

THE OTHER HALF

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Shekalim: Matching Funds

"This they shall give - everyone who passes through the census - a half-shekel." (30:13)

Moshe could not grasp the mitzvah of the half-shekel. Hashem took a fiery coin from beneath His holy throne and said to him, "This they shall give..." (Midrash Tanchuma, Ki Sisa 13)

Mefarshim (Torah commentators) find this Midrash perplexing: What was so difficult to understand about the half-shekel? With regard to the mitzvah of kiddush ha-chodesh (the determining of the new-moon), and the construction of the menorah, we find similar statements in Chazal (our Sages). Those mitzvos, however, are indeed complex and intricate, and it comes as no surprise that Moshe may have needed a little "Heavenly help" to grasp them. But what was not to be understood about giving a half-shekel? Furthermore, Hashem responded by showing Moshe a fiery-coin taken from beneath His holy throne. Yet the Jews weren't giving "fiery coins," just regular half-shekels. In what way did the fiery coin resolve Moshe's difficulties?

[The following story is perhaps worthwhile for the chasanim (grooms) of our times to hear.] Hagaon Rabbi Shimon Sofer [5581-5643 (1820-1883)], second son of the illustrious Chasam Sofer and Rav of Cracow, married-off one of his sons to the daughter of a respectable resident of the city, who had a good reputation in both Torah and nobility of character. The bride's father was a young man - it was his first daughter. All of the Torah giants of Cracow, along with many renowned guests from the surrounding areas, were in attendance at the simcha of the famous rav.

The kallah's father at some point found himself sitting side-by-side with a prominent Chassidic rebbe. "Tell me," the rebbe said to him, "what special merit did you possess, that you were deserving to marry your daughter into the family of Maran Shel Yisrael, son of the Chasam Sofer z"l?"

The mechutan replied, "I am indeed a simple man. Once, however, I did something good, and its merit stands me in good stead to this very day."

He continued. "I married the daughter of a poor man. He promised to provide us with everything, in the customary manner, and he kept his word. When my wife and I came to my in-laws' house the first Shabbos after our marriage to eat the Shabbos meal with them, I noticed that my mother-in-law had lit her Shabbos candles not with silver candlesticks, nor even with copper ones, but rather in the very simplest of candlesticks. My young wife, on the other hand, had graced our Shabbos table with

the most elegant silver candlesticks, which we had received as a gift from her parents. I voiced my curiosity as to the discrepancy. Tears welled up in my young wife's eyes as she answered me. 'I lit with my mother's candlesticks - my parents couldn't afford to buy us new ones, so they gave us theirs instead.'

"As time went on I noticed other discrepancies. For example, while we slept with the most luxurious of bedspreads, my in-laws slept with threadbare blankets that most surely left them cold at night. At that point, I made up my mind: We would return everything!

"I borrowed ten-thousand silver pieces from a number of merchants, and purchased everything we needed. Then, I gathered all my in-laws' possessions, and returned them. To my father-in-law's protests, I replied that the deed had been done, and that Hashem would help us repay our debt.

"So it was. On that very day, I entered the beis ha-midrash, and a Jew came over to me. 'Young man,' he said, 'I have a very good business deal for you. I believe you'll agree it's well worth your while to borrow the money for the initial investment.'

"I went over the deal, and his words indeed seemed true. I went and borrowed another ten-thousand silver pieces and invested them. They were promptly doubled. Ever since then, the rays of success have shone brightly upon me. Baruch Hashem, I have also been blessed with good and righteous sons and daughters. Nor did I ever neglect to study Torah. And now Hashem has bestowed upon me the great honour of marrying my daughter to the son of the rav of our city!" [Mishnas Yosef, vol. 1 pp. 24, quoted by A. Perlow, HaModia]

K'sav Sofer (the eldest son of the Chasam Sofer) explains that Moshe was perplexed by the commandment to take a half-shekel: Why a half? Doesn't the Mesilas Yesharim write (introduction) that there is no goal greater than the achievement of shleimus, completeness, and no greater evil than the lack thereof? Taking a mere half-shekel seems to be the antithesis of everything we strive towards!

Hashem responded by showing him a fiery coin from beneath His holy throne. This, says Hashem, is the other half. Without this half, which I alone hold, goals remain unreachable, dreams unattainable. Our drive for self-perfection must be constantly mitigated with the realization that alone, we don't stand a chance. With Hashem's help, conversely, we can attain heights and accomplish things we never even imagined possible.

Life is full of doubts and uncertainty. At times, however, the right path stands clearly before us, yet we find ourselves unable to take it, because we are intimidated - it seems beyond our reach. How can we overcome our fears and reservations, especially when "the right path" seems so distant and fraught with difficulties?

At these times, we must remind ourselves that we are only half of the puzzle. At the time, the bride's father had no idea how he could ever repay his debt. Yet he knew he was doing the right thing. He

ignored the practicalities, and took upon himself a deed so noble that for the rest of his life, he ate its fruits. He took out his half-shekel - ten thousand of them - and Hashem promptly took out His. We may not always merit witnessing Hashem's response with such clarity, yet it is there. To the degree we are willing to go out on a line for Torah and Yiddishkeit, Hashem stands there waiting to help us, providing us with the wherewithal we alone could never muster.

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