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### Becoming Whole

This week's Torah portion starts with the instruction of each member of the Jewish people to contribute half a shekel, the currency of the Jews in the desert, as an offering to God. Why does the Torah specifically command giving only a half shekel, and not a whole one? The Jews left Egypt with tremendous riches - certainly they could have afforded contributing a whole shekel. Moreover, why was everyone obligated to give the same amount? The mitzvah of *ma'aser*, tithing, requires that we give a percentage of our

earnings to the Levite or poor, such that what we give is directly proportional to what we have. Why weren't the Jews commanded to give in a similar manner – each according to what they possessed?

Lesson:

The half shekel teaches us many beautiful lessons in unity and humility. While everyone most likely could have afforded a whole shekel, the Torah is emphasizing the importance of unity. A whole shekel represents completeness – it is total and its monetary value stands on its own. A half shekel, however, is only a partial amount of the whole; only combined with another half of a shekel can it really be worth anything.

We are all 'halves' of a 'whole' on many levels. Husband and wives are two halves of a soul, coming together in completeness to help each fulfill their potential. However, this too is only a microcosm of the Jewish people. We are all interdependent and need each other to complete our collective mission as Jews. The second Temple was destroyed because of *sinat chinam*, baseless hatred, towards fellow Jews. As such, we know that the antidote is baseless love towards our fellow Jews. This is worth a pause, as we *know* what we need to do to rebuild the Temple! Just love our fellow Jew! How can we do this? When we do not think of ourselves as a whole, but only as a half.

No one is complete – as Jews we are all part of something much larger and greater than ourselves. When we recognize that every Jew is special, unique, and part of *our* collective mission in this

world, we can truly have the unity necessary to rebuild the Temple. Moreover, the fact that everyone was commanded to give the same amount – half a shekel – regardless of what you owned, further emphasizes that every person shares equal importance and value. Regardless of what you own, your talents, or capabilities, God created you with a unique purpose that is just as important as everyone else.

Exercise: Think of someone who you find it more difficult to get along with and focus on their positive qualities. Visualize having a positive interaction with them (it could be made up). Recognize that you cannot complete your mission without them.



## The Golden Calf: Yesterday and Today

As Cecille B. DeMille would say: "Let's set the scene." The Jewish people have just stood at Mount Sinai and heard the Ten Commandments. Their trusty leader Moses announces that he's going up the mountain for 40 days – to learn more Torah and get the stone tablets. The Torah describes what happens next:

The people saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Make us a shrine which will go before us. We have no idea what became of Moses, the man who brought us out of Egypt..."

The people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron, who cast them into a molten calf. Some of the people began to say, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of Egypt." (Exodus 32:1-4)

The question is obvious: If the Jews had just witnessed God's awesome power in the Ten Plagues, the splitting of the Red Sea, and the revelation at Mount Sinai, how could these same people turn around and worship a Golden Calf?!

The answer is that the Jews never built the calf to be worshipped.

Here's what happened: When Moses said, "I'm going up the mountain for 40 days," his intent was 40 full days. The people, however, mistakenly included in their count that first day – thus expecting Moses to return one day earlier. (For example, if today is Sunday, and I say you've got "one week" to get a certain job done – it's confusing whether you've got until Saturday or the following Sunday.)

So when Day 39 rolled around, the Jews began to wonder: "Where's Moses?" This caused great anxiety. For although the people knew it was God Himself Who'd orchestrated all the miracles, it was nevertheless Moses who'd raised his staff for the Red Sea to split. They relied on Moses as

captain of the team around whom they rallied to get the job done.

Their fundamental mistake? They lost patience, the serenity of knowing that life is a process and everything happens in its time. This lack of trust in made them lose touch with reality and – fueled by fear and anxiety – their imaginations began to run wild.

On Day 39, the malcontents in the camp seized on this energy and began circulating rumors that Moses wasn't coming back at all. The Talmud says that they managed to instill so much doubt that the people actually saw a vision of Moses dead! (So strong is the power of suggestion.)

Then the Jews reasoned: If Moses isn't coming back, we must craft a replacement. And so the Golden Calf was born. Not as an idol; not as a rebellion against God. But as a figurehead. A mere shrine to replace the missing Moses.

The next thing you know, it's full-blown idolatry.

### **Lack of Focus**

What happened?

Maimonides explains that idolatry is not a single step, but rather a process. In the old days, someone would carve a piece of stone and call it the "sun god." He'd want to pay tribute to God as creator of the sun. Before long, they were worshipping the sun itself. They believed that something other than God was the ultimate source of strength and salvation.

Today, it's not uncommon to believe that money, fame, stock options, status, an iPhone, or good looks is our source of fulfillment and happiness.

Treating something other than God as having ultimate significance is the very definition of idolatry!

People start off focused and clear on the priorities of life. But then we get sidetracked and may even forget what we're truly living for. We imagine that putting our trust in [fill in the blank – money, power, beauty, prestige, etc.] will bring me happiness.

Ask the typical high school senior: "Why are you going to college?" He's likely to reply, "Because I need to get a job." "Okay, why do you need a job?" "So I can pay my bills and have peace of mind to pursue the important things in life – family, friends, passions." Check in with him 10 years later – he's likely working 60 hours a week with no time for family, friends or passions.

### **Lack of Focus**

After Moses came down from the mountain and smashed the Tablets, he issued a pronouncement to all Jews:

"You can now turn back and avoid tragedy. Stop worshipping the Golden Calf and affirm your loyalty to God."

Only the Tribe of Levi, comprising about 3% of the Jewish population, accepted Moses' words. The other 97% remained stuck in their failed venture.

How often do we see someone continuing a destructive relationship simply because they're deeply invested and stuck. The physical or emotional gratification may have us hooked. And once we're in, it's hard to stop.

Recently at a young adult discussion group in Los Angeles, my colleague Rabbi Nachum Braverman tried an experiment. He held up a \$20 bill and made the following announcement: "We are going to auction off this \$20 bill to the highest bidder. The only catch is that whoever finishes as the second-highest bidder, also has to pay their bid, getting nothing in return."

The bidding began in a fun and festive tone. Quickly the bidding passed the \$20 mark and was down to two final bidders. At that point, each bidder had to outbid the other in order to avoid becoming the second-highest bidder who would pay for nothing. The mood in the room turned ominous, as everyone realized that someone was about to lose a lot of money! The bidding reached a frenzied panic, the two contestants, locked into a no-win situation. The room was breathless. And finally, that \$20 bill sold for \$76. Crazy.

It's true what they say: "The fight for life is the fight for sanity."

Many times in life, we hear a little voice in our head saying, 'Stop the idolatry.' Something will challenge us to stand up and be counted. In which camp are we? Do we have the clarity and conviction to stay on the right track? Because how we respond will have implications not only for us, but for generations beyond.

The lesson of the Golden Calf is to think about what we're doing. What starts innocently may turn out tragic. Have we lost sight of our true priorities? Are we being swept away by the mob?

We need to take a deep breathe and read the signs being sent to us every moment. With the right

clarity, when we hear the voice, we will stand up and be counted.



## Measure Your Worth

Sometimes we wonder whether such puny individuals as ourselves can make an impact on world events, whether we can make a real difference in God's universe. Most of us would give a negative response to such questions. *Parashas Ki Sisa*, however, comes to challenge that view. This *parashah* impresses upon us that not only is it possible for us to make a difference, but it is our imperative to do so. The portion opens with the words "*Ki sisa ... – When you take a census of the Children of Israel ... v'nasnu – every man shall give Hashem an atonement for his soul .... This shall they give – everyone who passes through the census, a half-shekel ....*"<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, this commandment to count the Jewish people appears puzzling. Surely the Almighty God knows our number, so what purpose is there in a census? Moreover, why should the people be counted through a "half-shekel"?

Herein is to be found a profound teaching, which, if absorbed properly, can be a life-transforming experience through which we can make that difference. *Ki sisa* – the words with which the Torah commands the census – does not literally mean "counting," but rather "*the elevation of one's head*," impressing upon us that when we realize that we *count*, our *heads are lifted up* and we are elevated. The realization that we can impact on the destiny of the world, that our words and deeds have significance, charges us with responsibility and allows us to grow and become better people.

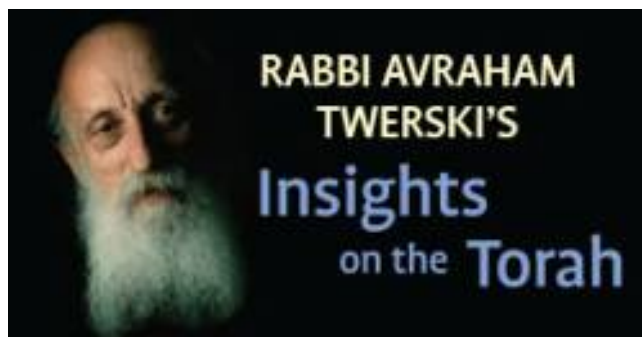
Our Sages offer many explanations as to how we may best achieve this elevation. When we make a spiritual accounting by carefully scrutinizing our lives, then we transcend ourselves and grow spiritually. By having to contribute *half a shekel* rather than a full *shekel* to the census, we are challenged to realize that we are *all only halves* and that our nation is strong only when its individual parts join in unity. It follows, then, that when we make a decision to pray with greater intensity and devote more time to Torah study, to be more scrupulous about the observance of Shabbos and kashruth, to make an effort to control our tempers and to desist from *lashon hara* (gossip and slander), to reach out with *chesed* (loving-kindness) and patience, then we are not only elevating our individual selves, but *we are actually tipping the scales in favor of our people and the world*.

The half-*shekel* that we are called upon to donate is also symbolic of a *heart broken in half*, which results from the awareness that sometimes we fail in our mission of fulfilling God's commandments.

That realization is in and of itself a measure of atonement for our souls. As King David proclaimed in his psalm: "God is close to the broken hearted ...."<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the word *v'nasnu* – "and they shall give" – is a Hebrew palindrome, a word or phrase that reads the same backward and forward, reminding us that *that which we give always comes back and enriches us*. When we give, our souls expand and our world becomes larger and more meaningful, bringing blessing to ourselves and to our people.

1. Exodus 30:12-13.
2. Psalms 34:19.



## When Moses Didn't Believe God

*It happened as he [Moses] drew near the camp and saw the calf and the dances, that Moses' anger flared up. He threw down the Tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain # (32:19)*

There is a remarkable Midrash which states that when God said to Moses, "Go, descend – for your people that you brought up from Egypt have become corrupt," Moses held on to the Tablets



and did not believe that the Israelites had sinned. He said, “If I do not see it, I do not believe it,” for the Torah says, “It happened as he [Moses] drew near the camp and saw the calf and the dances,” hence, he did not break the Tablets until he saw it with his own eyes.

The Midrash continues, “Woe unto those people who testify to what they did not see. Is it possible that Moses did not believe it when God said to him, ‘your people have become corrupt?’ But Moses wished to teach the Israelites proper behavior. Even if one hears something critical from a trustworthy person, one is not permitted to accept his word and take action on it if he does not see it himself” (Shemos Rabbah 46:1).

The Midrash seems to say that Moses did in fact believe God, but that he acted as if he did not in order to set an example for the people. However, the Midrash earlier is very clear: “Moses held on to the Tablets and did not believe that the Israelites had sinned. He said, ‘If I do not see it, I do not believe it.’”

The resolution of this apparent contradiction is that Moses did not believe God because he knew that God did not wish that he believe Him. Moses knew that God desires only what is proper, and inasmuch as it is proper not to believe anything negative about others unless one sees it oneself, God did not want Moses to believe Him. Moses did not act “as if.” His example and teaching were factual.

We find a similar incident when God told Moses to go to Egypt to deliver the Israelites from their enslavement. Moses said, “I must first ask permission from my father-in-law, Jethro” (Rashi,

Exodus 4:18). How dare he refuse to follow God's command until he received Jethro's permission? Rabbi Chaim Shmulevits explains that Moses understood God's will, that inasmuch as Jethro was hospitable to him when he fled from Pharaoh, God would not want him to depart without seeking his permission.

The Torah forbids speaking *lashon hara* (defamatory speech) and *rechilus* (talebearing). The Chafetz Chaim says that one who accepts *lashon hara* or talebearing is as sinful as the one who spreads them. In fact, even when one does see an apparent wrongdoing with one's own eyes, one should still give the person the benefit of doubt and assume that there must be compelling reasons for the person's action (Ethics of the Fathers 1:6).

If we observe Hillel's principle, “Do not do anything to others that you would not want done to you,” we can avoid both speaking and listening to *lashon hara* and talebearing.

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