

POCKETBOOK JUDAISM

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

HaShem spoke to Moses saying, 'when you take a census from the children of Israel according to their numbers... This is what they will give, all who pass through the counting: one-half Shekel according to the sacred Shekel...' [30:11-12, 14]

The Chassidic Rebbes derive new lessons from the Torah by parsing the verses in new ways, looking for alternate meanings in the words. My wife's grandfather, Rabbi Zvi Elimelech Hertzberg zt"l, was no exception -- and, like the famous Reb Levi of Berditchev, he also looked for the merits in every Jewish soul.

He notes that verse 11 literally reads: "when you **lift up** the Children of Israel according to their numbers." The word "pass through" in verse 14 can also mean "to trespass," and the word used for counting also means 'command' [a 'pakud' can either mean something which is counted, or a soldier -- perhaps because soldiers are counted]. Thus we can read the phrase "all who pass through the counting" as "all who trespass the commands."

And Rav Hertzberg says: when you want to lift up the Children of Israel, and acknowledge their value, do not look only at how well they observe the rules of the Torah. Look also at their Shekalim, and how they give them away. Look at their generosity. Then you will realize that "they will give!" They give charity. This applies even to "all who trespass the commands," those who did not observe the laws of the Torah. They give -- and you should recognize this merit. And it's true -- even the most unaffiliated Jews care about their causes and give great sums to charity.

HaShem showed Moshe a Shekel of fire. What happens when one brings fire in contact with something which is glowing, but not yet burning? The fire, of course, can cause the other object to light. Every Jewish soul is a spark waiting to light -- and fire can help it to burst forth. Both Tzedakah (charity) and Torah are compared to fire.

When one gives charity, he or she builds a connection between the giver and the receiver. When one gives to other Jews and Jewish organizations, the giver feels more connected with Jews and Judaism. Those who give to Israel, care about Israel. The giving is not merely a sign that one cares -- rather, the giving also **causes** the giver to care. Don't belittle "cardiac Jews," even if they do little else than give to Jewish causes! The Jewish heart beats within, maintaining a connection.

Giving to Jewish causes must be encouraged in a world where Jewish hearts are fading, where assimilation is the raging fire which must be fought with the fire of Tzedakah, and the fire of Torah.

Marginally-affiliated Jews are leading supporters of hospitals, universities, services for inner-city youth, and other charities of all kinds. If we encourage them to support Jewish causes as well, then we can help retain their connection to Judaism for future generations.

Good Shabbos,
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