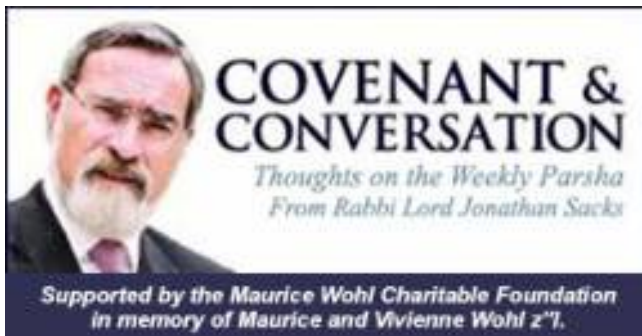


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## Celebrate

If leaders are to bring out the best in those they lead, they must give them the chance to show they are capable of great things, and then *they must celebrate their achievements*. That is what happens at a key moment toward the end of our parsha, one that brings the book of Exodus to a sublime conclusion after all the strife that has gone before.

The Israelites have finally completed the work of building the Tabernacle. We then read:

So all the *work* on the Tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, was *completed*. The

Israelites did everything just as the Lord commanded Moses ... Moses inspected the *work* and saw that they had done it just as the Lord had commanded. So Moses *blessed* them. (Ex. 39:32, 43)

The passage sounds simple enough, but to the practised ear it recalls another biblical text, from the end of the Creation narrative in Genesis:

The heavens and the earth were *completed* in all their vast array. On the seventh day God finished the *work* He had been doing; so on the seventh day He rested from all His *work*. Then God *blessed* the seventh day and made it holy, because on it He rested from all the *work* of creating that He had done. (Gen. 2:1-3)

Three key words appear in both passages: “work,” “completed” and “blessed.” These verbal echoes are not accidental. They are how the Torah signals intertextuality, hinting that one law or story is to be read in the context of another. In this case, the Torah is emphasising that Exodus ends as Genesis began, with a work of creation. Note the difference as well as the similarity. Genesis began with an act of *Divine* creation. Exodus ends with an act of *human* creation.

The closer we examine the two texts, the more we see how intricately the parallel has been constructed. The creation account in Genesis is tightly organised around a series of sevens. There are seven days of Creation. The word “good” appears seven times, the word “God” thirty-five

times, and the word “earth” twenty-one times. The opening verse of Genesis contains seven words, the second fourteen, and the three concluding verses 35 words. Always multiples of seven. The complete text is 469 (7×67) words.

The account of the construction of the Tabernacle in Vayakhel-Pekudei is similarly built around the number seven. The word “heart” appears seven times in Exodus 35:5-29, as Moses specifies the materials to be used in the construction, and seven times again in 35:34 – 36:8, the description of how the craftsmen Bezalel and Oholiav will carry out the work. The word *terumah*, “contribution” appears seven times in this section. In chapter 39, describing the making of the priestly vestments, the phrase “as God commanded Moses” occurs seven times. It occurs again seven times in chapter 40.

A remarkable parallel is being drawn between God’s creation of the universe and the Israelites’ creation of the Sanctuary. We now understand what the Sanctuary represented. It was a micro-cosmos, a universe in miniature, constructed with the same precision and “wisdom” as the universe itself, a place of order against the formlessness of the wilderness and the ever-threatening chaos of the human heart. The Sanctuary was a visible reminder of God’s Presence within the camp, itself a metaphor for God’s Presence within the Universe as a whole.

A large and fateful idea is taking shape. The Israelites - who have been portrayed throughout much of Exodus as ungrateful and half-hearted - have now been given the opportunity, after the sin of the Golden Calf, to show that they are not

irredeemable, and they have embraced that opportunity. They are proven capable of great things. They have shown they can be creative. They have used their generosity and skill to build a mini-universe. By this symbolic act they have shown they are capable of becoming, in the potent rabbinic phrase, “God’s partners in the work of creation.”

This was fundamental to their re-moralisation and to their self-image as the people of God’s covenant. Judaism does not take a low view of human possibility. We do not believe we are tainted by original sin. We are not incapable of moral grandeur. To the contrary, the very fact that we are in the image of the Creator means that we humans – uniquely among life forms – have the ability to be creative. As Israel’s first creative achievement reached its culmination Moses blessed them, saying, according to the Sages, “May it be God’s will that His presence rests in the work of your hands.”<sup>1</sup> Our potential greatness is that we can create structures, relationships and lives that become homes for the Divine Presence.

Blessing them and celebrating their achievement, Moses showed them what they could be. That is potentially a life-changing experience. Here is a contemporary example:

In 2001, shortly after September 11<sup>th</sup>, I received a letter from a woman in London whose name I did not immediately recognise. She wrote that on the morning of the attack on the World Trade Centre, I had been giving a lecture on ways of raising the status of the teaching profession, and she had seen a report about it in the press. This prompted her to

write and remind me of a meeting we had had eight years earlier.

She was then, in 1993, the Head Teacher of a school that was floundering. She had heard some of my broadcasts, felt a kinship with what I had to say, and thought that I might have a solution to her problem. I invited her, together with two of her deputies, to our house. The story she told me was this: morale within the school, among teachers, pupils and parents alike, was at an all-time low. Parents had been withdrawing their children. The student roll had fallen from 1000 children to 500. Examination results were bad: only 8 per cent of students achieved high grades. It was clear that unless something changed dramatically, the school would be forced to close.

We talked for an hour or so on general themes: the school as community, how to create an ethos, and so on. Suddenly, I realised that we were thinking along the wrong lines. The problem she faced was practical, not philosophical. I said: “I want you to live one word: *celebrate*.” She turned to me with a sigh: “You don’t understand – we have *nothing* to celebrate. Everything in the school is going wrong.” “In that case,” I replied, “*find* something to celebrate. If a single student has done better this week than last week, celebrate. If someone has a birthday, celebrate. If it’s Tuesday, celebrate.’ She seemed unconvinced, but promised to give the idea a try.

Now, eight years later, she was writing to tell me what had happened since then. Examination results at high grades had risen from 8 per cent to 65 per cent. The enrolment of pupils had risen from 500 to 1000. Saving the best news to last,

she added that she had just been made a Dame of the British Empire – one of the highest honours the Queen can bestow – for her contribution to education. She ended by saying that she just wanted me to know how a single word had changed the school, and her life.

She was a wonderful teacher, and certainly did not need my advice. She would have discovered the answer on her own anyway. But I was never in any doubt that the strategy would succeed, for we all grow to fill other people’s expectations of us. If they are low, we remain small. If they are high, we walk tall.

The idea that each of us has a fixed quantum of intelligence, virtue, academic ability, motivation and drive is absurd. Not all of us can paint like Monet or compose like Mozart. But we each have gifts, capacities, that can lie dormant throughout life until someone awakes them. We can achieve heights of which we never thought ourselves capable. All it takes is for us to *meet someone who believes in us, challenges us, and then, when we have responded to the challenge, blesses and celebrates our achievements*. That is what Moses did for the Israelites after the sin of the Golden Calf. First he got them to create, and then he blessed them and their creation with one of the simplest and most moving of all blessings, that the Shechinah should dwell in the work of their hands.

Celebration is an essential part of motivating. It turned a school around. In an earlier age and in a more sacred context it turned the Israelites around. So celebrate.

**When we celebrate the achievements of others, we change lives.**

### AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why do you think these passages about creation are structured in multiples of seven?
2. Why did Rabbi Sacks' advice have such a deep impact on the school in the story?
3. Could you apply this idea of celebration to a group of people you work or socialise with?

### NOTES

1. Sifrei, Bamidbar, Pinchas, 143.



## The Dangling Conversation

Moshe was the greatest teacher the Jewish People ever had, and that was his lasting legacy. He has been known for millennia as "Moshe Rabenu," Moshe our Master Teacher - not Moshe the king, or the redeemer; he was, above all the other roles he filled, the quintessential teacher - even though he led our ancestors out of bondage, navigated the path to the Promised Land, represented us and pleaded on our behalf, and so much more.

This week's Torah reading begins with what may be the quintessential teaching moment, which presented itself after several months that were perhaps too eventful, too exciting: The Israelites had left Egypt, had witnessed countless miracles, had fought a war against Amalek, had received the Torah and experienced a level of prophecy never before known to mankind; some of them then went on to commit the colossal error of the golden calf - all in the space of a few short months. The fate and future of the Jewish People hung in the balance, and Moshe's prayers on their behalf were accepted. God forgave them, and Moshe was invited to return to the mountaintop, and to receive new Tablets of Testimony to replace the Tablets that had been shattered when the nation sinned.

Now, upon his descent, Moshe finally has an opportunity to teach the assembled nation. There is a great deal of material to cover; God had given him so many laws, so many concepts and details, on his various trips to the summit, and Moshe is faced with an educational and spiritual challenge: Where to begin?

Moshe's first lesson is Shabbat:

Moshe then gathered the whole Israelite community and said to them: These are the things that God has commanded you to do: On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to God; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the Sabbath day. (Shmot 35:1-3)

While there may be many reasons why, of all things, Moshe chose Shabbat for their first topic of study, it is worth recalling that the laws of Shabbat were the final topic covered by God before He handed Moshe the first set of Tablets.

And God said to Moshe: Speak to the Israelite People and say: You must keep My Sabbaths, for this is a sign between Me and you throughout the ages, that you may know that God has consecrated you. You shall keep the Sabbath, for it is holy for you. He who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does work on it, that person shall be cut off from among his nation. Six days may work be done, but on the seventh day there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to God; whoever does work on the Sabbath day shall be put to death. The Israelite people shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout the ages as a covenant for all time; it shall be a sign for all time between Me and the People of Israel, for in six days God made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He ceased from work and was refreshed. When He finished speaking with him on Mount Sinai, He gave Moshe the two Tablets of the Covenant, stone tablets inscribed with the finger of God. (Shmot 31:12-18)

The repetition of the laws of Shabbat, though, is not a literary device; something far more important than narrative style lies behind the choice of Moshe's first lesson plan.

Let us consider the timing: The laws of Shabbat were the last to be communicated by God to Moshe before He ordered him to return to the camp and contend with the sin of the golden calf. It stands to reason, then, that the laws of Shabbat were spoken and Moshe was given the Tablets at the very same time as the people down below were forming and worshiping the golden calf. The stark disparity between the two scenes - the summit and the base of Mount Sinai - should be considered when we read the verses with which God introduced the observance of Shabbat to Moshe. A "split screen view" of events makes God's words concerning Shabbat observance even more meaningful, and somewhat intriguing:

The Children of Israel shall keep the Sabbath, observing the Sabbath throughout the ages as a **covenant for all time**: it shall be a **sign for all time** between Me and the People of Israel.

Despite God's later threat to eradicate the entire nation, despite the enormity of the sin the people were committing **at that very moment**, God was establishing the ground rules for an eternal covenant with the Jewish People, and the symbol of that covenant: Shabbat. As the people at the foot of Mount Sinai were sinning, God revealed to Moshe that the Jewish People will keep Shabbat forever - which, by extension, means that Jewish People will be equally eternal.

But God adds another piece of information: Desecration of Shabbat is punishable by death. Those who had worshipped the golden calf, as well as those who stood by passively and silently, deserved a death sentence. They had trampled the

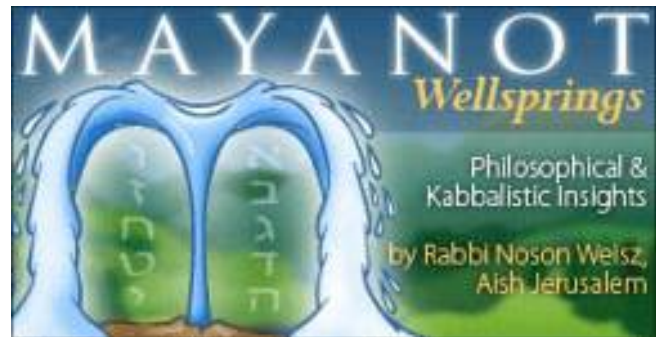


first two of the Ten Commandments, but at the very moment they should have been sentenced to eradication, God taught that anyone who observes the Shabbat will be spared. Anyone who testifies, through their Shabbat observance, that God, and not some man-made idol, created and sustains the universe, actively repudiates the golden calf and all it stands for. God created the remedy at the very moment the ailment was ravaging the camp.

The renowned Hebrew essayist Ahad Ha'am (Asher Ginsberg, 1856-1927) remarked that "more than the Jews kept Shabbat, Shabbat kept the Jews." This astute comment is a very potent religious, sociological and cultural observation, but Ahad Ha'Am missed the additional aspect of biblical exegesis: God declared that the covenant with the Jewish People, with Shabbat as its most potent marker, would, in fact, be upheld throughout the generations. The Jews would survive the golden calf episode, and would bear eternal testimony to God's creation of heaven and earth.

This, then was the content of Moshe's first lesson to the Jewish People: Shabbat, the most central expression of our eternal covenant with God. For the people who stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and received this first lesson from Moshe, the message was even stronger: Despite the golden calf, despite the fact that they deserved to be expunged from the pages of history, they were given a method of both reaffirming and proving their belief in God. Shabbat observance was given to us in order to elevate the six days of the working week and allow us to identify with and emulate God. Shabbat, for the Jews in the desert and for every Jew ever since, has been the sign of

our fidelity to God, of our covenant with Him. From the generation that survived the golden calf debacle to the present day, Shabbat is saved us, and continues to save us, when the future looks bleak.



## Soul Money

One of the 613 commandments of the Torah commands all Jewish males above the age of Bar Mitzvah to contribute a half-shekel each year to the Temple. All the public sacrifices that are brought in the Temple in the course of the year are purchased from the accumulated funds.

For the purposes of the half-shekel commandment, the year renews itself on the first day of *Nisan* – the month of the Redemption, the first month the Israelites counted after being instructed to start a new calendar based on the lunar cycle just prior to the exodus from Egypt. From the first of *Nisan*, only offerings purchased from the fresh half-shekel contributions are acceptable. The half-shekels that fund the offerings of the following year must therefore reach the hands of the overseers by the first of *Nisan*.

During Temple times, an announcement to bring the half-shekels was issued each year on the first day of *Adar*, a month prior to the due date. Reminiscent of this custom, we read the Torah section that contains this commandment – the first chapter of Parshat Ki Tisa, known as Parshat Shkalim – on the Shabbat just before *Rosh Chodesh Adar*. [In a leap year we read it just prior to the second Adar]

### THE SHEKEL OF FIRE

It is a pretty straightforward commandment as Torah commandments go. The sum is unambiguous, the date is clear; there is nothing that seems complex. Yet there must be more to this commandment than it first appears:

Rabbi Meir said, "The Holy One pulled out a coin of fire from underneath his glorious throne and showed it to Moses." (Jerusalem Talmud, Shkalim, 46b)

Apparently there was something very difficult to understand about this commandment. God had to demonstrate the coin personally to ensure that Moses would fully grasp the significance of this half shekel. What could be so obscure about a commandment that involves nothing more than the donation of a simple coin?

We find another provocative reference to these half-shekels in the Book of Esther:

*"If it pleases the King, let it be recorded that they be destroyed; and I will pay ten thousand silver talents (shekels) ... to the King's treasury."*  
(Esther 3:9)

Reish Lakish said: "It was known to the One Who spoke and brought the world into being that Haman would expend Shekels to destroy Israel, therefore he made sure that their (Jewish) Shekels preceded his (Haman's) Shekels. It is written that on the first day of *Adar* an announcement is issued regarding the bringing of Shekels." (Talmud, Megillah 13b)

In some mysterious fashion, our half Shekels are required to serve as a counterweight to Haman's Shekels. We would be lost without their protection. [See Tosefot, Megilah 16a, who works out the balance in terms of the numbers] What does all this information signify?

### SHEKEL AS SYMBOL

The Shekel symbolizes all money.

Although a phenomenon of the physical world, money has some spiritual attributes. For one thing, money is the primary social unifier. According to social contract theory, we human beings organize ourselves into societies as a survival device. Without social co-operation and integration, every individual would have to worry about providing himself with food, shelter, clothing, security, education and entertainment, clearly an impossible task. By organizing ourselves into groups and pooling our resources, we allow each person to specialize at one particular task thus ensuring that we all survive. Some people worry about food others are placed in charge of shelter etc., and we exchange our products with each other.

This type of barter system requires an efficient medium of exchange to make it work. There must be some way to determine the amount of food that equals a suit of clothing, and how much food and clothing should be offered in exchange for security or entertainment. Money is the medium of exchange that we have invented to meet this need.

The literal translation of the word *shekel* in Hebrew is "weight." The relative weight of all things is decided by the monetary value attached to them. The determination of the monetary value of services allows for the establishment of social harmony, provided all people are in substantial agreement regarding the fairness of the values that are set.

For example, if soldiers feel that their services are undervalued, and they are not receiving a fair exchange for their contribution, there is a danger that society will implode. Throughout human history it is disgruntled armies that have most frequently destroyed the old social order and replaced it with a new one. This type of occurrence is still quite common in South America.

Social harmony is a function of widespread satisfaction with the reliability of the monetary system and its ability to accurately weigh and balance the value of goods and services, so that the great majority of people feel satisfied that they are receiving a fair exchange for their contribution.

Alternative systems that have been attempted throughout history – such as communism, where compensation was separated from the value of the

individual's social contribution – have simply not worked. Only the translation of goods and services into money by the free market has worked as a principle of social unity over the ages.

### **DETERMINING SPIRITUAL VALUE**

But while money has always functioned efficiently to establish the exchange value of physical goods and services to everyone's satisfaction, it has never worked well as a determinant of the value of spiritual inputs.

The great moral philosophers of history have rarely been fairly compensated for the inspiration they provided society with their theories and ideas. We are all familiar with the stereotyped image of the talented artist who starves unrecognized in a garret for the greater part of his life even as he creates the priceless masterpieces that still enrich our lives many centuries after his death.

The free market is notoriously poor at assigning a proper value to spiritual commodities. Great paintings that can only be obtained for astronomic sums can be picked up for pennies before the artist becomes famous.

Because spirituality is not a necessity of life in a secular society, this lack of efficiency at valuating spiritual commodities does not seriously affect social harmony. But suppose we were to organize an entire society for purely spiritual aims. Money would obviously be a very poor means of fairly evaluating the spiritual goods and services, a process that would be essential for the unification of such a society.



Jewish society was organized for precisely such a spiritual purpose. In the prelude to the Covenant of Sinai, God declares:

*"And now, if you hearken well to Me and observe My covenant, you shall be to Me the most beloved treasure of all peoples, for Mine is the entire world. You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."* (Exodus 19:5-6)

Nevertheless, we find that the great Sages of Israel were often poverty stricken. For example: Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa (see Talmud, Brochot 17b), Rabbi Yehoshua (see Talmud Brachot 28a) and Rabbi Akiva (see Talmud, Ketubot, 63a). It seems that even in spiritual societies money is little more efficient at evaluating spiritual products than in purely secular societies. If we nevertheless find spiritual harmony among the Jewish people as a spiritual entity, its existence points to an alternative unifying device that must be at work.

### **DETERMINING SOCIAL STATUS**

In a secular society organized around social contract theory, individual wealth roughly corresponds to the amount of physical goods and services that individuals provide society. The greater contributors of goods and services to the social welfare end up with greater wealth than those that contribute less. We are not surprised to find that wealth is also associated with social status; the people with greater amounts of wealth tend to be those who make greater contributions to the physical welfare of all human beings and

are therefore deserving of greater honor. Wealth, status and honor tend to correspond.

In a society organized around spirituality, wealth and social status are divorced from one another. Generally speaking, people who excel spiritually tend to be uninterested in money; there is even a loose negative correlation between money and status in such a society. When Israel was spiritually healthy, there was absolutely no connection between a person's wealth and his position in society. The great sages of Israel were and still are universally admired and listened to despite the humility of their physical circumstances.

### **UNDERSTANDING HAMAN'S SHEKELS**

We have now laid the foundation that will help us appreciate the significance of Haman's Shekels.

Haman rose to prominence under the rule of King Ahasuerus, the ruler of the Medean (Persian) Empire that extended over 127 countries. This same King Ahasuerus was not of royal lineage; he was an immensely wealthy individual and he purchased his power with money. (See Talmud, Megilla, 11a.) The Book of Esther begins with a lengthy description of the party he threw in the third year of his reign, a party whose entire purpose was to impress his subjects with the vastness of his wealth. (See Esther 1:4.)

Later in the story, this same monarch elevates one of his ministers, Haman, to such a lofty height, that a command is issued that mandates everyone to bow down to him. (See Esther 3:1.) Haman's rise in status is also related to money. The Midrash informs us that Haman was one of the

wealthiest people who ever lived and that Ahasuerus elevated him because of his immense wealth. The clash of cultures that resulted in the edict of destruction against the Jewish people was triggered by Mordechai's refusal to obey the edict to bow to Haman. In a sense, the entire Esther story revolves around a clash of values concerning the importance of money.

We have pointed out many times in the course of these essays that the Torah does not spend time discussing the plans and ambitions of primitive people, nor does it treat such people with any respect. The people described in the Esther story created the background for a potential Holocaust that was only miraculously aborted at the last minute. We still celebrate the defeat of Haman after all these centuries on the Festival of Purim indicating that the thwarting of his evil designs remains relevant to us after all these centuries. We can be sure that neither Ahasuerus nor Haman was primitive or stupid.

### **KING AHASUERUS: THE REAL STORY**

Ahasuerus came to power 70 years after the destruction of the Temple. The prophets had foretold that the Babylonian Exile would last for no longer than 70 years and the Jews would be redeemed from exile when they were up. As they were all familiar with this prophecy, both the Babylonians and the Persians who took over the empire attempted to avoid starting up with the Jewish people until they were certain that the Redeemer was not coming and that God had abandoned the Jewish people for good in exile.

The Talmud recounts how all the tyrants who ruled over the Jews waited out what they

reckoned to be the full seventy years; it turned out that they were all mistaken regarding the correct manner to count the seventy years. The redeemer actually arrived right on schedule. (See Talmud, Megila 11b.) Ahasuerus waited longer than the others but even he finally felt safe in concluding that the 70-year deadline had passed and that the Redeemer was simply not coming.

But Ahasuerus also perceived an implication of the failure of the Redeemer to arrive that no one else seemed to have noticed. He realized that the abandonment of the Jewish people in exile meant that God had withdrawn His Presence from the world. There was therefore a new world order.

Ahasuerus had the opportunity to introduce a new unifying principle that would leave him in control of a global empire. God was the predominant force in human history up until this time. The worship of God and the interest in spirituality that was its inevitable companion dominated human ideas, and was the basic unifying principle in human affairs.

Mankind was united by the principle of worship. The entire Torah is replete with injunctions and warnings against the worship of idols. Worship of other gods was the prime cause of assimilation. The fact that each people had its own unique way of worshipping God does not defeat the principle of god-worship as a unifying principle. All men were focused on the same goal, to interrelate successfully with the Divine.

But this entire world of worship was now at an end. The God of Israel who was the ultimate source of all the local Divinities that people worshipped [see Maimonides, Yad Hachazaka,

Laws of Idol Worship, Ch.1] had abandoned the physical world for good. Mankind needed a new unifying principle.

### **THE NEW UNITY**

Although Haman's plans were ultimately frustrated and the Esther saga ended triumphantly, in many ways this analysis was right on target. While the redemption finally did arrive and the second Temple was duly built, God has never fully returned; He no longer rests His Presence (*Shechinah*) among us. He no longer communicates with us through His chosen prophets. We have no open manifestation of His presence in the physical world.

Ahasuerus proposed to introduce a secular social contract organized around the idea of wealth and money to replace God worship as the new unifying principle. His plan to annihilate the Jews was frustrated, but the new world order he introduced is still with us.

We are all familiar with the underlying idea of Ahasuerus' unifying principle. If all men pooled their resources together intelligently and we learned to exploit the bounties of nature, every man would be assured of a steadily increasing standard of living through ever-increasing human productivity. There would no longer be any need for Divine intervention.

In the past man had to turn to God for more bounty if he wanted to be better off. But money is potentially such a superb unifying principle that it can eliminate the need to worship God almost entirely. We can improve our own lot without His assistance or intervention. (In conjunction with

this idea here is an ironic observation; the American greenback, the quintessential symbol of money in modern times is inscribed with the motto 'In God we trust.')

What better human symbol can there be to represent the new order than the world's richest man, who rose to dizzying heights through his own creative drive, Haman? He was the perfect person to embody the new dream of a secular Utopia. So much for the events of the Esther story as seen from the non-Jewish side.

### **INTERNAL UPHEAVAL**

Simultaneously with these events in the secular world, an upheaval of major proportions was taking place among the Jews.

Nachmanides presents it thus (Talmud, Sabbath 88a); the Jews of Persia had decided that the covenant made at Sinai had come to its conclusion. God had kicked the Jews out of Israel. In the circumstances of exile, continuing to observe the commandments was simply not practical. In a secular world, the Jews had to adjust to a new reality.

Shmuel said: "Ten representatives [of the Jewish people] came and sat before the prophet. [Ezekiel] He told them, 'Repent.' They answered him, 'A slave that was sold by his master, or a wife who was divorced by her husband, do they have any attachment left to each other?' God said to the prophet, 'Tell them: "*Where is your document of divorce that I sent you, or where are the creditors to whom I sold you. It was for your sins that you were sold, and for your rebelliousness*

*that you were sent away. "(Isaiah 50) ... "What you are thinking will never come to pass! That you say, 'We will be as other nations, like the families of the earth, we shall also serve trees and stones.' 'By my life,' says the Lord God, 'If I will not rule you with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, and pouring anger if need be.'" (Ezekiel 20) (Talmud, Sanhedrin, 105a)*

This problem has plagued the Jewish people ever since. In a world where we are not under the protective umbrella of the Divine presence, it has always been difficult to remain an observant Jew. Countless Jews have abandoned observance over the ages on the grounds of practicality. As a result, we have suffered the tribulation of countless Haman's unfortunately often without any triumphant conclusion.

Mordechai symbolizes the Torah Jew who remains steadfast to Torah values in a changing world. His refusal to bow to Haman is the refusal to adjust to the new world order. For Mordechai the world never changes. He can always perceive the Presence of God even when worship is no longer the prevailing culture. As Mordechai was a leader of his people who, to their great credit, neither rejected him or made any attempt to officially distance themselves from him, Haman decided that the entire Jewish people would have to go so that the new world order could be successfully implemented. Because we stood unified behind our leader Mordechai, we prevailed.

### **THE FIERY HALF-SHEKEL**

We can finally return to the commandment of the half-Shekel.

The special grace of spiritual societies is that they do not value people according to any physical standard. People are valued according to how much they contribute to the spiritual welfare of their society rather than on the basis of the size of their material contribution.

In Hebrew the numerical value of the word *shekel*, meaning "weight", or "money," is 430, equivalent to the numerical value of the word *nefesh*, meaning "soul," which is also 430. The commandment to contribute the half Shekel has to be understood in the light of this hidden correspondence. It is actually an injunction to employ money, one of the physical resources of the world, to achieve atonement for one's soul. (See Exodus 30:12.)

Moses found this idea conceptually difficult. What do money and soul have to do with each other? Spirituality and interest in money seem to be mutually exclusive. Giving half a shekel hardly constitutes a great personal sacrifice, so how can it possibly be understood as atonement?

The image of a fiery coin from beneath God's throne was presented in response to Moses' bewilderment. The commandment to give the half-shekel is to be understood as a *dismissal* of money as the principle of unity.

### **REJECTING MONEY**

In a society where a person is valued according to the size of his contribution in goods and services, people never weigh the same. The fairest way to

tax people is to assess each person according to his means. All goods and services are valued in terms of money, so the wealthy naturally possess a greater share of the social pie. When society as a whole has to pay for something, the wealthy must contribute their proportionate share. If a democratic secular society ever needed to impose a spiritual tax to raise money for the offering of a communal sacrifice, this tax would be graduated like any other.

God displayed the image of the fiery half-shekel to teach Moses to relate to people as sources of light. The word *nefesh*, which equals the numerical value of the word "*shekel*," also forms an acrostic for the word *ner*, meaning "lamp"; *Ner*, the stand, *shemen*, the "oil," and *psilo*, the "wick" – each person's soul is a repository of the Divine flame that originates in God's throne.

A lamp is only the vehicle that holds the flame; the brightness of the light it sheds is the lamp's most important feature; the humblest lamp is more worthy than the most expensive if it gives off the brighter flame.

All Jews are lamps; they are the carriers of the Divine flame and they were given the task to light up the world. Fusing all the individual Jewish flames into a single fire whose intense luminosity can dispel the darkness of the world forms the social unity of the Congregation of Israel. The spiritual services associated with the maintenance of this fused national fire may cost only half a shekel per person, but that is because the lamp is never important per se; its significance is only in that it sustains the fire.

Our present Diaspora is extremely similar to the one described in the Book of Esther. We also live in a materialistic society that measures the quality of life in terms of the goods and services at the disposal of individual citizens. Such an exile always raises the specter of the threat of overindulgence in the 'party':

The students of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai asked him: "Why did the Jews of that generation deserve to be placed under an edict of destruction?" He told them: "You know the answer." They told him: "Because they went to enjoy the party of Ahasuerus." (Talmud, Megila 12a)

Jews are the repositories of God's flame. We must not lose ourselves in the enjoyment of the party served up by our wealthy and materialistic society. Our job is to light up the materialistic darkness with the bright light of God's spiritual flame. When we sit with abandon at Ahasuerus' table we risk our own destruction. Our half shekels take precedence over Haman's only as long as they are employed to sustain the holy flame.





## Mirrors of Faith and Hope

When the time came to build the *Mishkan* the people came forward to contribute to its construction, the men and the women alike. The *Daas Zekeinim Baalei Hatosefos* comments that the women contributed eagerly to the building fund, readily surrendering their gold jewelry for this holy purpose. The men thought that the women would be reluctant to part with their jewelry, but the women proved them wrong.

The *Daas Zekeinim*, based on the Midrash, goes on to draw a sharp delineation between the men and the women. During the incident of the Golden Calf, the women refused to relinquish their gold jewelry for the construction of the Calf, and the men had to take it from them by force. For the construction of the *Mishkan*, on the other hand, many men were reluctant to contribute, but the women did so enthusiastically.

For this gallant spirit, the women were rewarded with a special connection to the minor festival of Rosh Chodesh, on which women, but not men, customarily refrain from work (*Orach Chaim* 417:1).

What is the specific relationship between the contribution of the women and the reward of Rosh Chodesh?

The *Shemen Tov* offers a beautiful interpretation based on another Midrash. The Torah states (Shemos 38:8), "And he made the washing basin of copper and its stand of copper from the mirrors of the multitudes who thronged the entrance to the Tent of Meeting."

What was the history of these mirrors? The *Midrash Shir Hashirim*, quoted by Rashi, explains that during the worst times of the Jewish bondage in Egypt the men gave in to despair. They lost hope, and they separated from their wives. What was the point of bringing children into this world if their lot would be endless suffering and misery as slaves of the Egyptians? But the women refused to give up. They had faith that the bondage would end someday, that the Jewish people would be redeemed, that a future of freedom and opportunity awaited any children they would bear even in the darkest hour of their enslavement. And so, the women beautified themselves in front of their mirrors and went out into the fields where their husbands were laboring. Thus beautified and made up, they drew their husbands back to them and convinced them that it would be good to have more children.

The mirrors these women used to make themselves up were the symbol of the survival of the Jewish people. Had it not been for those mirrors, there would not have been any more Jewish children. Therefore, Hashem said, "These mirrors are more precious to Me than anything

else. Use them to make the washing stand of the *Mishkan*."

The women were the strong ones among the Jewish people. When the men were ready to surrender to despair, the women were the steady anchor of the people, the ones that kept the faith strong, the ones that never gave up hope, the one that insisted, "We must go on."

When the *Mishkan* was constructed, the men once again were overcome by depression. Before the sin of the Golden Calf, there would have been no need for the *Mishkan*. The *Shechinah* would have dwelt among all the people. The entire Jewish encampment would have been its domicile. But the Jewish people fell from grace when they sinned. They were no longer worthy of having the *Shechinah* among them. From that point on, the encampment would be divided into the Camp of the *Shechinah*, the Camp of the Levites and the Camp of the Israelites. The *Shechinah* would dwell in seclusion behind the walls of the *Mishkan*.

As long as the construction of the *Mishkan* did not begin, the men held out hope that perhaps there would be a last-minute reprieve. Perhaps things would revert to the way they were, the way they should have been. Perhaps the *Shechinah* would yet dwell among all the people. But when the construction got under way, the writing on the wall was clear. The damage caused by the sin of the Golden Calf would be everlasting. There would be no reprieve. This was a very depressing thought, and many of the men fell into despair. They could not bring themselves to contribute to

the *Mishkan*, to put the nails in their own coffin, so to speak.

But the women, rocks of stability, once again came forward and saved the situation. "This is not a time to despair," they said. "What's done is done, and no matter how much we've lost, it cannot be undone by being depressed. Now is the time to look to the future, to embrace this holy *Mishkan* enthusiastically, to bring about a renaissance of the Jewish people."

In Egypt, the faith and hope of the women had saved the Jewish people physically. At the construction of the *Mishkan*, the faith and hope of the women saved them spiritually. It gave them hope to reach for a new closeness with the Master of the Universe. And for this, they were rewarded with a special status regarding Rosh Chodesh.

According to our Sages, Rosh Chodesh, the festival of the new moon, celebrates the concepts of rebirth and renewal. The moon is always waning and waxing. Even in its darkest phase, we know it will once again recover its full illumination. It is the symbol of faith and hope for the Jewish people who also go through cycles of darkness and light. Therefore, it is the Jewish women, who have shown themselves most sensitive to the ideas of faith and renewal, that are most closely connected to the festival of Rosh Chodesh.

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