

THE FEELING THAT UNITES

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We read in this week's Parashah (28:14), "This is the olah-offering of each month in its own month for the months of the year." Making a play on the similarity of the words "chodesh" / month and "chadash" / new, our Sages see in this verse an allusion to the Mitzvah that a new collection be undertaken every year to pay for the coming year's public offerings. This is the Mitzvah of "Machatzit Ha'shekel" / giving half-a-Shekel to the Temple treasury every year for use in buying animals for public sacrificial offerings.

The annual collection of the Shekalim began in the month of Adar, the same month in which Haman planned to exterminate the Jewish People. Indeed, the Gemara (Megillah 12b) states that the Mitzvah of Machatzit Ha'shekel was meant as an antidote before the fact for the 10,000 bars of silver that Haman would offer Achashveirosh for the right to destroy the Jewish People. Why this Mitzvah in particular?

R' Yosef Yonah Zvi Horowitz z"l (1892-1970) explains: Haman told Achashveirosh (Esther 3:8), "Yeshno am echad / There is one nation scattered and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your realm." The Gemara (Megillah 13b) comments that the word "Yeshno" alludes to Haman's assertion that the Jewish People were "yashen" / asleep, i.e., neglecting the performance of Mitzvot. On a deeper level, writes R' Horowitz, being asleep can mean performing Mitzvot, but without feeling. This, Haman said, is what makes the Jews "scattered and dispersed," not united, and therefore vulnerable. In contrast, a Mitzvah performed with feeling--a feeling of a higher purpose that is greater than one's self--unifies the Jewish People. This is what the Machatzit Ha'shekel does--unites the Jewish People in the public service in the Bet Hamikdash. (Chagvei Ha'selah p.96)

"Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aharon, the Kohen, turned back My wrath from upon Bnei Yisrael,

when he zealously avenged Me among them." (25:11)

Midrash Bemidbar Rabbah comments: Hashem said, "It is only fitting that he (Pinchas) should receive his reward. 'Therefore, say - Behold! I give him My covenant of Shalom / peace' (verse 12)." The "Shalom" that was given to Pinchas is a great thing, for it meant that the entire world will act peacefully. [The "Shalom" that was given to Pinchas was more than the absence of conflict; it was a promise of reconciliation with the family of Zimri, the sinner that he killed (Etz Yosef).]

The Midrash continues: The Torah is entirely Shalom, as is written (Mishlei 3:17), "Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its pathways are Shalom." When a person comes in from the road, we say, "Shalom." In the morning, we say, "Shalom." In the evening, we say, "Shalom." When we recite Shema, we conclude the blessings afterwards with, "He spreads a tent of Shalom over His nation." When we recite Shemoneh Esrei, we conclude with "Shalom." Birkat Kohanim ends with "Shalom." Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta says, "There is no vessel that can hold a blessing other than Shalom, as is written (Tehilim 29:11), "Hashem will give might to His nation; Hashem will bless His nation with Shalom." [Until here from the Midrash]

R' Shlomo Mehr z"l (late 19th century; rabbi of Braila, Romania) writes: Regarding the quoted verse from Mishlei, commentaries explain that there are two types of ways--a well-traveled, public thoroughfare and a more private road. The first is called in Hebrew a "derech"; the second is called a "netiv." (R' Mehr cites the Zohar for this distinction.) Each of these types of roads has advantages and disadvantages. On a derech / busy thoroughfare, it is hard to concentrate on one's thoughts and one is constantly buffeted by other travelers. Such a road is not particularly "pleasant" to travel on. The advantage of a busy road, however, is that one is unlikely to be ambushed by highwaymen there. A private road, on the other hand, is more pleasant, but it is more dangerous because fewer people use it. It lacks "Shalom."

(Not so the Torah, says Mishlei: "Deracheha / Its ways are ways of pleasantness and [also] all netivoteha / its pathways are Shalom." It has the advantages of both types of paths.)

R' Mehr continues: When the Midrash says "It is only fitting that he should receive his reward," it means that most people have no claim of entitlement to reward. After all, what does G-d owe us?! However, one who goes beyond the letter of the law, beyond his obligations--as Pinchas did in risking his life for Hashem's honor--can claim entitlement to reward.

When Pinchas stood alone to kill Zimri, he chose the less-traveled path alluded to in the quoted verse in Mishlei. As such, he was in danger, without Shalom. (We now understand, notes R' Mehr, why the author of the Midrash connected the verse in Mishlei with our verse.) He didn't have risk his Shalom; he was going beyond the letter of the law. It is only fitting, therefore, that his reward be "Shalom." (Divrei Shlomo)

"It was after the plague -- Hashem spoke to Moshe and to Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen, saying, 'Take a census of the entire assembly of Bnei Yisrael, from twenty and above, according to their father's houses, all who go out to the legion in Yisrael'.

"Moshe and Elazar the Kohen spoke to them in the plains of Moav, by the Jordan near Yericho, saying, 'From twenty years of age and above, as Hashem had commanded Moshe and Bnei Yisrael, who were coming out of the land of Egypt'." (26:3-4)

Regarding the need for this census, Rashi z"l comments: A parable--It may be compared to the case of a shepherd whose flock was infiltrated by wolves, and he counted the sheep to discover the number that was left. [So, after the plague, Hashem counted those that remained.] Another explanation: When Bnei Yisrael left Egypt and were entrusted to Moshe's care, a specific number were entrusted to him. Now, when Moshe was close to dying and had to hand back his 'sheep,' he counted how many he was returning. [Until here from Rashi]

R' Yehuda Gruenwald z"l (rabbi of Szatmar, Hungary; died 1920) wonders: Hashem told Moshe to count Bnei Yisrael "according to their father's houses," yet those words are omitted when Moshe repeats the command to Bnei Yisrael! He writes: This difference between Hashem's command and Moshe's repetition of it can be explained by the existence of two reasons for the census, as Rashi notes. In Hashem's love for Bnei Yisrael, He wanted to know how many had perished in the plague. (Of course, notes R' Gruenwald, Hashem knows everything. Nevertheless, ordering a census is an expression of His love.) Expressing Hashem's love for each and every Jew required taking a detailed census by family, so that Bnei Yisrael would notice that those who died in the plague were from the families of the tribe of Shimon that had sinned; this shows that Hashem acts justly and also mercifully. However, when Moshe repeated the command to Bnei Yisrael, he wanted to convey the second purpose as well--that he had to account for the nation that had been entrusted to him. For this purpose, only a total number was necessary. [In the actual implementation of the census, Moshe did, of course, follow Hashem's command, as the succeeding verses make clear.] (She'eirit Yehuda)

A Torah Tour of the Holy Land

When one sees cities of Yehuda (Judea) in their state of devastation, one says (based on Yeshayah 64:9), "Your holy cities have become a wilderness," then he tears his garment. (Shulchan Aruch, O.C. 561:1)

This applies only to cities in Yehuda, not to cities in the rest of Eretz Yisrael, which are not as important. Even if the cities in Yehuda are inhabited by Jews, if they are ruled by Ishmaelites, they are considered devastated. (Mishnah Berurah 561:1-2)

When one sees Yerushalayim in its state of devastation, he says (the continuation of the above verse), "Tziyon has become a wilderness; Yerushalayim, a wasteland," then he tears his garment

(Shulchan Aruch, O.C. 561:2)

R' Yechiel Michel Tukachinsky z"l (1872-1956; Yerushalayim; author of Gesher Ha'chaim on the laws of mourning, and other works) writes: This should be done when one reaches a place from which he can see the Old City, for example from Har Tzofim (Mount Scopus) to the northeast, and similarly from other directions. (Ir Ha'kodesh Ve'ha'mikdash 17:2)

How does this Halachah apply today, when Yerushalayim is under Jewish control? Contemporary Halachic authorities differ.

R' Moshe Feinstein z"l (1895-1986; Russia and New York) writes: It seems logical that even though we have not yet been redeemed due to our many sins, one should not tear his garment when he sees Yerushalayim because, thank G-d, it is beautifully built-up and is not under the control of foreign nations. One would still tear his garment when he sees the site of the Bet Hamikdash. (Igrot Moshe O.C. IV No. 70:11)

R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach z"l (1910-1995; Yerushalayim) disagrees. He writes: I think that as long as we see foreign houses of worship and cemeteries of idol worshipers in the Holy City, and we cannot uproot them, it is still considered "devastated." We lift our eyes to Heaven that we may soon see the Divine service in the Bet Hamikdash; then we will delight in Hashem and rejoice in His eternal salvation. (Minchat Shlomo No. 73)