

WHY DID MOSHE NEED A VISUAL IMAGE OF THE HALF-SHEKEL COIN?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Ki Sisa

Why Did Moshe Need A Visual Image of The Half-Shekel Coin?

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 671, Neigel Vasser - Washing hands upon arising. Good Shabbos!

This week's parsha contains the mitzvah to donate the half-shekel coin: "This shall be given by everyone who passes through the counting, from twenty years old and up, a half shekel from the holy shekel coin, the shekel weighing twenty geirah, a half shekel as gift to Hashem." [Shemos 30:13-14] Rashi cites a Medrash that G-d showed Moshe the appearance of a coin made from fire weighing a half shekel and told him "This is what they shall give."

Rashi actually abbreviates the Medrash. The Medrash itself mentions that Moshe had difficulty envisioning what exactly the half-shekel coin looked like and G-d therefore showed him a heavenly vision of exactly the way it appears. The commentators are bothered - why was it so difficult for Moshe to envision the appearance of this half-shekel coin?

The Gemara has a similar narration concerning the Menorah. The Menorah has very intricate detail and geometric configuration. We can understand how Moshe might not have been able to picture what the Menorah looked like until he was shown an example of a fiery Menorah in a vision. Likewise, the Talmud says that Hashem had to show Moshe examples of the reptiles and insects (sheratzim) mentioned in Parshas Shmini. That statement can also be understood. But what is so hard to envision about a coin? Why did G-d have to show Moshe a coin made out of fire?

I will share one answer to this question based on Derush [homiletic interpretation] and another answer based on Pshat [simple interpretation].

This homiletic interpretation is offered by many. I saw it most recently in the Oznaim LaTorah. Moshe Rabbeinu had difficulty understanding how money could serve as an atonement (kaparah). Money is the root of most evil. However, Hashem speaks of the half-shekel donation being 'kesef hakipurim'

[the money of atonement]. Moshe wanted to know how that can happen. How could something that is the cause of so much evil and trouble serve to bring man closer to His Maker?

Therefore, G-d showed him a coin made out of fire. Is fire good or bad? Fire can be the most destructive thing in the world. It can kill. It can decimate. On the other hand, where would we be without fire? We would freeze in the winter. We would not be able to prepare our food. The world would not be able to exist without fire.

We see that there are things in this world that can bring tremendous good and at the same time can bring tremendous evil. They can bring tremendous improvement and tremendous destruction. The point of showing Moshe the coin made out of fire was to equate money with fire. Money, too, can be destructive or constructive, depending upon how it is used.

An interpretation that is more straightforward and closer to the 'pshat' is offered by Rav Simcha Zissel, the Rosh Yeshiva from Chevron, zt"l: Moshe Rabbeinu understood that there are things in this world that are called "Cheftzah shel mitzvah" [items with which Mitzvos are performed]. Some things are natural products (e.g. -- lulav, esrog, haddasim, aravos). Other things are "manufactured" (e.g. -- cow-hide upon which is written certain words may be made into a Sefer Torah, Tefillin, or Mezuzah). Although the latter are man-made products, the intent of the scribe in creating them may make them holy and allow them to become a "Cheftzah shel mitzvah". Moshe did not have trouble understanding this.

However, Moshe could not understand how it is possible to do a mitzvah with a coin that is minted for commercial purposes. How is this piece of metal, which is minted by secular authorities able to become a "Cheftzah shel mitzvah"? Therefore, Hashem showed him the coin of fire and thereby informed him that in fact even such an item could be sanctified and used for achieving atonement, as long as it is GIVEN for the sake of a mitzvah.

Where Is Mordechai Alluded To In Chumash?

The Gemarah in Chullin [139b] expounds on the pasuk discussing the recipe for making the ketores [incense] used on the Mizbayach HaPineemee [inner Altar]: Where is there an allusion to the personage of Mordechai in the Torah (Chumash)? It is found in this pasuk -- "Take for yourself spices, Mor Deror..." [Shemos 30:23]. The Aramaic targum [translation] of the words Mor Deror is "Mor dechya" (which when put together becomes Mordechai). What do Chazal mean by this exegesis?

The Chasam Sofer suggests an interesting explanation: The Rambam explains in Hilchos Klei HaMikdash that the spice which the Torah calls Mor Deror is musk. This is the opinion of Rabbeinu Yona as well. In Tractate Brachos, Rabbeinu Yonah explains how we obtain the musk ingredient. There is a certain animal that grows a boil on its neck, which is filled with blood. When the boil dries out, the blood turns into a powder like substance, which is musk. This is used in the ketores and is

critical for providing it with its pleasant aroma. Some Rishonim question the Rambam and Rabbeinu Yona: How can we take a substance that originated in an impure source (blood of a non Kosher animal) and use it in the ketores in the Bais HaMikdash [Temple]? The Rabbeinu Yona answers that the powder like musk is a "new substance" (panim chadashos ba-u l'kan) and is disassociated from the original blood of the non-kosher animal.

Mordechai's lineage is traced in the Megillah. He is identified as Mordechai the son of Yair, the son of Shimi, the son of Kish [Eshter 2:5]. Who was Shimi? This is none other than Shimi ben Geirah, arch-enemy of Dovid HaMelech [King David]. He called the King an adulterer and a murderer. Shimi was a traitor who cursed Dovid HaMelech when he was down and out. The righteous Mordechai was the grandson of Shimi. How can such a Tzadik come from such a wicked person?

The answer is that a person can disregard his lineage and make himself into a great person. Where do we find such a precedent as Mordechai in the Torah? Namely, where do we find that in spite of one's ancestry, he can prove himself and be the leader of a generation? We find that phenomenon in the musk (Mor Deror = More Dechya) used in the ketores. Its origin stemmed from the blood of a non-kosher animal and yet it was a key ingredient in the ketores burned on the Mizbayach HaPineemee.

Did Moshe Not Believe What G-d Told Him?

Parshas Ki Sisa contains one of the most tragic events in all of Chumash - the sin of the Golden Calf. Chazal say that the reason why the Jews sinned here was only to demonstrate the path of repentance to the masses (of future generations). In this narrative, we learn the theme of how to do Teshuva.

The Nesivos Shalom (the Slonimer Rebbe) asks an interesting question. G-d told Moshe "Go, descend - for your nation that you have brought up from Egypt has degenerated. They have strayed quickly from the way that I have commanded them; they have made themselves a molten calf; prostrated themselves to it and sacrificed to it, and they said, 'This is your god, O Israel, which brought you up from the land of Egypt.'" [Shemos 32:7-8] Moshe descends, sees the people dancing around the Calf and then breaks the Luchos with the Ten Commandments.

The Slonimer Rebbe asks - why did Moshe wait until he saw for himself that the Jewish people were worshipping an idol? G-d already told him what they were doing. What more testimony did Moshe need? Did he not believe G-d that he had to witness their crime with his own eyes before taking the action of breaking the Luchos?

The Slonimer Rebbe answers that Moshe Rabbeinu's action teaches us something that is really the key to Teshuva. Most of the time, when a person sins, there is something called guilt. Guilt is the first step to repentance. As long as one feels bad about what he has done, there is the strong hope that

he will amend his ways in the future. "One who does a sin and is embarrassed by it, G-d will forgive him". [Brachos 12b]

Moshe believed G-d that the Jews made an idol and thereby sinned grievously, but he was hoping that at least they had remorse for their actions. That would have allowed them to take the next steps towards repentance. It was only when Moshe descended from the mountain top and saw them dancing ecstatically around the Golden Calf that he realized that they had no pangs of guilt or any second thoughts about what they had done. Then he knew that drastic measures were called for and it was only at that point that decided to break the Luchos containing the Ten Commandments.

This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Ki Sisa are provided below:

-
- Tape # 046 - Dealing With Illness on Shabbos
 - Tape # 089 - Returning From Medical Emergency on Shabbos.
 - Tape # 137 - The Census: Can Jews be Counted?
 - Tape # 184 - You and Seriously Ill: How Much Responsibility
 - Tape # 230 - The Mitzvah of Shekalim and Davening Mussaf
 - Tape # 274 - Saying Tehillim at Night
 - Tape # 320 - The Melacha of Dyeing
 - Tape # 364 - The Melacha of Memachek
 - Tape # 408 - Fax Machines on Shabbos
 - Tape # 452 - Kiddush Shabbos Morning
 - Tape # 496 - Tallis: Bringing It Home On Shabbos
 - Tape # 540 - Machatzis Hashekel
 - Tape # 584 - The Meat Delivery At Your Door
 - Tape # 628 - Mincha - How Early, How Late?
 - Tape # 671 - Neigel Vasser - Washing Hands When Arising
 - Tape # 716 - Shliach Mitzvah: Is He Always Safe?
 - Tape # 760 - Can You Sell Your Aveiros?
 - Tape # 804 - Great Grandchildren
 - Tape # 848 - Oy! The Fridge Light Is On
 - Tape # 892 - Borer: Can You Separate White Meat from the Dark Meat?
 - Tape # 936 - The Obligation to Learn Tanach
 - Tape # 979 - Chilul Shabbos to Save a Person Who Will Die Shortly

Tapes or a complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information.

RavFrand, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Yissocher Frand and Torah.org.