשֶּׁקֶל
בַּשֶּׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֶשְׂרִים גֶּרָה הַשֶּׁקֶל מִחֻצֵי הַשֶּׁקֶל
תְּרוּמָה לַיְקֹוֹק
יד) כָּל הָעֶבֶר עַל הַפְּקֻדִים מִבְּנֵי עֶשְׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה יִתְּנוּ
תְּרוּמַת יְקֹוֹק
טו) הָעֶשְׂרִי לֹא יִרְבֶּה וְהַדֵּל לֹא יִמְעִיט מִמִּחֻצֵי הַשֶּׁקֶל
לְתַת אֶת תְּרוּמַת יְקֹוֹק לְכַפֵּר עַל נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם
טז) וְלִקְחֶתָּ אֶת כֶּסֶף הַכֹּפָרִים מֵאֵת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְנָתַתָּ
אֹתוֹ עַל עֲבֹדַת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וְהָיָה לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְזִכְרוֹן
לִפְנֵי יְקֹוֹק לְכַפֵּר עַל נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: When you take the sum of the children of Israel, according to their number, then they shall give every man a ransom for his soul to the Lord, when you number them; that there be no plague among them, when you number them. This they shall give, every one that passes among those who are numbered, half a shekel after the shekel of the sanctuary—the shekel is twenty gerahs—half a shekel for an offering to the Lord. Every one that passes among those who are numbered, from twenty years old and upward, shall give the offering of the Lord. The rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less, than the half-shekel, when they give the offering of the Lord, to make atonement for your souls. And you shall take the atonement money (silver) from the children of Israel, and shall appoint it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may be a memorial for the children of Israel before the Lord, to make atonement for your souls.⁴

In this second commandment to give, it seems the silver was used for two specific purposes. According to Exodus 30, the money is collected for the purchase of public sacrifices, “and shall

⁴ This and all subsequent translations of Biblical sources are slightly modified from the old JPS translation.

appoint it for the service of the tent of meeting.” However, Exodus 38 indicates that the money collected is in fact the silver used to create the sockets and hooks of the mishkan.⁵

The first commandment to make a donation to the mishkan is less specific. At the very beginning of the Torah’s discussion of mishkan-building, in parshat Terumah, we read:⁶

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְקֹוֹק אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר
ב דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ לִי תְרוּמָה מֵאֵת כָּל אִישׁ
אֲשֶׁר יִדְבְּנוּ לְבוּ תִקְחוּ אֶת תְּרוּמָתִי

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the children of Israel, that they take for Me an offering; of every one whose heart makes him willing you shall take My offering.

The text continues with a long list of woods, skins, threads, metals, precious stones, oils and spices from which the offering can be made.

The difference between the two types of contribution is striking. The first contribution, in *parshat Terumah*, is called *terumat nedivei halev* (the contribution of the generous of heart). It allows each individual man or woman (see endnote) to choose from a lengthy list of materials, the material that he or she wishes to contribute, and its quantity. In theory the individual could later discern his or her individual contribution when attending services in the *mishkan*.

The second contribution, discussed in the *maftir* of Shabbat *Shekalim*, is a uniform contribution in which each man over the age of twenty (see endnote) gives not from generosity, but from obligation. The individual chooses neither the nature of the gift nor its quantity. Even the poor person is required to give the stated amount, and even the wealthy individual is prevented from making a contribution that

can later be recognized as his own. One cannot even experience the half-shekel contribution as whole.

I see these two types of contribution as representing two contrasting aspects of religious commitment. On the one hand we are asked (perhaps not even required) to make our unique individual contribution. On the other, we are commanded to give a specified amount of a specified substance as our anonymous contribution to the whole. It is this money which cannot be recognized as coming from any specific individual which will be used to purchase the public sacrifices - those sacrifices which atone for the sins of the people as a whole. And, it is this silver from which the hooks and screws of the tabernacle are formed. The hooks and screws are hardly the most ornate feature of the Temple and may not even be visible. No man can discern his individual contribution here, but without the contribution of all members of the nation, the structure would surely collapse.

The half-shekel is called atonement silver and is given when the people are counted. It is said to protect the people from a plague which would otherwise occur.

Midrash Tanchuma suggests a reason why atonement should be required at the time of census.

לפי שצפה הקב"ה שכל מנין שעתידין ישראל למנות
שיהא בהן חסרון והתקין להם את השקלים רפואה
כדי שיהא להן כפרה ולא יהיה בהם נגף בפקוד
אותם.

Because the Holy One, Blessed Be He, foresaw that in each census in which the Israelites would be counted there would be a lack, and He established the shekalim as a cure so that they would have atonement, and would not be struck by plague when counted.⁷

⁵ Exodus 38:25-28.

⁶ Exodus 25:1-2.

⁷ Tanchuma Ki Tisa A, Buber edition.

It is not clear why the Jews will be found lacking. It may be because they are to be viewed individually and no individual is perfect. Rashi, in his interpretation of the phrase, “every one that passes among those who are numbered,”⁸ notes that in the census, people are counted one by one.

“Everyone who passes among those who are numbered.” Scripture uses the expression “everyone who *passes* among those who are numbered” because it is the practice of those who count animate beings to make these *pass* before them one after the other counting as they *pass*. Similar are (Lev. 37, 32) “whatever *passes* under the rod;” (Jer. 33:13) “the flock shall *pass* under the hands of him who counts them.”⁹

This Rashi echoes the Mishnah that discusses the judgment which takes place on the New Year of *Tishrei* and the High Holy Day prayer (*Unetaneh Tokef*) which is based on that Mishnah:

בארבעה פרקים העולם נידון בפסח על התבואה
בעצרת על פירות האילן בראש השנה כל באי העולם
עוברין לפניו כבני מרון שנאמר (תהלים ל"ג) היוצר יחד
לבם המבין אל כלמעשיהם ובחג נידונים על המים:

At four seasons of the year the world is judged: on Passover through grain; on Shavuot through the fruit of the tree; at the New Year all who enter the world *pass* before Him like sheep since it is said, “He who fashions the hearts of them and who considers all their works;” and on the Festival (Succot) they are judged through water.¹⁰

⁸ Exodus 30:13

⁹ Rashi on Exodus 30:13.

¹⁰ Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2. Translation modified from Neusner, Jacob The Talmud of Babylonia: An Academic Commentary, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994.

All mankind *passes* before you like a flock of sheep. As a shepherd seeks out his flock, making his sheep *pass* under his rod, so do you make all the living souls *pass* before you; you count and number your creatures, fixing their lifetime and inscribing their destiny. (*Unetaneh Tokef*)

On the *Tishrei* New Year (Rosh Hashanah), the New Year for the world as a whole, every inhabitant of the world *passes* individually before God and is judged as an individual. Since each of us sins, each of us is liable to be judged harshly. Similarly in Moses' census the individuals should, in theory, *pass* individually before God and be judged harshly. To counteract the harsh judgment they are to give silver.

But what is the connection between silver and atonement? The silver of atonement is called in Hebrew, *kessef hakippurim*. The Hebrew word for atonement *kippurim* comes from the root *kaf-peh-resh*, which means to cover up. The silver, as it were, is to provide a protective covering for the people so that they will not be judged harshly. How does the act of donation accomplish this? Through contributing something anonymous and partial, *half* a shekel, each individual joins the community becoming part of a whole. As part of the community, which is always deserving of life, the individual attains atonement.

This interpretation is an extension of an idea expressed by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik concerning the scapegoat (*seir hamishtaleach*).

In the case of the *seir hasmishtaleach*, the owner of the offering is not any particular person but the community, Knesset Israel which possesses its own independent personality and can never be considered so corrupt as to cause it to be termed an “offering of the wicked.” Therefore the sacrifice of the scapegoat atones for the sins of each member of the

people of Israel who adheres to Knesset Israel and remains inseparably linked to it by an inseverable bond. For the individual offering, acquittal is not possible without repentance, while for the communal offering, the individual does not play any role and receives atonement only in his capacity as a member of the community, and the community does not require repentance.

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Rabbi Soloveitchik explains that the scapegoat can atone for some sins even in the absence of repentance because the scapegoat is a communal sacrifice and the community always deserves to be forgiven. The very act of joining oneself to the community entitles an individual to atonement. As the scapegoat is one of the sacrifices purchased with the half-shekel,¹² it seems reasonable to expand the *Rav's* idea to explain the function of the half-shekel itself.

The half-shekel atonement silver is collected preceding the New Year of *Nissan*. The first *Nissan* was the time of the birth of the Jewish nation and each subsequent *Nissan* marks the beginning of the year of Jewish holidays. It is appropriate therefore that we are required by the first of *Nissan* to make a contribution which represents our becoming an integral part of the Jewish nation. As we join the nation we merit life and celebrate a New Year which is not a day of awe, but the beginning of a season of gratitude and joy.

Note: While the wording in the biblical text referring to *terumat nedivei halev* is masculine, this less specific commandment seems to apply to men and women. According to the Torah, women contributed as generously or more so than the men (Exodus 35:4-29, see especially verses 22, 25, 26, and 29). The more

specific commandment of the half-shekel, where individual donors are counted, applies only to the men. (Numbers 1:1-3.) It seems to me that the ideas gleaned from studying Torah have a general significance beyond the particulars of the individual topic studied. The idea of the importance of binding oneself anonymously to the community, developed in this dvar Torah, is of relevance to all of us, even though in the specific case of the half-shekel the donors are only men.

¹¹ Peli, Pinchas H. *On Repentance in the Thought and Discourse of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Jerusalem: Orot Press, 1980, p.120.

¹² Mishnah Shekalim, 4:1-2

