

MACHATZIS HASHEKEL: THE HALFWAY MARK

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah

Every Jew had to donate Machatzis HaShekel, "one half-shekel" for the daily, communal sacrifices brought up by the priests on the Altar on behalf of the whole nation (Shemos 30:13). This uniform annual rate was paid by rich and poor alike, during the month of Adar.

One size fits all in this mitzvah. Everyone was treated as equal. With no distinction made between individuals, the half-shekel levied on every communal member ensured that each Jew merited an equal share in this valuable endeavor (Sefer HaChinuch). The homogeneous price avoided embarrassment for the less affluent and assured no feeling of moral superiority for those that could have afford to give more.

Of the many beautiful allusions given of what the "half-shekel" symbolizes, the common motif is the incompleteness of the Jew - both within himself and within his society.

Within himself, a person, like a game of soccer, is made up of two-halves. A human being is a combination of "soul" and "body". The "soul" emanates from the spiritual realm of Heaven; the "body" is the coarse, physical and earthly component.

What the "half-shekel" signifies is how each component within man is, at most, half the picture (See Rabbeinu Bachya). That Moshe beheld a vision of a heavenly coin of fire for this mitzvah (Bamidbar Rabbah 33:9) teaches how the half-shekel donated on Earth had a otherworldly parallel; how the "body" of every Jew here has its corresponding "source" in the spiritual "soul" above (Sefas Emes, Shekalim 5647). Where united into one whole, the body merges with the soul in the fulfillment of the Torah dictates. Only in their synthesis do they become "one whole unit". A compromise is only a half-measure; it lacks completion.

The mark of man reaching the "halfway point" is similarly echoed within the relationship he has to his society.

The half-shekel famously denotes the sentiment how every Jew, no matter how stupendous his accomplishments, is still deficient and only "half" an entity where he does not totally relate and identify with the community. He is an obligatory member of the Jewish nation; he needs them, and they need him.

In the scenario where he relates and sees the congregation as his "other- half", they end up nicely

complementing each other. The ideal state of achdus, "unity" was memorably achieved at Sinai where every Jew stood "like one man, with one heart". (This completeness within each person himself is also connoted in how all physical defects were healed so they every Jew was whole and unblemished to receive the Torah). Where disputations fester, however, the Children of Israel are not united and dismally do not live up to their title "one nation in the land" (Amidah, Shabbos afternoon prayer).

Significantly, the money of the half-shekel collection went for the communal purchase of the daily tamid offering that was itself split into half: one lamb offered soon after daybreak at the beginning of the daily service, the second in the afternoon, towards the end (Bamidbar 28:4). It was the harmonious combination of two-halves that proved the ingredients for the constant elevation sacrifices to ascend from man up to Heaven.

Alone, neither "body" nor "soul" is complete. Alone, neither "individual" nor "community" are whole. They have only reached the "halfway mark".

But together, where united in one goal, they can go forward and onwards towards spirituality, service of G-d and perfection. The course is presented by Osher Chaim Levene, author of SET IN STONE (2004: Targum) about the meaning of mitzvah observance and PEOPLE OF THE BOOK (2007: Targum) about the biblical personalities. A writer and educator, he learned at the Gateshead and Mir Yeshivas, holds a Bachelor of Science (Honors) business degree from London's City University, and is a Member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.