

PARSHAS SHEKALIM

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, zechuso tagein aleinu, Parshas Shekalim, 5631

The Sfas Emes begins this ma'amar by quoting the first Mishna in Maseches Shekalim. That Mishna says: 'On the first day of Adar, we have people hear about: their obligation to donate half a shekel to the Bais Ha'mikdash; and about Kil'ayim. This involves the need to be careful, when planting one's field, to avoid mixing seeds of different species (e.g., grapes and wheat).

As he often does, the Sfas Emes poses a basic question. Why were these announcements made in Adar? He answers that Adar resembles Elul in certain important ways. Elul is the month before the end of one year (and the beginning of a new year). Because of its position as a potential turning point in our lives, Elul is a propitious time for doing Teshuva. Similarly, Adar comes right before the new year that begins in Nisan. Thus, Adar is also well-placed for a person to look inside of himself, and do Teshuva.

But, notes the Sfas Emes, there is an important difference between Teshuva in Adar and Teshuva in Elul. In Elul, people typically do Teshuva because of yir'ah (fear; a sense of awe). By contrast, in Adar, people may return to HaShem out of ahava (love) In fact, continues the Sfas Emes, that is why we experience heightened joy -Simcha -- in Adar. We feel more joyous because when Adar comes, our expansiveness and good feeling toward HaShem increase. Likewise, this is the reason for our obligation to make a donation to the Beis Ha'mikdash in Adar. HaShem does not need our donations. What HaShem does want is to give us the opportunity to awaken our good feelings and dedication toward Him.

(Note that the Sfas Emes has just given us a whole new perspective on giving Tzedaka. The conventional view sees a person giving Tzedaka because of his/her commitment to do mitzvos. Ultimately, love for HaShem may enter the process. But that happens only if we work on ourselves hard enough to do the mitzva not out of rote and not because of social pressure, but because of our love for HaShem. By contrast, the Sfas Emes sees the process as BEGINNING from our love for HaShem.)

Every Jewish person has within him/her a latent devotion to HaShem. What we need is an activity to express that devotion. The obligation to give the half Shekel to the Beis Ha'mikdash provides such an opportunity. And because Adar gives us an opportunity to express that love for HaShem, we feel more joy!

At this point, the Sfas Emes injects a note of severe caution into the ma'amar. He does this by citing a Dvar Torah that he had from his Grand- Father, the Chidushei HaRim. The Pasuk in Shir HaShirim (7, 2) says: 'Mah yafu pe'ah'mayich ba'ne'alim, bas nadiv'. (ArtScroll: 'But your footsteps were so lovely when shod in pilgrim's sandals, O daughter of nobles'.)

By contrast, the Chidushei HaRim read this Pasuk in the following Non- pshat manner.

The generosity and expansiveness of spirit (he is reading 'pe'ah'mah'yich as 'pulse rate', -- i.e., 'spirit'. Cf. 'Vatipah'eim rucho' in Bereishis 41, 8) that the Jewish people have, as the descendants of Avraham Avinu (whose Chessed and magnanimity were so great that he could be called ' the Nadiv '; i.e., the benefactor') is so great that it must be locked up (Min'al == lock). That is, love can be so overpowering that it has to be watched, lest it go outside. (Anyone who knows of the devotion and love that many Jews in Russia and Poland had for Communism, will assent to this comment of the Chidushei HaRim.) The Sfas Emes continues: that is why the Mishna with which we began says that at the same time as we awaken peoples' hearts to Nedivus -- expansiveness-we must also warn them about 'Kil'ayim' -- which the SE reads as alluding to locking up, (as in 'Beis Ha'kela' prison). That is, people must be warned to be careful with that love and devotion.

The Sfas Emes concludes: Every year, when we read the parsha of Shekalim, our hearts are awakened to give all to HaShem . But unfortunately, we do not have the Beis Ha'mikdosh, and thus cannot give our all as an offering. Inevitably, HaShem's love for US is awakened, and we can do Teshuva with Simcha (i.e., joyously).

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