

PAYING OUR DEBTS

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Parshas Ki Sisa

Paying Our Debts

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The Midrash Rabbah on this week's parashah opens by citing the verse from which the parashah takes its name: "Ki tissa" / "When you take a census of Bnei Yisrael . . ." The midrash comments: Hashem said to Moshe, "Tell Bnei Yisrael that they have a debt they owe me, as it is written (Devarim 24:10), 'Ki tasheh' / 'When you make your fellow a loan . . .' [The midrash is making a play on the similarity between "tissa" (tav-sin-aleph) and "tasheh" (tav-shin-heh).] Tell them that they should repay me."

R' Yitzchak Ze'ev Yadler z"l (1843-1917; Yerushalayim) explains: The makers of the Golden Calf did not intend to deny G-d; rather, their sin was that they wanted to have an intermediary between themselves and Hashem. [Ed. note: This is the same motive which, according to Rambam z"l, caused idolatry to originate in the first place.] Hashem's "desire," though, is to give us His beneficence directly, without an intermediary.

Hashem's direct beneficence cannot be obtained, however, unless the Jewish People are united. The reason is that this "flow" from Hashem comes as a result of mitzvah observance, and many of the mitzvot cannot be practiced unless one has assistance. For example, one cannot give charity if there is no one to receive it. Likewise, one cannot teach Torah if there is no one to learn it. [In addition, some mitzvot can be performed only by men, only by women, only by kohanim, only by non-kohanim, etc. Thus, we are all dependent on each other.] This is the message of the machatzit ha'shekel / half a shekel which Bnei Yisrael were instructed at the beginning of our parashah to give. "You are only half a person," the Torah is teaching. Indeed, each person gave the same amount: "The wealthy shall not increase and the destitute shall not decrease from half a shekel," the Torah commands. This highlights that we are dependent on each other. When we learn this lesson, we have paid our debt to Hashem, i.e., we have atoned for the sin of the Golden Calf, because we have made it possible for Hashem's direct beneficence to flow. (Tiferet Zion)

"The wealthy shall not increase and the destitute shall not decrease from half a shekel." (30:15)

R' Shlomo Yosef Zevin z"l (1888-1978; Russia and Israel) writes: It now is common in many countries to tax "progressively," meaning that not only do the wealthy pay more taxes because they have a bigger taxable base (e.g., higher incomes), they also pay at a higher rate. This is not a new idea, writes R' Zevin. It is found in the Mishnah (Peah 1:2): "One should give not less than 1/60 of his field as peah [i.e., leaving part of the field unharvested so the poor can come and take for themselves]." The mishnah continues: "Although [according to Torah law] there is no minimum level of peah, it all depends on the size of the field." Commentaries ask: What is the meaning of the last phrase, "it all depends on the size of the field"? Of course, the larger the field, the more peah one will give! The answer is that the mishnah is describing a progressive tax system. According to Torah law, there is no minimum amount that a person must give as peah. However, the Sages decreed a minimum - 1/60 of the field. Nevertheless, it all depends on the size of the field, and one who has a larger field should give at a higher rate than 1/60.

On the other hand, the Torah also imposes flat taxes, which require everyone to pay the same thing. Our verse is an example of a flat tax. Why? So that no person would think that the Mishkan / Tabernacle or Bet Hamikdash / Temple belonged to him more than to his poorer neighbor. Indeed, it was for this reason that each person gave half a shekel, to remind him that he made only part of the contribution.

In this light we can better understand the Gemara's teaching (Megillah 13b) that the merit of the mitzvah of the half-shekel outweighed the 10,000 shekels that Haman offered Achashveirosh. What this really means is that Jewish unity saved the Jewish people in the days of Haman. This is what Esther had in mind when she told Mordechai (Esther 4:16), "Go, gather all the Jews." And, the Jews were successful in battle against Haman's allies because (Esther 9:16) they "congregated and defended themselves." (La'Torah Ve'la'moadim p.118)

Thirty Days Before Pesach . . .

". . . שעמדה והיא" / It is this that has stood by our fathers and us." (The Pesach Haggadah)

When we recite these words during the Seder, it is customary to cover the matzah and to lift the cup of wine. Why? Is not the matzah a mitzvah de'oraita / a Torah-ordained mitzvah, while the Four Cups are only a rabbinically-ordained mitzvah? Why do we seem to attribute more importance to the rabbinic mitzvah than to the Torah mitzvah?

R' Menachem Mendel Kalish z"l (1819-1868; Rebbe of Vorka, Poland) explained: What is it that has held the Jewish people together and has stood us in good stead throughout the millennia of exile

and persecution? It is the Torah scholars of each generation who have ensured the continuity of halachah and mitzvah-observance, and it is our adherence to their words that has preserved us as a nation. This is why we point out a rabbinic mitzvah and say, "It is this that has stood by our fathers and us."

When R' Mordechai Rokeach of Bilgorai z"l (died 1948; father of the current Belzer Rebbe) repeated R' Kalish's explanation to his father, the Belzer Rebbe, R' Yissochor Dov Rokeach z"l (1854-1926), the latter ordered that it be written down immediately. When he was reminded that it was chol ha'moed, when writing should be avoided if possible, R' Yissochor Dov responded that such a thought is too important to forget. It must be written down, even on chol ha'moed. (Quoted in Mi'saviv La'shulchan No. 140)

Preparing for Pesach

R' Chaim Friedlander z"l (mashgiach ruchani of the Ponovezh Yeshiva; died 1984) writes: As Pesach approaches, we make many preparations--cleaning, shopping, etc. But the mitzvah of sippur yetziat Mitzrayim / relating the story of the Exodus requires no less preparation, and this we do not do by-and-large. In particular, we tend to make two mistakes which stem from not understanding either the "geder" / definition or "shiur" / required amount of this mitzvah, R' Friedlander states.

First, our divrei Torah at the seder tend to focus on the text of the Haggadah rather than on the content, for example, expounding on whether we should say, "Ha lachma anya" or "K'ha lachma anya."

Second, many people recite so many divrei Torah on the first part of the Haggadah, which is only the introduction (including "Mah nishtanah" and the Four Sons), that they have to rush through the later part, which actually tells the story of the slavery, persecution and, finally, redemption. Yet, according to Rambam z"l, the portion of the Haggadah about which it is said, "Whoever speaks more about the story of the Exodus is praiseworthy," is only the latter part of Maggid, from "Arami oveid" and onward.

R' Friedlander continues: We find two hints in the Haggadah to what the real mitzvah is. One teaches us the geder of the mitzvah: "Even if we are all wise, etc., it is incumbent upon us to relate the story of the Exodus, and whoever speaks more about the story of the Exodus is praiseworthy." The second teaches us the shiur of the mitzvah: "In every single generation, a person is obligated to see himself as if he had participated in the Exodus from Egypt." One must tell the story until he can see himself in it.

Why, in fact, is a person who already knows the detailed story of the Exodus obligated to retell it? R' Friedlander explains: When a person relates a moving experience that happened to him, it can be so real to him that he reacts as if he is reliving the fear or the joy that he experienced during the actual event. So, too, the mitzvah of sippur yetziat Mitzrayim is fulfilled when we can picture ourselves in

the story, not merely when we know the story. This requires even a learned person to actively retell the story so that he can first experience the bitterness of the slavery and oppression, then the gradual process of the Exodus, and finally the joy of being drawn close by Hashem.

This is not an easy task by any means. To help, we have tangible items on the seder plate to aid us: matzah, maror, charoset, etc. When we eat these items, or when we point to them during the course of reciting the Haggadah, it should not be a mechanical act but rather one that causes us to reflect.

For example, when we eat the maror, we should reflect on the bitterness of the exile. When we eat the matzah, we should think about the miraculous, sudden departure from Egypt after hundreds of years of exile.

The Gemara relates that the sage R' Nachman had a slave named Daru. R' Nachman asked him, "If a master freed his slave, what would be the slave's obligation?" Daru answered, "He would have to give thanks." R' Friedlander explains that R' Nachman wanted to concretize for himself the abstract ideas discussed in the Haggadah. It should be noted that the Gemara describes Daru as a good-for-nothing who did not even work enough to pay his own upkeep. If even such a slave must be grateful for his freedom, how much more so must Bnei Yisrael, who performed back-breaking labor in Egypt, be grateful!

R' David Avudraham z"l (14th century) writes that feeling as if one participated in the Exodus leads to "hoda'ah," which means both acknowledgment and thanks, and to "shevach" / praise. R' Friedlander explains: Hoda'ah means "acknowledging" the truth that Hashem performed many miracles for us and "thanking" Him for them. This leads to shevach, which involves speaking His "praises." Ultimately, both of these--hoda'ah and shevach--are meant to lead to kabbalat ohl malchut Shamayim / accepting the yoke of Heaven, which then leads to doing the mitzvot willingly and with joy. This is why, after we say, "In every single generation, a person is obligated to see himself as if he had participated in the Exodus from Egypt," we immediately say, "Therefore, we are obligated to give hoda'ah and shevach." (Siftei Chaim II p.355)

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 **[Torah.org](https://torah.org)** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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