

MONEY IS LIKE FIRE

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"Each person who passes to be numbered, from age twenty, shall give a half-shekel, from a shekel of the Temple,... a donation to HaShem." [30:13]

The *Medrash* says, "Rabbi Meir said, the Holy One, Blessed be He, brought out from beneath his throne of Glory a coin of fire, and showed it to *Moshe*, and said to him, like this shall they give."

The *Noam Elimelech* explains why *HaShem* showed *Moshe* a coin of fire. When handling money, he explains, one should remember that a coin is very much like fire. Just as fire can burn and destroy, but can also warm, and cook, and serve in other valuable ways, so too a coin. If one gives a coin for a good purpose, for charity or kindness, then it is very valuable and helpful to a person; but if a person uses his money improperly, then the same coin can burn and cause serious harm.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein zt"l, the leading Jewish legal authority of our generation, passed away on the thirteenth of Adar II, 1986 - meaning his tenth *Yahrtzeit* has just passed. He also comments on this *Medrash*.

He asks the following question: why did G-d have to show *Moshe* a coin at all? Why was it so difficult for *Moshe* to understand the size of a half-shekel? The verse says that a shekel was 20 geirah, a known amount, so it should have been easy to determine a half-shekel.

Rabbi Feinstein explains that *Moshe* could not understand how people living in a materialistic world could involve themselves with spiritual pursuits. *HaShem* showed him a half-shekel to show him that a person should divide his time: only half of a person's efforts can be devoted to material gain; the spiritual side must be cared for as well. The division also shows a middle ground -- a person living in this world also cannot be so overwhelmed with spirituality that he ignores his material needs. It is crucial to find a balance.

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