

TIPPING THE SCALES

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

This week's parsha, Ki Sisa, begins with the mitzvah of the machtzis ha-shekel, the half shekel which was to be given by each Jew in place of a census. "Everyone who passes through the count shall give a half shekel. [And this half shekel shall serve] as an atonement for your souls..." Why were the Jews to give exactly a half shekel - why not a whole one? And in what way does this serve as an atonement? Also, the wording, "Everyone who passes through a count," is unusual.

Today (Friday) is the yohrtzeit of the holy tzaddik the Rebbe R' Elimelech of Liezensk zt"l. While the Rebbe R' Elimelech was renowned throughout shtetlech of Poland, Russia, and Hungary for his true piety and the wondrous miracles he wrought, he was also famous for his anavah (humility). Indeed, as we often find, humility is seen among the truly great, while arrogance and pride are the lot of those who have so little to be proud of. The Gemara expresses it such: An empty container - with only one coin inside - makes far more noise than a pushke full of money!

It is told that a student of the Rebbe R' Elimelech once met up with a man who was a staunch opponent of chassidus. Upon hearing that there stood before him a student of one of the infamous "Rebbes," this misguided Jew decided he would have a little fun at the Rebbe's expense.

"Tell me - you say you are a talmid (student) of the world renowned Rebbe R' Elimelech?"

"Yes, I am," he said proudly.

"Why, it's an honour. I would like you to tell me something of the greatness of your 'Rebbe.' After all, I make use of his sefer all the time!" The talmid blushed.

"Yes, it's true. Would you like to see?" With this, the man stood up from his chair, and lifted the cushion upon which he sat. Beneath it lay the sefer Noam Elimelech. "Why - I've never found any other sefer which gives me such 'backing' and 'support' as your Rebbe's sefer! A true metziah! Now, be so good, and tell me more about your 'Rebbe'."

"My holy Rebbe, the Rebbe R' Elimelech," stuttered the talmid, "was so great, that had you placed him under your cushion instead of his sefer - he would have been equally still. Indeed, he was so humble and unassuming that I imagine he would have felt that he belonged there!"

When petitioners used to come to R' Elimelech zt"l, seeking his prayers and blessings, he used to say to his disciples: "Do you know why these people always come to me? It's not because I'm great, nor because my prayers have any special power. I'll tell you why: Chazal (our Sages) say that every

person should imagine as if all the world's inhabitants stood upon a scale which weighed their deeds, and that the scale was exactly balanced, so that if, G-d forbid, one sins, he will tip the scales and bring suffering and calamity to the world.

"Now, the fine and upstanding people who come to me all find themselves in difficult and onerous situations. Some are lacking in parnassah (making a living). Others, may Hashem protect us, are sick. Still others have marital problems, or can't find a befitting spouse for their son or daughter. But they know the truth: They are pure minded and righteous people - it is certainly not they who have tipped the scales and brought these problems to the world. So they ask themselves, 'Who could it be that is at fault for all our suffering? Who is the sinner that keeps tipping the scales?' And they come to the only logical conclusion: It's me!

"Thus, they come to me, and tell me of their pain and tzures, not because they hope I'll pray for them, but rather because they hope I'll be aroused to do teshuvah (repentance) after hearing all of their suffering - and realizing that I'm at fault!"

Such a self-critical view may at first glance seem extreme. To us, it may almost seem comical that one so holy and righteous could truly believe he is at fault for the suffering of others. If, however, we examine the words of our Sages, we will see that it is not so far fetched. We all have the responsibility to pray for the well being of our contemporaries, and the wherewithal to influence the world in a positive way.

One who, G-d forbid, killed someone by accident, is obligated by the Torah to exile himself to one of the Arei Miklat (cities of refuge) in atonement for his accidental yet careless sin. There he must dwell, away from his home, until the death of the Kohen Gadol (High Priest). Once the reigning High Priest dies, he is permitted to leave the city of refuge and return to his home. The Talmud says that the mother of the High Priest used to bring food and drink to the exiled, in hope that in appreciation, they would refrain from praying that their son (the High Priest) die, so that they may return home sooner.

Yet let's say they would pray for the High Priests death - would their prayers be accepted? In the view of our Sages, yes. To some extent, the High Priest is at fault for the tragedy that befell the dead man and his accidental killer. For perhaps had the High Priest prayed harder for the safety and well being of his nation, such a misfortune may never have happened. Were the exiled Jew wish for his death, there is concern that his prayers may indeed be accepted.

"Everyone who passes through the census... " 'Passing through' ("oveir") in Hebrew is another way of saying one who transgresses. 'The count' ("pekudim") is another way of saying the commandments. "One who has a desire to transgress the commandments... He shall give a half-shekel," shekel in Hebrew also means to weigh. Let the potential sinner realize that the world is constantly being weighed, and we each have the power to tip the scales for good or for bad. "This will be an atonement for your souls."

While we'd like to believe that our choice between good and bad is a very personal one, and effects

no one but ourselves, this alas is not the truth. Perhaps, when we are tempted, if we remember that "the entire world rests on our shoulders," and it is within our power to bring suffering and pain, or healing and blessing, then we'll choose our paths a little more carefully.

Have a good Shabbos.

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