

ON MACHTZIS HASHEKEL AND THE NECESSARY COMPLEMENTARITY OF THINGS

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On Machtzis HaShekel and the Necessary Complementarity of Things¹

Dyads play an important and consistent role in the conceptual universe of Chazal. Hashem's very *midos* are divided between the categories of *duchrin* and *nukvin*², subtly moving against each other. Our *avodah* inexorably contains quantities of two opposing inner states: love of Hashem, and reverence for Hashem. (The division of the *luchos* into two tablets alludes to this necessary bifurcation.) When looking at important events through a spiritual lens, Chazal saw a dynamic between upper and lower worlds, which in turn was mediated between "relationships" between two different rungs on the spiritual ladder of *sefiros* that connect Hashem's Will with concrete action.

In a word, the inner life of the universe that Chazal contemplated is full of relationships between entities, rather than concepts acting freely and independently. Almost nothing acts alone - things happen through the sliding and changing interrelationships between concepts and objects.

The mandatory half-shekel - no more and no less - begins to sound far more predictable and appealing. It speaks of the ubiquitous incompleteness of so much that is important to us, and of the need for partners and complements in everything important that we do.

The single most important of these interrelationships is that of the individual and the collective. The Mishkan gives it dramatic expression. We know that the Mishkan's purpose was not to provide an abode for the Shechinah, but rather to facilitate the Shechinah making its abode within us. (The Torah underscores *v'shachanti b'sochum*³, not *b'socho*.) Yet the Mishkan was not built through the individually-driven donations of each person, striving to bring the Shechinah into his life. The Torah insists, at least in part, on the uniform half-shekel. The Torah teaches that even the individual working on his very personal and individual growth cannot possibly absorb the spirituality he needs without partnering with the greater community of *Klal Yisrael*.

The reason for this is readily apparent. The indwelling of the Shechinah in more common parlance amounts to *devekus* to Hashem, commanded by the verse "To Him you shall cling."⁴ But how does one "cling" to the overwhelming and infinite power of G-d? Chazal's advice⁵ is through clinging to *talmidei chachamim*. The Rambam's paraphrase⁶ of this gemara is telling. "It is a mitzvah to cling to

chachamim and their students." Why students? And isn't it a distortion to extend the mitzvah of clinging to Hashem to *talmidei chachamim*, who are not hinted to in any manner of form in the verse?

Clinging to *talmidei chachamim* is not an extension of the verse, but the embodiment of it. The Torah does not command us to do what we cannot. It is simply impossible for all Jews to reach the level of *devekus*. Yet, the Torah imposes the obligation of *devekus* upon all of us. The solution is to attach ourselves to what is already attached.

Elsewhere,⁷ Chazal write "Whoever attaches himself to evildoers, even if does not act as they do, is punished together with them; whoever attaches himself to those who perform mitzvos, even if he does not join them in that performance, nonetheless is offered the same reward." There are spiritual accomplishments that are beyond the reach of many people. They need not despair, but change their strategy. They can lay claim to *devekus* by associating with those for whom it is working reality - the *talmidei chachamim*. The Rambam observes that even this is not a workable solution. Not everyone has access to and can create a relationship with a genuine *talmid chacham*. The Torah must mean, therefore, that by associating with the world of *talmidei chachamim*, one participates in the mitzvah of *devekus* to the best of one's ability. If the association cannot be with a *talmid chacham*, it can be with people one degree of separation away - their students.

The bottom line is that *devekus* is a mitzvah that many individuals can simply not perform - other than by partnering and connecting with others. This partnership lies at the heart of the half-shekel, which so clearly points to its missing other half.

With this we understand another difficult passage in the Rambam, at the beginning of *Hilchos Shekalim*. He writes that the half-shekel is an absolute obligation, imposed even upon those who are too poor to afford it, and who would ordinarily use the ones defense for their inaction. Since the half-shekel is the price of participation in the building of the Mishkan, itself the tool through which we achieve all-important *devekus*, no one can remain outside its circle; all must have a stake, without exception.

Fulfillment-through-association is the key to other mitzvos that seem beyond the ability of each and every individual. The *Bais Avraham* considered Shabbos in this group. The full *kedushah* of Shabbos is inaccessible to the individual, save through his banding together with us who in concert can experience Shabbos as it should be experienced. *Kedoshim tihyu*⁸ is another example. *Mesilas Yesharim* readily admits the inability of the individual to achieve *kedushah* through his own devices. Rather, he begins the process, and further achievements are granted to him from Above. What he means is that his association with others gives him access to their accomplishments; they all become partners by pooling their contributions.

Lovingly, the Torah informs us that we Hashem's precious children⁹. But it is only the group as a whole that He refers to this way. The plural is used: *Banim atem*. The individual is not called a *ben*.

Here too, the spiritual closeness of *ben* is unavailable to the individual, and only achieved by the individual associating with the collective.

R. Akiva famously declaimed that *v'ahavtah l'reyacha kamocho* is a *klal gadol* in Torah. Loving your fellow as yourself is a great underlying principle of much of the observance of the Torah, because that love allows us to join with, to bond with others. It is only through that bonding that we participate - by partnership or by surrogacy - with so many important mitzvos. It is not coincidental that R. Akiva was the author of the passage cited above about the consequences of attaching oneself to evildoers and mitzvah performers.

We must be especially aware of this strategy whenever Hashem displays special love to *Klal Yisrael*. We cannot and will not be able to seize the opportunity to move closer to Him, unless we unite with and act in concert with other Jews. This is precisely what we did when Hashem showered us with love at the time of Purim: we responded with *mashloach manos*, with the sending of gifts that brought us closer to our fellow Jews. We sought - and attained - *devekus* by clinging to those who cling to Him.

So it must be at all times that He shows special love to us. We must stand ready to implement the spiritual content of *mashloach manos* - *avodah* actualized only through a shared effort with others.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom, pgs.230-232

² Lit., masculine and feminine

³ Shemos 25:8

⁴ Devarim 10:20

⁵ Kesubos 111A

⁶ De'os 6:2 ⁷ Avos D'Rebbi Noson 30:3

⁸ Vayikra 19:1

⁹ Devarim 14:1