

# THE SOUL OF PRAYER

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Hashem showed Moshe a half-shekel coin of fire, taken from beneath the Throne of Glory. "This is what they should give," He said. (Talmud Yerushalmi, Shekalm 1:4)

Apparently Moshe had some difficulty understanding the mitzvah of machtzis ha-shekel, donation of a half-shekel, until Hashem was forced to demonstrate it to him. We find similar comments regarding the construction of the Menorah and consecrating the new moon. However, those cases are indeed complex, whereas giving a half-shekel coin seems like a pretty straightforward mitzvah. What exactly didn't Moshe understand? And why indeed is the mitzvah a half-shekel and not a full one?

Also, it seems funny that the coin was found "beneath the Throne of Glory," not normally the place one would think to look for coins. And why was it made of fire?

Early mefarshim note that the word shekel has the same numerical value (430) as nefesh, spirit - the lowest level of the Jewish soul.

This is significant: The funds collected from the half-shekels were used to purchase communal offerings. Since the destruction of the Beis Ha- Mikdash (Holy Temple), our prayers stand in stead of the sacrifices. The word nefesh is connected to prayer: *"I pour out my spirit (nafshi) before Hashem"* (Shmuel-1 1:15). *"To you, Hashem, I pick up my spirit"* (Tehillim/Psalms 25:1). The fact that nefesh and shekel share the same numerical value is not coincidental; it alludes to the fact that the two share one function.

This ties in to Purim. Chazal (our Sages) say (Megilah 13b), "Hashem knew that Haman planned to weigh shekels against the Jews (Haman 'bought off' Achashveirosh with a kingly sum of silver), therefore He made sure their shekels (i.e. the mitzvah of the half-shekel) preceded Haman's." Maharal writes (Or Chadash, Introduction) that "while all past and future Jewish redemptions depend on and are tied in with prayer, no one instance was so deeply connected to prayer as Purim." Hashem made sure our shekels - and our 'spirited' prayer - would stand in our stead as a powerful antidote against Haman.

*"And for me, my prayer is to You Hashem, at an acceptable time"* (Tehillim 69:14). Why does the Psalmist begin the verse with the conjunction "and" - implying there's someone else besides 'me'?

Sefer Chasidim (1157-8) writes that every Jew has a malach/mazal (angel) that defends him in prayer

before the Heavenly Court, and asks Hashem to accept the prayers of his charge with compassion. This malach also awakens the soul of his guarded one, encouraging him to pour out his heart before Hashem with concentration and enthusiasm.

This malach/mazal, the Bobover Rebbe shlita explains, is not necessarily an angel in the traditional sense.

When man's soul is 'hewn from beneath the Throne of Glory' and placed within a body, it doesn't move from one place to the next as would a material object. Rather, it expands its reach from its origin to the body with which it connects.

This, explains the Ba'al Tanya, is the meaning of (Devarim/Deuteronomy 32:9), "For Hashem's portion is His nation; Yaakov is the rope of His inheritance." 'Hashem's portion' refers to the soul, which we are taught is "the G-dly portion within man." The soul is like the rope; no matter how long, it remains tethered to its source.

Thus, the Rebbe explains, the malach which initiates prayer on our behalf, and awakens us to pour out our hearts, is the out-of-body portion of our soul, which remains forever connected to its source - Hashem - and can never be corrupted by our shortcomings. This fits in with the Sefer Chasidim's description of this malach/mazal: Ba'al Tanya writes that man's soul is sometimes referred to as mazal, from nozel, to flow, because it flows from its source beneath the Throne into man's body, and through it all goodness flows from heaven to earth.

This may also explain why even those completely distant from G-d, in their most testing moments, inevitably turn to prayer. Prayer, which stems from the soul, remains intimately connected with its upper source, and is at times the one uncorrupted source of purity in an otherwise tainted existence.

Note that it is shekel which has the same numerical value as nefesh, and not machtzis ha-shekel, the half shekel. The shekel, like the sacrifices it supports, represents prayer. It is half inasmuch as our this-worldly prayer is only part of the picture. Our 'better half' resides beyond our physical existence, keeping us connected with a higher calling.

Perhaps this explains what puzzled Moshe, and Hashem's answer. It was not the 'how' of the half-shekel but the 'why' - why is this mitzvah to be done with a half coin?

Hashem responded by showing him a fiery coin - it is significant that coin (matbeah) is also used by Chazal to represent prayer (kol ha-mishaneh mi- matbeah she-tav'u Chachamim/whoever changes the liturgy from the one established by our Sages...). The coin, which corresponds to the soul (shekel=nefesh), was made from fire: prayer is not something to be done by rote, but rather an expression of the fiery heart, a revelation of man's deepest emotions and desires.

The 'coin' was taken from beneath the Throne of Glory, the source of all Jewish souls. It is only a half coin, because the prayer we express is preceded by the prayer of our upper soul, which stirs our hearts to pray. The month(s) of Adar is a most opportune time to take inventory of our prayers - what

we're putting in to the 'pushka' and what we're taking out. Have a good Shabbos. [Based on dvar Torah of the Rebbe, Mishpatim/Shekalim 5766] Text Copyright © 2008 by [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and **[Torah.org](#)**