

RIGHT ON THE MONEY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

Everyone counted must give a half-shekel, according to the standard of the sanctuary, where a shekel equals twenty gerahs. Such a half-shekel is to be given as an offering to G-d. (Shemos 30:13)

With less than one month to go until Purim arrives, it is time to get into the Purim mode. What better way to start with Parashas Ki Sisa which contains the cure for Haman, as the Talmud reveals:

"If it pleases the king, let it be recorded that they be destroyed; and I will pay ten thousand silver talents into the hands of those who perform the duties, for deposit in the king's treasuries" (Esther 3:9). Said Resh Lakish: It was known to Him who said one word and the world was created, that in the future Haman would give talents of silver to buy Israel. Therefore, He had commanded that in the same month they should give shekalim of silver to G-d, as we have learned in a mishnah that on the first day of Adar it was announced that the shekalim should be given. (Megillah 13b)

Thus, the Talmud teaches:

The Holy One, Blessed is He, does not "hit" the Jewish people unless He creates a healing first. (Megillah 13b)

In other words, by paying ten thousand talents of silver Haman could have bought the right to exterminate the Jewish people - from Heaven! But that was not in the cards, so to counteract Haman's act, G-d had the Jews purchase themselves first, so-to-speak, paying an equivalent amount to G-d:

Haman answered, "Your handful, which you have offered to G-d, has outweighed the ten thousand talents that I had proposed to the king, for your destruction." - I heard that ten thousand talents of silver equals a half-shekel for each Jew, for there were 600,000 that left Egypt and he said . . . (Tosfos, Megillah 16a)

The B"Ch explains: One talent equaled sixty manehs: sixty times ten thousand equals 600,000. Thus, the half-shekel in this week's parshah was the cure being created in advance of the "illness," which makes sense in light of what the Talmud says elsewhere:

Where does the Torah allude to Mordechai? It is written, "Take principle spices, or pure myrrh (mar dror) five hundred shekels . . ." (Shemos 30:23). (Chullin 139b)

The other element of the cure to Haman is right after the mitzvah to give the half-shekel. And not just the cure to Haman, but to the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Rah, for as Tosfos explains:

Then the king said to Haman, "The silver (Heh-Chof-Samech-Peh) is given to you, the people also, to do as you see fit." (Esther 3:11) Hakesef (Heh-Chof-Samech-Peh) equals the gematria of ha-aitz - the tree ($5+20+60+80 = 5+70+90$) to hint that he would hang from a tree. (Tosfos, Megillah 13b)

But not just any tree, for we already know that Haman is connected to a primordial tree, THE tree that is the very source of the possibility for Haman to exist:

Where is Haman alluded to in the Torah? Hamin ha-aitz - [Did you eat] from the tree [from which I commanded you not to eat]? (Bereishis 3:11). (Chullin 139a)

This is why Matanos L'Evyonim (Gifts for the Poor) is one of the four mitzvos of Purim, for we are not only helping out the downtrodden on this festive day, as the Rambam says, but rather we are also purchasing ourselves from G-d, so-to-speak, so that our enemies cannot. Indeed, of the four mitzvos it is the one that corresponds specifically to the letter Vav of G-d's Four Letter Name, which the Arizal explains corresponds to a tree because it is long and vertical like a tree.

(The final Heh corresponds to Malchus and acts as the ground for the Vav, and the sefirah of Da'as sits on top of the Vav, conceptually-speaking, making it into an Aitz HaDa'as Tov. However, when Adam caused the Da'as to descend below Chochmah and Binah where it was protected from the Chitzonim, making it vulnerable to the Klipos and abuse, he transformed it into an Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Rah.)

SHABBOS DAY:

All the people pulled off the golden earrings from their ears and brought them to Aharon. He took all of it from them, and with an engraving tool formed it and made a molten calf. They said, "These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of Egypt!" (Shemos 32:3-4)

The episode of the golden calf comes at the end of the parshah, but that does not mean that it actually happened that way. In fact, the rabbis teach that the mitzvah to build the Mishkan and to perform the service therein actually came after Moshe descended the third and final time from Har Sinai, on the 11th of Tishrei, after achieving atonement for the surviving Jews who had allowed the golden calf to be created. Once again we learn:

The Holy One, Blessed is He, does not "hit" the Jewish people unless He creates a healing first. (Megillah 13b)

For, when the Jews gave gold to build the golden calf they sold themselves out and made themselves vulnerable to destruction by the nations of the world. However, by contributing to the construction of the Mishkan they bought themselves back, and this is why it was so important that their giving was leshmi (for G-d's sake), and not for an ulterior purpose. It had to be a true giving.

Thus, the Mishkan was a lesson in spending money. For, when it comes to the Jewish people, when money is used in unholy ways, a purchase can actually result in a sale: if we purchase something spiritually wasteful we sell ourselves to the side of spiritual impurity as a result, G-d forbid. This is what the Erev Rav proudly announced: "These are your gods, O Israel, which brought you up out of Egypt!"

That is, you belong to them now.

That is why the construction of the Mishkan was completed on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev, the future date of Chanukah and the of holiday Chanukah Gelt (Chanukah Money). True, on a Pshat-Level playing dreidel for money is a reminder of how the Jews of that time used to pretend to be playing games so that they could continue to study Torah in secret and safety. However, on a Sod-Level Chanukah Gelt is about purchasing our right to survive from our enemies.

Now we can appreciate what the Talmud says:

"And Ya'akov remained alone" (Bereishis 32:25); Rebi Elazar said that he remained for small jars. From here we learn that the money of tzaddikim is more valuable than their bodies. Why to such an extent? Because they will not steal. (Chullin 91a)

Steal? Righteous people?

On the other hand, going BACK for small jars in this case is going AHEAD for Chanukah:

G-d said to Ya'akov, "For endangering yourself for a small container, I Myself will repay your children with a small container to the Chashmonaim [at the time of Chanukah]." (Midrash Tzeidah LaDerech)

What's the connection? The key is in the following lesson from the Talmud:

Rav Yannai [acted] upon his views, for he said, "A man should never stand in a place of danger and say that a miracle will happen for him, in case it does not. And if a miracle does occur for him, it is deducted from his merits." (Shabbos 32a)

Why? Because, to borrow a term from Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, zt"l, ever since Har Sinai, Hashgochah Pratis for the Jewish people is based upon a concept called Chesed Mishpat. Yes, it sounds like an oxymoron, but it means that the Chesed Heaven does for us is not for free, but must be earned, and if not earned, then borrowed. And borrowing, at least for a Tzaddik, is kind of like stealing.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

Take the Atonement-Money from the Children of Israel and use it to make the Appointed Tent, so it may be a memorial to the Children of Israel before G-d, to atone for your lives. (Shemos 30:16)

What does this mean? It means that righteous people do not take anything for free. As the prophet said:

Those who hate gifts will live. (Mishlei 15:27)

Righteous people pay their own way because they like to know that at the end of the day whatever they have benefit from, they earned. They value whatever property they have because they view all of it as vehicles to pay their own way. G-d forbid, they should take something for granted only to need it later for a mitzvah and lose the chance to perform it. Then, when they are in a time of need they will lack the necessary merit for Heaven to help out and either miss out or succeed at the cost of reward in the World-to-Come.

"And Ya'akov remained alone" (Bereishis 32:25); Rebi Elazar said that he remained for small jars. From here we learn that the money of tzaddikim is more valuable than their bodies. Why to such an extent? Because they will not steal. (Chullin 91a)

Steal what? Steal success as a result of not having purchased it with what they have been blessed. And, everything in the physical world is just a vehicle to pay their way: money to buy food for Shabbos, clothing to properly represent G-d in this world, bodily limbs with which to perform mitzvos. Everything exists just to access the real currency, the only currency Heaven actually accepts: Nefesh.

That's why it is called Mesiros Nefesh - the handing over of one's soul. When a person performs a mitzvah, it's as if they have taken a portion of their Nefesh and given it to G-d. To the extent that he has put himself out, is the extent to which he has handed over some of his Nefesh to G-d in payment for life. That is why it was so important to give to the Mishkan leshmi - for G-d's sake. Anything less would not have resulted in true Mesiros Nefesh, and the Mishkan could not have atoned for anything.

We may not know this or appreciate it, but the yetzer hara does. Thus, unbeknownst to so many people, he constantly urges us to spend money wantonly and tries to make us take for granted that with which we have been blessed. In the meantime, we live on, taking from Heaven what we want, all the while racking up a bill that is bound to come back to haunt us either in this world or the next one.

Either way, we pay back with yesurim. As they say, "You can either pay us now or pay us later, but pay us you will." For, suffering is a forced form of Mesiros Nefesh, and sometimes it reaches phenomenal proportions and can even result in national suffering in this world to avoid it in the next world. This is what the Talmud means when it concludes:

Rebi Eliezer said, "If Israel will repent then they will be redeemed, and if they will not, then they will not." Rebi Yehoshua said to him, "If they do not repent they will not be redeemed?! Rather, The Holy One, Blessed is He, will cause to rise a king who will make decrees as difficult as Haman's were and Israel will repent and return to the right path." (Sanhedrin 97b)

Having paid our dues redemption can finally come.

MELAVE MALKAH:

But Mordechai would not bow and would not prostrate himself. (Esther 3:2)

Which raises the question, what was Mordechai really thinking? Did he not realize that by antagonizing Haman he would turn against the Jewish people in a big way? Did he not realize the extent to which he was endangering his own people, and what would have happened had he left Haman alone?

The answer is, complete and utter destruction, G-d forbid. On the contrary, Mordechai knew full and well what the consequences of his actions would be, and that is why he did what he did. It had been his intention to bring yesurim onto his people while there was still time, because he sensed that a great debt had built up and payment could end up being quite severe.

In a sense, he used Haman. Through Haman, the Jewish people became worthy of redemption, because all the yesurim they suffered at his hand paid back Heavenly debts until none existed. In fact, it says in the Talmud:

The students of Rebi Shimon Bar Yochai asked him, "Why were the Jews of that generation obligated to be destroyed?" (Megillah 12a)

The language of the Talmud is nitchaivu, the same word that one might use to express a financial debt as well. For that essentially is what makes a sin so bad: it is stealing from G-d. As the Talmud says, for everything forbidden in the Torah there is something like it that is permissible. Sometimes a sin comes down to timing, like eating perfectly permissible food - on a fast day.

Thus, when Mordechai saw Haman rising to power, knowing that he was from Amalek, and therefore a punishing belt in the hand of G-d. He worked quickly to empty the debt of the Jewish people of his time. That came in the form of suffering and fasting, the combination of which toppled Haman from power and opened the door to redemption from Babylonian exile.

Thus, this week's parshah is essentially the same message as Purim: take stock of what you have been blessed with and consider how you can use it as a form of Mesiros Nefesh, and in doing so, earn success and avoid disaster. Don't just drift; don't rely on freebies. As a result of what you SPEND on mitzvos, be it actual money or actual life, you end up BUYING life.

Haman counted on this to buy the right to destroy us. Mordechai counted on this to buy the right to save us. What we do depends SOULY on the extent to which we BUY into the idea and utilize it to our advantage.

Have a great Shabbos,
PW Text

Copyright © by [Rabbi Pinchas Winston](#) and Project Genesis, Inc.

Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkofa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's [online book store](#) for more details! www.thirtysix.org