**S.A.L.T. – PARASHT KI-TISA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Ki-Tisa tells the famous story of *cheit ha-eigel* – the sin of the golden calf – in response to which Moshe threw to the ground and shattered the stone tablets given to him by God atop Mount Sinai, upon which were engraved the Ten Commandments. After God agreed to forgive the people, He instructed Moshe to carve two new stone tablets upon which the commandments would be engraved anew (34:1).

The Gemara in Masekhet Nedarim (38a) discerns from the formulation of God’s instruction to Moshe – “*pesol lekha*” – that the *pesolet*, the dust that was produced when Moshe chiseled the stones, was allowed to be kept by Moshe. This dust was very valuable – the commentators explain that this was a precious type of a stone – and thus Moshe became wealthy as a result of *pesolatan shel luchot* – the dust produced from the carving of the new tablets.

What might be the significance of Moshe’s achieving wealth through his carving a second set of tablets after the sin of the golden calf?

*Chatam Sofer* (cited in *Likutei Chaver Ben Chaim*) offers an allegorical interpretation of the Gemara’s remark. He suggests that the image of the “dust,” the pieces of stone which were not actually part of the *luchot* (tablets), represents that which is not written as part of the corpus of Torah, but ought to be self-understood. Common decency and basic courtesy are not included among the technical requirements of Torah law, but our commitment to *middot* (refined character traits) must precede our commitment to the Torah’s specific demands. Refined character, the *Chatam Sofer* explains, is the material from which the stone tablets were made; it is not written on the tablets along with the other commandments, but it forms the basis and foundation of the commandments.

Moshe’s “wealth” – his special stature as God’s prophet and as the communicator of His commands, *Chatam Sofer* explains, resulted from “*pesolatan shel luchot*,” his outstanding character. In Parashat Shemot, where the Torah tells us of Moshe’s life before his being selected for his role of prophet and leader, we read of his sensitivity to the plight of the underprivileged, and his selfless commitment to help. The Torah makes no mention of Moshe’s brilliance or devotion to God, but gives several examples of his compassion for the downtrodden and his contempt for injustice. He intervened when he observed an Egyptian taskmaster beating a helpless slave, when he observed one Israelite slave beating another, and when he observed Midyanite shepherds chasing Yitro’s daughters from the well. Thus, *Chatam Sofer* explained, the Gemara attributes Moshe’s “wealth” – his unique stature of greatness – to “*pesolatan shel luchot*,” to his character, his empathy, compassion and sensitivity, to those areas of Torah which are self-understood prerequisites to the formal dictates of the Torah. Before we can hope to achieve greatness, we must first achieve goodness, conducting ourselves with basic decency and sensitivity towards others.

Sunday

Yesterday, we noted the Gemara’s curious remark in Masekhet Nedarim (38a) that Moshe became wealthy as a result of “*pesolatan shel luchot*” – the “dust” which fell when he carved the second set of stone tablets. Moshe had shattered the original set of tablets upon witnessing *Benei Yisrael*’s worship of the golden calf (32:19), and after God granted the nation forgiveness, He instructed Moshe to carve new tablets (34:1). Whereas the initial tablets were made by God Himself (“*ma’aseh Elokim heima*” – 32:16), the second tablets were to be carved by Moshe.The Gemara understood from this instruction (“*pesol lekha*”) that Moshe was allowed to keep the dust and small pieces of stone produced by his chiseling the stone. As this was a special, precious stone, the Gemara comments, Moshe became wealthy as a result of this material which he was allowed to keep.

The Gemara here perhaps seeks to convey the message that sometimes, our greatest blessings result from the “*pesolet*” – the “refuse,” the “dust,” the “filth” with which we are sometimes compelled to deal at various times in life. In Moshe’s case, this refers not only to literal “refuse” – the mess of gravel and grit that he needed to work with in order to produce the new tablets – but also to the broader context of this job assigned to him. The sin of the golden calf marked *Benei Yisrael*’s greatest moment of failure, and therefore, by extension, it likely marked Moshe’s greatest moment of failure. This is powerfully expressed by the Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (32a), cited by Rashi (32:7), which comments that when God informed Moshe of the nation’s sin by saying, “Go down [from the mountaintop], for your nation…has been corrupted,” He meant, “*Reid mi-gedultekha*” – “Go down from your stature of greatness.” The nation’s disgrace brought shame to Moshe, their leader and guide. This grave sin created a great deal of “*pesolet*” – “refuse,” a large “mess” which Moshe then had to work to address. The image of Moshe laboring to chisel new stones, surrounded by “*pesolet*,” perhaps reflects the broader situation – the “mess” that Moshe now confronted, and which he was now responsible to deal with. Moshe found himself embarrassed and ashamed, and he now faced the difficult, unwanted challenge of “cleaning up” the “mess” and “picking up the pieces” of the tragedy of *cheit ha-eigel*.

If so, then the Gemara here perhaps teaches that on some occasions, a “messy situation” can become our greatest and most valuable asset. Sometimes, it is specifically the “*pesolet*” in our lives, the undesirable, uncomfortable, difficult and unpleasant situations which we confront, which is the most “enriching,” which brings us the most benefit. Rather than bemoan the “*pesolet*” in our lives – the unwanted, unenjoyable tasks that we find ourselves forced to perform – we should try, as much as possible, to embrace them, recognizing that life’s challenges, including our own failures, can often bring us the greatest “wealth” and blessing.

Monday

Parashat Ki-Tisa begins with the command of *machatzit ha-shekel* – the half-shekel tax imposed upon each member of *Benei Yisrael* from age twenty and above. This command includes both a requirement to use this tax as the method of counting the nation whenever a census needed to be taken, and, additionally, an annual tax, the revenue from which was used for the sacrifices and other needs of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

The Torah specifies that every individual must pay the precise same amount, regardless of financial status: “*He-ashir lo yarbeh ve-ha’dal lo yam’it mi-machatzit ha-shekel*” – “The wealthy one shall not add onto, and the impoverished one shall not diminish from, the half-shekel [amount]” (30:15). Those who enjoyed material blessing were not permitted to pay higher than the half-shekel amount, and those suffering poverty were not permitted to pay less. (Of course, wealthier members of the nation could give to the poor to enable them to fulfill this *mitzva*.)

The Maggid of Kozhnitz (*Avodat Yisrael*) suggested that this law may be seen as a model relevant also to spiritual “wealth” and “poverty.” Just as the wealthy individual may not exceed the half-shekel payment, the Maggid writes, similarly, those who are spiritually “wealthy” should not exaggerate their worth. They must ensure not to think too highly of themselves, and not to view themselves as more important than other members of the nation. No matter how much a person has achieved, he must remain cognizant of his faults and failings, of the fact that he has still not reached his full potential. And, by the same token, the “poor” – those who are religiously “impoverished,” without many good deeds to their credit, should not “diminish” from their sense of self-worth. They should not minimize the value and importance of the *mitzvot* they have performed, or of their positive character traits and admirable qualities.

The Torah prescribed a single amount for the *machatzit ha-shekel* payment so that all members of the nation will feel equally represented by the public sacrifices offered in the *Mikdash*, and see themselves as equal partners in this sacred endeavor. The Maggid of Kozhnitz here suggests that we apply this perspective also to the abstract “*Mikdash*” that we are to collectively build in fulfillment of our nation’s mission. *Am Yisrael* will always consist of “wealthy” and “poor,” those who are exceedingly righteous and those who are less so. Nevertheless, we are to see each other as equal members of this enterprise, with each individual working to the best of his or her ability to make his or her unique contribution. We must constantly strive to do our share, without taking too much pride in our successes or feeling too much shame for our failures. As long as we try, we are all equal partners in the “*Mikdash*,” in the collective effort to be a sacred nation worthy of God’s presence.

Tuesday

The opening verses of Parashat Ki-Tisa introduce the *mitzva* of *machatzit ha-shekel* – the half-shekel tax imposed upon every member of the nation. As the Ramban discusses at length in his opening comments to this *parasha*, the Sages understood these verses as referring to three distinct commands. First, the Torah here requires that when a census is conducted, the people must be counted by way of half-shekel donations given by each member of the nation. Implicit in this command, the Ramban writes, was the second requirement – to count *Benei Yisrael* at the time this command was given, at the time of the construction of the *Mishkan*. And thus in the beginning of Parashat Pekudei (38:25-28) we read that the people had donated silver half-shekels for the census, and this silver was used (mainly) for the sockets that formed the foundation of the *Mishkan*. The third obligation is the annual half-shekel tax that was collected to fund the public sacrifices and maintenance of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

While the consensus view appears to be that all these three requirements are included in the *machatzit ha-shekel* command presented in these verses, a unique position is taken by the Vilna Gaon, in *Aderet Eliyahu*. The Gaon’s approach is unique in two respects – in his understanding of the Torah’s command vis-à-vis the census, and in his understanding of the annual half-shekel tax.

According to the Vilna Gaon, the law concerning the census is presented only in the first verse (after the introductory verse, “The Lord spoke to Moshe”), which states that when the nation is counted, everyone must give “*kofer nafsho*” (“a ransom for his soul”). This verse makes no mention whatsoever of the amount of a half-shekel, and the Gaon explains that this amount was not required when taking a census. As the Gaon observed, King Shaul used other means of counting when conducting a census (Shemuel I 11:8, 15:4). In the Gaon’s view, some means of “atonement” is required when taking a census, but not specifically a half-shekel. This is in contrast to the conventional understanding, that specifically a half-shekel is required when taking a census.

The amount of a half-shekel is mentioned here in Parashat Ki-Tisa only in the next verse, and according to Gaon, the rest of this brief section refers entirely to the mandatory donation of silver towards the construction of the *Mishkan*. Beyond the first verse – which speaks of the need for some sort of “atonement” when conducting a census – the Torah here speaks only of the one-time tax needed to supply the silver that formed the foundation of the *Mishkan*. The Torah does not, in the Gaon’s view, speak here at all of the annual half-shekel tax that was collected for funding the operations of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. This requirement, he contends, was taught via oral tradition (“*halakha le-Moshe mi-Sinai*”), and is not actually stated in the Torah.

The Gaon answered on this basis the question raised already by the Ramban, in his Torah commentary (30:15), regarding the Torah’s command forbidding donations of more or less than a half-shekel: “The wealthy one shall not add onto, and the impoverished one shall not diminish from, the half-shekel [amount]…” The Ramban noted that the Torah here appears to impose a strict prohibition against paying a higher or lesser amount for the *machatzit ha-shekel* obligation, and yet, the *Rishonim* who listed the Torah’s commands did not include this prohibition in their list. According to the Gaon’s approach to these verses, of course, this is no question at all. Since these verses refer only to the one-time half-shekel donation required at Sinai, they do not establish eternal Torah law such that this prohibition should be counted among the 613 Biblical commands.

As mentioned, the Gaon’s view does not represent the standard understanding. Thus, for example, the Rambam in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* (*asei* 171) and in the opening passage of *Hilkhot Shekalim* writes explicitly that the annual half-shekel tax constitutes a Biblical command, introduced here at the beginning of Parashat Ki-Tisa.

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted the question raised by the Ramban, commenting to Parashat Ki-Tisa (30:15), regarding the Torah’s command that the annual *machatzit ha-shekel* tax must be paid in the correct amount, and neither higher nor lower. The Ramban observed that the Torah here appears to introduce a prohibition against paying more or less than the required half-shekel sum, and yet, this prohibition does not appear in the various lists of the Torah’s 613 commands. (In truth, the *Tashbatz*, in his *Zohar Ha-raki’a*, lists among the 613 Biblical commands these two prohibitions, paying more or less than a half-shekel. Other *Rishonim*, however, did not list these prohibitions among the 613 Biblical commands.)

In tentatively suggesting a possible answer this question, the Ramban cites the Gemara’s comment in Masekhet Ketubot (108a) regarding the treasurer’s intention when taking money from the Temple treasury with which to purchase the public sacrifices. The Gemara comments that when the treasurer took money, he had in mind that the money should include even those who had yet to make their annual *machatzit ha-shekel* payment. In order to ensure that the sacrifices would represent the nation in its entirety, without exception, the treasurer specifically intended that the money used to purchase the animals and other materials for the public offerings would include funds that would arrive in the future. As such, the Ramban writes, the treasurer essentially fixed any and all deviations from the half-shekel payment. Excess funds paid by the wealthy were not credited to the wealthy, and went instead to cover the insufficient sums paid by the poor. It thus turned out that even those who paid incorrect amounts were in the end considered to have supplied the correct amounts.

At first glance, the Ramban’s comments seem very difficult to understand. Even though the *kohanim* who ran the treasury were able to fix the problem created by higher or lower *machatzit ha-shekel* payments, why would this affect the culpability of the violators? Did they not violate the Torah’s command by paying more or less than the required sum – precisely what the Torah warned against?

The Ramban’s comments are explained by Rav Yerucham Perlow, in his commentary to Saadia Gaon’s listing of the *mitzvot* (*asei* 20). He writes that the Ramban understood the verse, “The wealthy one shall not add onto, and the impoverished one shall not diminish from, the half-shekel [amount]” as directed not to the wealthy and the poor, but rather to those in charge of the Temple treasury. The Torah here does not prohibit donating more or less than a half-shekel for one’s annual *machatzit ha-shekel* obligation. Rather, the Torah here is explaining how the public rituals in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* are to be considered equally representative of all the people. It is telling the treasurer to have in mind when using the collected funds that they include a half-shekel from every individual – with excess funds covering payments which have yet to be made – such that the wealthy and the destitute as equally represented by the Temple sacrifices. As such, Rav Perlow writes, the Torah does not introduce here a separate command, but rather clarifies how the obligatory public sacrifices become public sacrifices – by being purchased collectively by the entire nation, with each individual considered to have donated an equal share.

Thursday

The Rambam, in the beginning of *Hilkhot Shekalim* (1:1), writes that even an “*ani ha-mitparneis min ha-tzedaka*” – a pauper who is supported by charity – is required to give a half-shekel each year towards the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, in fulfillment of the *machatzit ha-shekel* obligation. Despite this individual’s unfortunate state of poverty, the Rambam writes, he is required to borrow money or even sell his clothing in order to pay a half-shekel.

Rav Chaim Kanievsky, in his work *Shekel Ha-kodesh* (1:1, in the *Bei’ur Halakha* section), addresses the question as to why this should be the case. The Talmud Yerushalmi (Pei’a 1:1) famously writes that a person who does not have money with which to perform a *mitzvat asei* (affirmative command), such as if he cannot afford a pair of *tefillin*, is exempt from that obligation. Moreover, the Rama (O.C. 656:1) writes that one does not have to spend more than 20 percent of his assets for the sake of the fulfillment of a *mitzvat asei*. The well-known exceptions to this rule are the obligation of Chanukah candles and the obligation of four cups of wine on the night of Pesach, which must be fulfilled even if this requires begging, borrowing, or selling one’s clothing (O.C. 472:12, 671:1) – an extraordinary provision which is commonly understood as reflecting the importance of *pirsumei nisa* (publicizing the miracle celebrated through these *mitzvot*). The Rambam makes an additional exception for the *mitzva* of Shabbat candle lighting (*Hilkhot Shabbat* 5:1), which has been explained based on the *halakha* which affords precedence to Shabbat candles over Chanukah candles due to the singular importance of *shalom bayit* (serenity in the home – *Shulchan Arukh* O.C. 678:1). If *Halakha* requires a pauper to sell his belongings or beg for the sake of lighting Chanukah candles, the Rambam apparently reasoned, then certainly he should do so for the sake of Shabbat candles, which are deemed more important than Chanukah candles.

In any event, the basic rule is that a person does not have to beg or sell his clothing to fulfill the Torah’s affirmative commands, except in these rare instances. The question thus arises as to why the Rambam considered the *machatzit ha-shekel* obligation one of the exceptional *mitzvot* that require even the destitute to do anything they can to be able to fulfill this requirement.

Several writers, including the *Sefer Ha-chinukh* (105), cite as the source of this law the Torah’s command in Parashat Ki-Tisa (30:15), “The wealthy one shall not add onto, and the impoverished one shall not diminish from, the half-shekel [amount]…” The Torah here explicitly commands that even a pauper must pay the *machatzit ha-shekel*, and thus this verse might perhaps be the source requiring even the destitute to do what they can to fulfill this obligation. However, Rav Kanievsky questions this conclusion, noting that the Torah may not necessarily be speaking of somebody who is so poor that he must sell his clothing or beg in order to obtain a half-shekel. Quite possibly, the Torah establishes that one who has only less than a half-shekel should not pay anything, rather than pay an amount less than a half-shekel – not that he must resort to extreme means of obtaining money for this *mitzva*.

Rav Kanievsky notes that some writers suggested drawing proof to the Rambam’s ruling from the case addressed in the Mishna (Shekalim 1:7) of somebody who pays the *machatzit ha-shekel* on a pauper’s behalf, who is absolved of the requirement to add a “*kalbon*” (the money changer’s fee for exchanging a whole *shekel* for two half-shekels). The fact that the Mishna envisions such a scenario would appear to indicate that even the poor were required to participate in the *machatzit ha-shekel* payment. Clearly, however, as Rav Kanievsky writes, the fact that some might volunteer to enable an impoverished friend to fulfill this *mitzva* does not mean that the impoverished friend is required to beg for donations for this purpose.

Rav Kanievsky suggests that the Rambam perhaps reached this conclusion on the basis of the fact that the revenue from the *machatzit ha-shekel* went towards the public sacrifices, which were offered on behalf of the entire nation. The Gemara in Masekhet Zevachim (4a) states that whereas a private sacrifice is disqualified if the *kohen* tending to the sacrifice had in mind the wrong person (and not the person who brought the offering), no such law applies to the public sacrifices. These sacrifices are brought on behalf of the entire nation, and thus there is no scenario where the officiating *kohen* could have the wrong person in mind – for all members of the nation are the “owners” of the public sacrifices. As such, since these sacrifices were to represent all members of *Am Yisrael*, it follows that all members needed to participate in the *machatzit ha-shekel* donation, even if this entailed resorting to extreme measures such as selling one’s clothing or begging for charitable donations.

Friday

Towards the end of Parashat Ki-Tisa, we read that Moshe’s face “shone” when he descended from Mount Sinai for the final time, carrying the second pair of stone tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were engraved (34:29). The people were frightened by this mysterious “glow” from Moshe’s face, and so Moshe wore a veil when he spoke to them, in order to conceal his face.

The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 47:11) brings two views as to the origin of this radiance, one of which claims that it resulted from the ink that was left over after Moshe wrote down God’s commands. Before Moshe descended from the mountain, God had commanded him to write the series of laws that he had been taught (“*ketov lekha et ha-devarim ha-eileh*” – 34:27), and the Midrash teaches that a drop of ink remained in the bottle given to him for this purpose. Moshe wiped this ink on his head, resulting in a mysterious “glow” from his face.

How might we understand this concept, that Moshe’s face “glowed” as a result of the leftover ink?

Rav Heschel of Cracow, in his *Chanukat Ha-Torah*, suggests an answer based on the famous tradition (*Hadar Zekeinim* and *Ba’al Ha-turim* to Shemot 27:20, and *Da’at Zekeinim* to Shemot 32:32) that Moshe’s name was omitted from Parashat Tetzaveh as a result of his plea for *Benei Yisrael* after the sin of the golden calf. God sought to eradicate the nation and produce a new nation from Moshe, but Moshe interceded on *Benei Yisrael*’s behalf and demanded that if they were not forgiven, then “erase me, if You will, from Your book” (Shemot 32:32). Although God accepted Moshe’s plea and forgave the people, nevertheless, Moshe demand of “*mecheini na*” – that his name should be “erased” – was partially fulfilled, through its omission from a context where it should have appeared. (Parashat Tetzaveh begins with the words, “*Ve-ata tetzaveh*,” instead of the conventional, “*Va-yedaber Hashem el* ***Moshe*** *lei-mor*.”) This omission, Rav Heschel suggests, resulted in some leftover ink. The meaning of the Midrash’s remark, Rav Heschel explains, is that Moshe was deemed worthy of this special radiance because of his extraordinary self-sacrifice on behalf of *Am Yisrael*. Moshe refused to accept *Benei Yisrael*’s fall, despite being offered the opportunity to be the sole founder of God’s new treasured nation, and this remarkable selflessness and devotion to the people is what made him “shine” as he came down from the mountain to rejoin *Benei Yisrael*.

We might also suggest that the Midrash here points to Moshe’s mysterious “glow” as symbolic of the general aura and “radiance” that ought to characterize Torah life. The “ink” with which the Torah is written includes not only its technical requirements and prohibitions, but also an overall feeling and atmosphere that must be created and maintained. Not everything the Torah demands of us can be formulated in strict, legal terms. When God instructed Moshe to write His commands, He gave him a bit of extra ink – symbolizing the areas of Torah life that do not involve any specific obligations or restrictions, the overall “glow” of joy, dignity, sensitivity and serenity that must radiate from those who live lives of Torah commitment. Beyond strictly obeying the numerous specific commands, we must also strive to live with the “radiance” of Torah that shines upon and inspires the people around us.

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