

EQUAL HALVES

by Shlomo Katz

Hamaayan / The Torah Spring
Edited by Shlomo Katz

Contributing Editor: Daniel Dadusc

Ki Sisa

Volume XIV, No. 21
20 Adar I 5760
February 26, 2000

Today's Learning:

Eruvin 4:4-5

Orach Chaim 254:1-3

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Yevamot 88

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Nedarim 3

Our parshah opens: "When you raise the heads of Bnei Yisrael according to their numbers, every man shall give an atonement for his soul when counting them . . . a half shekel[.]" Why, asks R' Moshe Feinstein z"l, was the command to take a census phrased as "raising the heads of Bnei Yisrael"? He explains:

If you ask a typical person why he does not study more Torah or do more mitzvot, he will answer, "Who am I? I'm not capable of being a Torah scholar or a tzaddik." To counter this inappropriate feeling of humility, to "raise the heads of Bnei Yisrael," Hashem said that every person should give exactly one half of a shekel, no more and no less, toward the census. In this way, each person will realize that he is on par (at least potentially) with the greatest scholar and the greatest tzaddik. All that one needs is determination and effort.

There is another lesson in these words. The gemara (Bava Batra 10b) asks, "How will the honor of Israel be uplifted? Through 'Ki tisah'/'When you raise'." Commentaries explain that the gemara is actually referring to the end of the verse, which alludes to the mitzvah of tzedakah/charity. Why, then, did the gemara quote the beginning of the verse? R' Feinstein explains that it is not enough to give charity. Rather, the honor of the Jewish people is uplifted when we are able to "raise our heads," i.e., to hold our heads high after giving tzedakah. This depends on how we give tzedakah - for example, whether we give an honorable amount in relation to our means and whether we give it with the right attitude instead of begrudgingly. (Darash Moshe)

Understanding the Golden Calf

How could the generation which witnessed the Ten Plagues and received the Torah make a Golden Calf? In a lecture delivered this week in 5733/1973, R' Yaakov Yitzchak Halevi Ruderman z"l (see page 4) answered this question as follows:

The midrash says: "It was good that our ancestors said, 'Na'aseh ve'nishmah.' Was it good that they said [about the Calf (Shemot 32:4)], 'Aileh/These are your gods, Israel'?" It would seem, observed R' Ruderman, that making the Calf was more than just wrong. In some respect, the making of the Calf stood in particular contrast to Bnei Yisrael's calling out "Na'aseh ve'nishmah."

A similar contrast is highlighted by the gemara (Berachot 32b) in interpreting the verse (Yishayah 49:15), "Can a woman forget her baby, or not feel compassion for the child of her womb? Even 'aileh'/these may forget, but 'Anochi'/I would not forget you." The gemara says (as if quoting Hashem), "I will forget the sin of 'Aileh/These [are your gods, Israel],' but I will never forget that you accepted the Torah [beginning with 'Anochi/I am Hashem'] at Sinai." How does the making of the Calf stand in contrast to Bnei Yisrael's acceptance of the Torah?

Two introductory points are necessary. First: Ramban, Kuzari and other early commentaries explain that only a small part of the nation viewed the Golden Calf as an idol. Most of the Jewish people were seeking only an intermediary who would represent G-d's presence on earth. This was the role in which the people had seen Moshe before his "disappearance" on Har Sinai. The prophet Yechezkel teaches that Hashem's "Throne" is adorned with four images: the face of a man, the face of an ox, the face of an eagle and the face of a lion. Thus, when the people thought that Moshe had been taken from them, they thought it would be permitted to make one of the other images on G-d's "Throne" as a reminder of G-d's presence.

Second: what was the significance of the statement, "Na'aseh ve'nishmah"/ "We will do and we will hear"? It meant that, unlike the nations that refused to accept the Torah without knowing its contents, Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah wholeheartedly and unconditionally. It was equivalent to saying, "We have no thoughts or concerns except for the Torah. There is no room in our hearts or in our world for anything but Hashem and His Torah."

Bnei Yisrael attained a very high level by saying "Na'aseh ve'nishmah." Measure-for-measure, just as Bnei Yisrael declared that no part of their hearts, minds and beings would be devoid of Hashem's Torah, so Hashem was prepared to leave no part of the world devoid of His presence. But, by saying, "Na'aseh ve'nishmah," Bnei Yisrael set a high standard that they had to live up to. Thereafter, it was inappropriate for Bnei Yisrael to seek an intermediary to "represent" G-d; He was already as close to them as could be!

R' Ruderman concluded: from the above explanation we can learn an important lesson about how to study Tanach. We read in Tanach about the sins of great people (e.g., King David with Batsheva), and we wonder how they could commit sins that few of us would commit. Now we know, however, that when a great person slips and does not live up to the high standard that he has set for himself, the Torah judges him very harshly. As we have seen, because Bnei Yisrael failed to realize Hashem's closeness to them, it is considered as if they committed idolatry. On our lowly level, Bnei Yisrael's failing would not be considered a sin at all! Similarly, because King David's sin, as subtle as it really was, was beneath him, the prophet describes the incident as if King David committed adultery. (Sichot Halevi p. 94)

The gemara (Berachot 32a) says: "Moshe spoke forcefully to Hashem. He said, 'It was the gold and the silver that You gave Bnei Yisrael that led them to make the Calf!'"

R' Yaakov Moshe Lessin z"l (mashgiach ruchani at Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan/Yeshiva University after 1939) explains: One who wants to become a complete person must know that the Torah's expectations cannot be measured with the same "ruler" that we use in our every day affairs. Rather, the Torah's expectations are far loftier than our thoughts can grasp. Thus, when Moshe said, "It was the gold and the silver that You gave Bnei Yisrael that led them to make the Calf," he was expressing a very subtle point. Indeed, the sin of the Golden Calf was so subtle that the early commentaries struggle to pinpoint exactly what it was. Similarly, we are taught, the angels asked Hashem, "Why did you decree that man should die?" Notwithstanding the simplistic way in which Adam and Chava's sin is told in the Torah, the sin was in fact so minute and so subtle that the angels did not know what it was.

Chazal teach that even the Jews' maidservants experienced a greater revelation at the splitting of the Yam Suf/Red Sea than the prophet Yechezkel experienced at the height of his career. Nevertheless, man's nature is such that if he stops focusing even for a moment on his spiritual and intellectual pursuits, he can quickly develop a small, but dark, stain on his soul which can later spread. Thus it was possible that only hours after the great revelation at the Sea, Bnei Yisrael were so drawn to the booty that washed out of the Yam Suf that they refused to leave and travel on to Har Sinai (see Rashi to Shemot 15:22).

This was Moshe's complaint to Hashem: The stain on their souls that allowed them to make the Golden Calf developed from that time at the Sea when You gave them gold and silver. Those riches

distracted them from their spiritual pursuits long enough that a Golden Calf became possible.
(Ha'maor She'ba'Torah Vol. I, p. 173)

Rabbis of the New World

R' Yaakov Yitzchak Halevi Ruderman z"l was born on Shushan Purim in 5601/1901 in Dolhinov, Russia, where his father, R' Yehuda Laib, was the rabbi. He studied in Yeshivat Knesset Yisrael in Slobodka, then headed by R' Nosson Zvi Finkel (the "Alter") and R' Moshe Mordechai Epstein z"l. (Slobodka produced more future leaders of American Torah Jewry than any European yeshiva. Among R' Ruderman's colleagues in Slobodka were R' Reuven Grozovsky; R' Ruderman's first cousin, R' Yaakov Kaminetsky; R' Aharon Kotler; R' Yitzchak Hutner; R' Yaakov Moshe Lessin, and others.) R' Ruderman received semichah/ordination from R' Epstein in 1926. At approximately the same time, R' Ruderman published his only written work, Avodat Halevi.

In 1930, R' Ruderman joined his father-in-law, R' Sheftel Kramer, at the latter's yeshiva in Cleveland. (R' Kramer previously had taught at the yeshiva of R' Levenburg in New Haven, Connecticut, the first yeshiva in the United States outside of New York.) In 1933, R' Ruderman moved to Baltimore and founded the Ner Israel yeshiva. R' Ruderman led that yeshiva for 54 years until his passing and built it into one of the largest yeshivot in America, producing numerous rabbis, educators and learned laymen.

Outside of his own yeshiva, R' Ruderman was involved in many aspects of Jewish communal life. His death on 14 Tamuz 5747/July 11, 1987 followed less than one-and-a-half years after the passing of R' Kaminetzky and R' Moshe Feinstein (both of whom died just before Purim of 1986). With the passing of these three giants of the Lithuanian yeshiva world, many considered an era to have ended in American Jewish history.

Posthumously, R' Ruderman's students have published two volumes of his teachings: Sichot Levi contains mussar/ethical insights based on the weekly parashah, while Mas'at Levi contains lectures on the 19th century work Minchat Chinuch and other Tamudic and halachic insights.

Copyright © 1998 by [Shlomo Katz](#) and Project Genesis, Inc.

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ("lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah"), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Project Genesis](#) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page. Text archives from 1990 through the present may be retrieved from <http://www.acoast.com/~sehc/hamaayan/>. Donations to HaMaayan are tax-deductible.

