

CLASS 43 - SHEKALIM

by Rabbi Heshy Grossman

"On the first of Adar was announced the [giving] of the Shekalim"

"Said Resh Lakish: It was known and revealed before He who spoke and the world came into being that Haman was destined to measure Shekalim against Israel, therefore He gave precedence to their Shekalim before his." (Megilah 13b)

The Shekalim were not merely a convenient way of counting the census, nor a method to guarantee the upkeep of the Temple. They are the assurance that our weights and measures will tip the scales of Divine justice, and the children of Israel will prevail against their mortal enemy.

A Shekel is more than a coin - literally, it is a weight, a measure of value. It is here that the battle against Amalek rages still, and it is with the Shekel that we prepare our defense.

Let us explain.

1

Haman approaches Achashverosh with a dastardly scheme:

"...there is one people, scattered and diverse among the nations, throughout the countries of your kingdom, and their religion is different than that of every nation, and the laws of the king they do not keep, and it is of no value to the king to let them be."

"If it be fine with the king, let it be written to destroy them, and ten thousand Kikar of silver I will weigh, through the laborers, to be brought to the treasure chambers of the king."

"And the king removed his ring from upon his hand, and gave it to Haman ben Hamdasa, the enemy of the Jews." (Megilas Esther 3:8-10)

Ten thousand Kikar Kesef was not an arbitrary figure, but carefully planned.

"And for each one of them, I will give one-quarter silver Shekel. Their ancestors numbered six-hundred thousand men when they left the land of Egypt. Six hundred thousand quarter silver Shekalim equals ten thousand silver Kikar..."

"...G-d responded and said: The B'nai Yisrael have already given, when they left Egypt, one measure per head, and the weight of that silver was one hundred Kikar, and seventeen hundred and seventy-seven Shekel."

"You have no permission to acquire them, and Achashverosh has no authority to sell them." (Targum Sheni, ad. loc.)

These two enemies of the Jews have more in mind than legalities - they attempt an heretofore unfathomable arrangement - the sale of a nation, a people to be bartered as chattel.

Achashverosh removes his ring - and the deal is done.

2

In Lashon HaKodesh, the word 'Teva' alludes to a number of apparently unrelated ideas. 'Teva' means 'nature' - 'Taba'as' is a ring - while 'Matbe'a' refers to a coin.

A general rule of the holy tongue is that each word has only one translation, and these three concepts are merely different expressions of one common theme.

'Teva' is an all-encompassing system, a framework determining the rules and principles of the natural world, setting the guidelines for every resident of earth.

Hence, 'Teva' B'Gimatriya equals Elokim, for it is this particular Divine name that rules over creation.

It is this authority that holds sway over global economics.

In earlier times, man existed on subsistence standards, producing most of his own needs and bartering for the rest. Each item was valued for its utilitarian function, and luxuries were an unknown commodity.

In order to expand this fledgling system of trade, an overarching pricing system is established, and for this a nation has a king. The central government sets the barometer of market value, and mints the coin that carries its weight. Every item is worth a set price, and with the fluctuating rise and fall of changing values, the chance for profit is created.

The search for greater gains spurs even further growth, and the king travels the world in his quest for newer markets.

The global economy is born. This 'Matbe'a' parallels the 'Teva' put in place by G-d, a complex assemblage of overriding principles that sets the course of daily conduct.

This is the 'Taba'as' of the king, signet of central authority and designator of the communal ledger.

3

Haman wants to mint a coin of his own, a Matbe'a that will establish a new measure of value, dominating all the world.

This framework will have room for all the world's inhabitants - but not Klal Yisrael.

Haman creates another Teva - a natural system of law that stands in opposition to the

transcendental vision of a nation that dwells apart.

From this moment on, the Jewish people are destined for persecution and affliction, cast out everywhere they turn.

The common market has no place for a nation that produces no salable commodity.

This is the purchase that Haman arranges - a network of controlling interests that establish a new set of rules; a world where might makes right, and happiness has a price; where the values of eternity are easily discarded, and vanities of the moment are pursued at all cost.

He fails to notice one small point: our Shekalim were first.

" 'This is what they shall give': Said Rebbe Meir: from underneath His throne of glory G-d removed a coin of fire and showed it to Moshe - 'this is what they shall give'...all those who are counted."
(Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Tisa 9)

Moshe Rabbeinu is uncertain about the nature of this Shekel that every Jew must bring. It is not the size or shape that confuses him, but the inability to find a coin that will transcend all value, a Matbe'a that will dominate the world.

G-d shows him the coin that emanates from underneath His throne, the seat of all true worth. This Shekel is made of fire, the one element that consumes everything it touches.

While common values are flimsy and transitory, the Matbe'a Shel Aish overpowers the standards of society with a different vision of worthiness, a new measure of importance.

This heavenly perspective subsumes all worldly constructs, and man suddenly realizes that the pleasures of his world are destined to fade.

What factor fixes the value of any particular item?

Market price is determined by supply and demand. The sole determinant of current value is the desirability of any particular article.

For this reason, millions of dollars are spent annually to convince consumers that they absolutely must have items that they really don't need. These artificial supports keep the economy churning, producing ever greater profits for those ensconced within the system.

If ever man will come to his senses, and realize that he can live without this year's new and improved model, profits would deflate, the economy will come to a halt, and we wouldn't have bread to eat.

The Jewish people have their own system of commerce.

"What was the Matbe'a of Avraham Avinu? An elderly man and woman on one side, a young boy and girl on the other." (Bava Kamma 97b)

Every coin is stamped with the image of the king, the monarch who declares the measures of value. Avraham Avinu builds a kingdom of a different sort, with values of a higher caliber. Stamped with the memory of a miracle that transcends the boundaries of nature, Klal Yisrael acknowledges that the coins they treasure can never be exchanged. Aware of their impossible origins, borne by parents who defied every rule of life, the Jew understands that the coins of this world are not his own, and the values of society are of little import to him.

How does Avraham Avinu arrive at this faith? He looks around at his world and sees a city burning. Recognizing that true value can only be eternal, he understands this: the framework that fuels this material world is totally self-consuming.

Man cannot appreciate forever the physical pursuits that leave him feeling empty, and when that final day comes, the prized treasures of modern civilization will be little more than yesterday's trash.

G-d shows Moshe a half Shekel of fire, and we provide the other half.

Haman may have storerooms filled with treasures - but our Shekalim come first.

With his downfall imminent, Haman beseeches the king with one last request:

"In all your empire, the currency utilized is your coin and mine, but now, the Matbe'a will be his [Mordechai], and this honor I do not want to do for him."

The king responds:

"...I trust no longer to leave my ring in your hand, for you are not a friend to the king as is Mordechai HaYehudi, and no longer will any Matbe'a be exchanged in the world other than that of Mordechai."

This is the Matbe'a of the Jewish people - a currency to settle all our debts, and fulfill every obligation - with the power to purchase all eternity.

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