

# RIGHT ON THE MONEY

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

**AS OF THIS SHABBOS**, b"H, we will have officially entered "Purim Mode." For the Maftir we will skip ahead and read from Parashas Ki Sisa, about the giving of the Machatzis HaShekel, the half-shekel given by each Jew in the desert, and later in Temple times. This is the time of year that Temple representatives went out to communities around Eretz Yisroel to collect the obligatory half-shekel for the Temple sacrifices. Therefore, we read about it now, just in advance of Rosh Chodesh Adar.

Parashas Shekalim is one of the four special thematic parshios read at this time of year, two in advance of Purim and two after. "Shekalim" has to do with the Temple collection, while "Zachor" recalls the war against Amalek in advance of Purim. "Parah," about the Red Heifer, reminds us of the need to be spiritually purified when offering the Korban Pesach, and "HaChodesh" announces the coming of the "Rosh Hashanah" of months, Chodesh Nisan.

That's on one level. There is a deeper one, and it is the thread that connects Purim to Pesach in a fundamentally profound way. It is the thread that runs throughout all of history, from the Aitz HaDA'AS Tov v'Ra to current history and our age of false or illusionary news reporting. Ultimately, it connects up this world with the next one, Olam HaBa, the World-to-Come.

Let's start with a definition of Media:

1. a plural of medium.
2. (usually used with a plural verb) the means of communication, as radio and television, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet, that reach or influence people widely:

When it first began, the Media was probably a sincere effort to keep people in touch with events occurring beyond their everyday range of vision. Or, it was meant to be a means of providing details from topics of public interest that only became visible after some investigation.

Unquestionably many saw, from the beginning, a way to make lots of money off the public's "need to know." The "Media Moguls" realized, early on, that a lot of people were prepared to pay certain sums of money to stay informed, or just to feed curiosities, of which there are many.

The temptation to cheat has always been great. The bottom line was to sell newspapers, or to grow listening and then viewing audiences. The greater the amount of people who bought a specific newspaper or listened to a particular show, the more big-buck sponsors you could attract.

On the other hand, there was always the potential of being sued for slander. Furthermore, if the

public ever became convinced of the unreliability of a particular news source, they could abandon it just as quickly as they bought into it. Once a Media source loses its credibility, it is not so easy to regain it again.

This created some kind of balance. It was clear that you could not believe EVERYTHING you read in the newspapers or heard on the radio. It was, however, relatively safe to assume that the general gist of the reporting was correct. The main agenda of the people in control seemed to be for the most part, to increase their financial share of the Media pie.

Then the agenda changed. Making money through Media became secondary, perhaps because they have so much of it already. The agenda became first and foremost political, and the Media became a powerful tool to push a far more liberal mandate on the world.

The problem is that many people still buy newspapers and watch the news for the same reason they always have: to know what is going on in the world. They still believe that what they read, hear, or watch, is accurate enough to be believed. They have a tough time adjusting to the fact that "legitimate" Media sources would use their power of influence to mislead the public to suit their own mandates.

What people do not realize is the danger this represents for society as a whole. It is one thing to lie and know that you are lying. Distorting the truth is rarely ideal, even when for "good" reasons. Perpetually lying does something weird to the brain. It blurs the line between fact and fiction until it disappears altogether, and the lie becomes the reality.

This is because the brain, as "smart" as it seems to be, is not that smart at all. It can be duped, and quite easily. In fact, if the brain did not paralyze the body while we sleep we would act out dreams as if they ARE reality. The brain, apparently, has a VERY difficult time distinguishing between reality and dream.

None of this would be so bad if there wasn't one, true, objective reality. It would not be so dangerous if life did not have any real objective. But it does. And, just as the guy who mistakenly believes he can fly learns otherwise when jumping off a building, so too does society find out the hard way how to distinguish truth from fiction.

This was the warning of the Aitz HaDa'as To v'Ra—the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Many think that it is was just a test of obedience, like don't eat your desert before your main course. Everyone talks about the "forbidden fruit," but so few people talk about the forbidden Da'as—Knowledge. God didn't just tell man which fruit to eat. He commanded him regarding the proper knowledge to learn.

Here's another idea people take for granted. The name of the Israeli currency is Biblical, "shekel." It comes from a word that means to "weigh," because once upon a time, before money was minted, that is how the value of currency was established. A scale is a "mishkelah" in Hebrew.

In Kabbalah, the "Mishkelah" refers to the "middle line" of sefiros. It represents the balance between the right side of the sefiros, which are Chesed-oriented, and the left side, which are Gevurah-based, the opposite of Chesed. As such it also refers to the all important sefirah of Da'as, and thus when someone "weighs" an idea to establish its validity, it is called, "shikul HaDa'as."

There is a lot of Kabbalah on this idea, much of which is REALLY helpful to know for living a correct life. For now, the question is, what is the connection between Da'as and money? Shlomo HaMelech summed it up profoundly this way:

If you want it as you do silver, and search after it like buried treasures, then you will understand fear of God. Da'as Elokim—Godly knowledge—you will find. (Mishlei 2:4)

Money is one of the most valued commodities in Creation. It is the potential to accomplish much in life, and to enjoy so much of it. As such, people are very careful with it, counting it on a regular basis to the point of obsession. They hate being cheated out of money they believe ought to belong to them.

If people approached knowledge the same way, the Media would not be so off in its direction and purpose. People would not be so liberal with life knowing the cost for being so. They would have their priorities in the correct order, and peace would reign on mankind. Machatzis HaShekel was not only about fundraising. It was a yearly reminder about what constitutes a true "contribution" to the service of God, and mankind as well.

For this reason, it is quite appropriate that "Shekalim" comes on the Shabbos that we read Mishpatim. The first thing we learn about after receiving the Torah are judgments, God's judgments. As we will see over the next couple of weeks, b"H, "Parashas Zachor" follows the section about keeping accurate weights for this very reason.

The Media may have its own agenda, in many cases, a very liberal and inaccurate version of reality. If only they knew that they are playing the role of Amalek all over again, and that the final battle is to do away with Amalek altogether. It may only look like an information war, but it is really an epic battle on a Biblical scale.

After all, as the Talmud points out, the Aitz HaDa'as Tov v'Ra was the source of Haman, the descendant of Amalek (Chullin 139b). Furthermore, the 10,000 Kikar Kesef that Haman gave to Achashveros, to buy the right to exterminate the Jewish people, was offset by the Machatzis HaShekel given by the Jews in the desert. And, just for the fun of it, the gematria of "Aitz" (tree) and "Kesef" (money) are the same: 160.