

Parsha Ki Sisa

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1. *The Power of Unity*

In this week's parsha, the Torah tells us about the *Machtzis Ha Shekel* (the half coin made of silver) that was donated by every male above the age of twenty. All Communal Offerings (*Korbanei Tzibur*) that were brought in the Bais HaMikdash needed to be purchased with each year's new half-coin donations, which were replaced every Nissan. The Mishna tells us that in order to collect a sufficient amount of the new *Machtzis Ha Shekel* by the first of the month of Nissan, they would announce that it had to be sent to the Bais HaMikdash at the beginning of the month of Adar.

In the *Megillah* we read that in order to seal the fate of the Jewish people, Haman had given 10,000 talents to Achashverosh (King of Persia) so that every Jewish man, woman, and child should be annihilated. In exchange for the silver talents, Achashverosh gave his ring to Haman in order to send a royal proclamation throughout the Persian Empire regarding the destruction of the Jewish people.

The Gemara in *Tractate Megillah* tells us that before bringing punishment upon the Jewish people Hashem always provides the antidote for that punishment in advance. The Gemara explains that the Commandment of giving the *Machtzis Ha Shekel*, which was given 1,500 years prior to the decree of annihilation, was the antidote to negate the talents of silver that were given by Haman. Specifically how did the merit of the *Machtzis Ha Shekel* counter Haman's plot to annihilate the Jewish people?

The Torah tells us regarding the obligation of the *Machtzis Ha Shekel*. **“The wealthy man is not permitted to give more and the poor man is not permitted to give less than half a silver coin.”** Clearly the Torah is requiring uniformity in the giving of this donation. One would think, as with any other charitable donation, that it is admirable to give more than the minimum amount. Nevertheless, in this case, the Torah is telling us in a very specific and distinct manner that only the half-coin of silver (*Machtzis Ha Shekel*) is acceptable.

The fact that every Jewish male donates only half a silver coin and not a whole coin is symbolic that every Jew needs to complement each other in order to create the whole. This is the concept of *achdus* (unity). The *Machtzis Ha Shekel* represents the concept of *tzibur* (community) the unification of the Jewish people.

A community is not a collection of individuals each having their own perspective and direction, but rather it is a unified and equalized group with a common viewpoint and goal. This is represented through the *Machtzis Ha Shekel* that is given to purchase the *Korban Tzibur* (Communal Offering). In order for an offering to be considered a *Korban Tzibur* it must be purchased with communal funds and not with individuals participating as partners.

One of Haman's claims that he communicated to Achashverosh against the Jewish people was that **“they are scattered and fragmented among the people.”** Some commentators explain this criticism to mean that the Jewish people were not unified but rather they were fragmented and divisive which is the antithesis of a “tzibur.” We can now understand why the mitzvah of *Machtzis Ha Shekel* was the antidote to negate Haman's ten thousand talents of silver. Haman was sealing our fate with the claim that there was no *achdus* among the Jewish people and the *Machtzis Ha Shekel* given by the Jews up until the destruction of the First Temple countered and negated Haman's plot.

The mitzvah of the *Machtzis Ha Shekel* signifies the unity of the Jewish people, which is the meaning of “tzibur.” The month of Adar, which was proclaimed through the giving of the *Machtzis Ha Shekel* is a month that expresses our unity. Haman wanted to destroy us based on the contention that we were not unified during this month.

Every day in the *Amidah* (silent prayer) we ask Hashem in the blessing for the ingathering of the exiles that He should gather us in - *yachad (together)* - from the four corners of the earth. We could have asked Him just to gather us from the four corners of the earth. Why do we add the word “*yachad*”? The answer is - we are only a fully functioning Jewish people if we are unified with a common perspective and goal, only then will we merit that special relationship with Hashem. Since the Second Bais HaMikdash (Second Temple) was destroyed only because of a lack of unity that is indicated through *sinaas chinam* (baseless hatred) it can only be rebuilt through the unity of the Klal Yisroel.

If we are able to view one another as individuals who are part of a whole entity, the Klal Yisroel, then we will all have the same perspective and our redemption will be imminent.

2. *Revealing the Ongoing Hidden Miracles*

As part of the prayer service for most of the holidays, we recite *Hallel* (Praise of G-d), in which we sing the praises of Hashem. These *Psalms* are expressions of joy and faith in G-d. The Gemara in *Tractate Megillah* asks why do we not recite *Hallel* on the joyous holiday of Purim?

We do not recite *Hallel* on Rosh Hashanah. The Gemara in *Tractate Rosh Hashanah* explains, that since the “Book of Life and Death” is open before Hashem it is too solemn and overwhelming a moment for us to recite *Hallel*. On Purim we commemorate the miraculous salvation of the Jewish people by G-d. Haman had issued a decree to annihilate every man, woman, and child and only at the last moment was there a change of events in which we destroyed our enemies. It would seem appropriate for us to express our gratitude and thanks to Hashem by singing the praises of G-d through the recitation of the *Hallel*. However we do not. The question is why?

Rav Nachman, in *Tractate Megillah* responds to this question by saying that the reading of *Megillas Esther* (the Book of Esther) on Purim is the equivalent to the recitation of the *Hallel*. The Gemara asks – where is Esther alluded to in the Torah since the miracle of Purim came through Esther. The Talmud answers that it is alluded to in the Book of Devarim (Deuteronomy) in the section of the curses. The verse states “**Anochi [Hashem] Hester ester Panai (I will conceal My Face).**” This verse indicates that after the destruction of the First Temple that Hashem will conceal His involvement with existence and interact with the world in a hidden manner. The miracle of Purim was a miracle cloaked in nature where G-d’s involvement was not obvious. The word “*ester*” which is the word for “concealment” is the same as the word Esther that is how the Torah alludes to Purim. How do we understand Rav Nachman’s response that the reading of the Megillah is the equivalent of reciting *Hallel*?

Hallel, as we explained, is an expression of thanks and joy through which we acknowledge all that Hashem has done for us. If one reads the *Megillah* from beginning to end and fully comprehends and understands the unusual events as they unfolded they would surely see the Hand of Hashem hidden in nature. When one comes to this realization through the reading of the Megillah, one will naturally be beholden and have gratitude to Hashem, which is equivalent to an expression of *Hallel*.

The Maharal of Prague in his commentary on the *Megillah* explains that if viewed individually many of recorded events could be dismissed as coincidental and not from the Hand of Hashem. However when one sees the continuous repetition of these unusual events one realizes that there is a pattern which indicates someone behind the scenes orchestrating these events. For example Mordechai’s niece Esther became the Queen of Persia and replaced the granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar, a rabid anti-Semite. It may also have been coincidental that Mordachai happened to be sitting at the gates and overheard a plot to kill the King among the gatekeepers (which he

foiled). Achashverosh could not sleep and he requested his book of chronicles that reminded him the proper reward was not given to Mordechai the Jew. At that moment, Haman came to receive permission to have Mordecai hanged from the gallows etc.

It is interesting to note that the holiday of Pesach (Passover) follows Purim. If we reach the proper level of thankfulness to Hashem on Purim by realizing His continuous involvement in our lives (albeit hidden), then we will be sensitized to fully appreciate the miracles surrounding the Exodus that we discuss on Pesach. When we read the *Megillah* we should come to the realization of what could have happened to the Jewish people if not for Hashem's involvement.

The nature of our current exile (exile of Edom -Roman Exile) is that Hashem is concealed from us and his actions are cloaked in nature. In every generation there are those who would destroy the Jewish people, yet we survive. Just as in the miracle of Purim, the Hidden Hand of Hashem saved us from annihilation; we continuously experience this level of miracle. We therefore should be beholden to Hashem and constantly realize his involvement in our lives. As a result of this appreciation and understanding of His Presence in our lives may we merit the ultimate redemption of Moshiach when Hashem will reveal Himself in this existence.

3. Protecting Ourselves from Negative Influences

In this week's parsha, the Torah tells us that Moshe told *Klal Yisroel* (the Jewish people) that he was going to ascend to heaven to receive the Torah and that he would return after forty days. Due to a misunderstanding, the *Klal Yisroel* miscalculated and believed that Moshe died and would not return. As a result of this sense of insecurity and through the initiative of the rabble, a Golden Calf was made.

As Moshe was completing his forty-day period in heaven, the Jews were engaged in the *Chet Ha Agle (sin of the Golden Calf)*. At that moment Hashem said to Moshe, "**You must go down because your people who you have taken out from Egypt have become corrupt.**" Rashi cites Chazal that explain that "**You must go down**" to mean that Moshe must be reduced to a lower status because Hashem only elevated him to that special level for the sake of the Jewish people (who were no longer worthy).

Chazal explain that the reason why Hashem used the term "**your people**" rather than "my people" refers to the *erev rav - the rabble who were allowed to leave Egypt*. Moshe consented to take them along without first consulting with Hashem. He did this for the sake of trying to bring them under the wings of Hashem, i.e. conversion. The *erev rav* became corrupt and they consequently corrupted the Jewish people. Since Moshe did not consult with Hashem about the conversion of the *erev rav*, Hashem referred to them as Moshe's people and not the Jewish people. The question is – why didn't Moshe consult with Hashem concerning this very important decision of allowing *erev rav* to intermingle with the Jewish people?

The Gemara in *Tractate Nedarim* tell us that one of the reasons why the Jewish people were exiled and enslaved in Egypt was because Avraham missed an opportunity to convert a group of people to monotheism. After Avraham's victory over the four mightiest kings who had taken the Sodomites captive, the King of Sodom approached Avraham and said, "**Give me the people and you take the possessions.**" Avraham's response to the King of Sodom was, "**I will not take from you as much as a thread or a bootstrap.**" At this moment, Avraham had an opportunity (as the victor) to take the people of Sodom to convert them from paganism to monotheism, but he did not. Hashem said to Avraham, "**Just as you have allowed these people to remain pagans, and not bring them under the Divine Presence your children in the future will be put in a position to become pagans in Egypt.**" (Measure for measure.)

Moshe, as the redeemer of the *Klal Yisroel*, understood that the sin of Avraham was finally atoned for after the 210 years of exile. Understanding this with absolute clarity, Moshe was not going to repeat the mistake of Avraham. He was now was in a position to either reject the rabble of Egypt or accept them. The obvious choice for him was to convert them and allow them to become part of

the Jewish people. If Moshe's justification of his actions seemed to be so correct why did Hashem chastise him?

The answer is – Moshe's and Avraham's situations are not to be compared. When Hashem chastised Avraham for not converting the Sodomites to monotheism, there were no Jewish people. It was a time when the world was totally paganistic and therefore Avraham should have taken advantage of the opportunity to convert this group of people to monotheism. However in Moshe's situation regarding the conversion of the rabble, there was a Klal Yisroel who was meant to be the chosen people of Hashem at Sinai. By intermingling the *erev rav* with the Klal Yisroel (who had a great spiritual potential), there was a chance that Moshe would jeopardize the spiritual development of the Jewish people. Therefore Moshe needed to consult Hashem before allowing the *erev rav* to leave Egypt. This is why Hashem told Moshe, "**your people**" to indicate that it was Moshe's decision and not His.

From this episode we learn how careful we must be to not expose ourselves, our family, and our community to outside influences that may be detrimental to our spirituality. If *Moshe Rabbeinu*, the greatest Jew who ever lived, was vulnerable and made this serious mistake as a result of not consulting Hashem, then how much more so should we be careful to consult Torah sages before making decisions that could affect our community.

4. How to Receive Gifts from G-d

The Torah tells us that when the Jewish people were gathered at Sinai Moshe Rabbeinu ascended to heaven for forty days and forty nights to be taught the Torah by Hashem. Moshe was taught the Torah in its entirety by Hashem during this period of time. Scripture tells us regarding Torah, "**There is no end to the breadth and depth of Torah.**" This teaches us that the quest for the understanding of Torah is endless. During this forty-day period Hashem would teach Moshe the Torah in its entirety every day. At the end of each day Moshe would forget all that Hashem had taught him. This was repeated day in and day out for thirty-nine days. On the fortieth day, Moshe retained the Torah that He learned. What lesson is Hashem teaching Moshe through this forty-day process?

We find that throughout the Torah the number forty (whether in days or years) signifies the completion of a process. For example, at the time of the Great Flood, the Torah tells us that it rained for forty days and nights. Only after forty days when the mountain peaks were seen did Noach send out the raven to see if the world was inhabitable. The Jewish people wondered in the desert for forty years before entering into the Land of Israel. It is a forty-day process from the time of conception for life to begin. Identically, only after forty days was Moshe able to retain the Torah that was taught to him by G-d. What was the significance of Moshe forgetting the Torah for thirty-nine consecutive days and only retaining it after the fortieth day?

The Gemara in *Tractate Nedarim* tells us based on a verse in the Torah, "**The gift of the Torah is G-d's portion.**" In other words the Torah is a gift from G-d to the Jewish people. The Gemara asks an obvious question - why did the most important event in history of existence, the giving of the Torah, take place in a desert, a location of total desolation. In addition, the desert was lacking in any aesthetic value. One would think that such a momentous occasion would have taken place in a grander and more aesthetically pleasing location. Why did G-d choose the desert?

The Gemara explains that in order for one to be worthy of receiving Hashem's gift - the Torah. One must be willing to allow himself to become as "desolate" as the desert. Meaning, one must be agreeable to negate himself and become humble to the point of nonexistence. If one is able to achieve this level of humility and self-negation then one is worthy of receiving Hashem's gift – the Torah. One's innate intelligence and ability are the primary consideration in one's ability to achieve the spiritual grasp of Torah. The Torah is a gift from Hashem and not merely a process of accumulating intellectual information. Torah is a spiritual entity, it's G-d's Wisdom. Therefore its acquisition depends on one's spiritual ability and conditioning.

It is stated in *Pirkei Avos (The Ethics of Our Fathers)*, that there are forty-eight criteria that one must meet in order to become a “vessel” that has the capability of acquiring and retaining the Torah. This again reiterates that the understanding and retention of Torah is a gift of G-d that is only granted to one who is spiritually worthy of receiving it.

The Gemara in *Tractate Megillah* states that if a one says that he has toiled in his pursuit of Torah and has found it (the Torah) he is to be believed. Rabbi Chaim Brisker z’tl that the Gemara should have used the expression “understood” rather than “found.” Why does the Gemara use the term “found?” He answers that the understanding of the Torah is not a natural process of understanding but rather it is a gift endowed to a person based on his toil. This was the lesson that Moshe learned during his forty-day stay in heaven.

Despite the intellectual capability of Moshe and his spiritual dimension as a prophet he was not able to retain the Torah that he was taught during the first thirty-nine days in heaven. It was only on the fortieth day that Moshe retained the Torah. Hashem granted Moshe the gift of Torah on the fortieth day not based on Moshe’s intellectual capability but because G-d chose to gift it to him.