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Setting A Personal Agenda Before Pesach

By Rabbi Saul J. Berman

The opening of this Parshah, Exodus, Chapter 30, verses 11-16, describes the census of the Jewish people taken through having each individual pay a half shekel. This passage serves as the foundation for the Biblical requirement of census through contribution, as opposed to through counting individuals. On its most direct level, this text serves to teach the obligation of non-objectification of individuals within the context of Jewish culture. Persons are not numbers!

More persons were slaughtered and tortured in the 20th century than in any previous century in human history. A precondition of such inhumanity is the reduction of humans to numbers, to objects, to less than human entities. The Torah is intent on teaching us that true human dignity begins with the recognition of the Tzelem Elokim which resides in each person. That irreducible core of transcendence common to all humans, Jew and non-Jew, male and female, of whatever race, whatever religion and whatever skin color – must be affirmed repeatedly.

This text also served as the basis for what eventually became universal Jewish practice on the evening of Purim, of having each person make a contribution of three half shekalim. The number of coins was based on the appearance of the phrase machatzit Hashekel, "a half shekel," three times in the course of this passage.

In the period of the second temple, it was the practice that the contribution of half shekel was used for three distinctive purposes. The funds from the half shekel were used for the purchase of animals to be offered as sacrifices in the temple. The funds from the half shekel were also used for bedek ha Bayit, for the maintenance and repair of the sanctuary. And thirdly, the funds from the half shekel were used for Tzedakah, for the support of the poor within Jewish society.

The contribution of three half shekalim was made during the month of Adar, so that funds would be available for the preparation of the sanctuary at the beginning of the month of Nissan, in expectation of Pesach. Over the course of time, even long after the destruction of the Temple, at approximately the time at which this half shekel tax would have been collected, it became Jewish custom for each individual to give three half shekel as a reminder of the three separate purposes for which those funds were given.

When one looks at those three purposes, one can well understand why the rabbis would have encouraged the development of this particular practice. The purchase of Korbanot, of sacrifices is a reminder of the intensity of the individual's relationship to God. Korbanot are, after all, the model for prayer and on that level for the private relationship between the individual and God. The Torah insists that the daily communal sacrifices, the Temidim, had to be purchased out of communal funds, the Machatzit Hashekel funds, contributed by every Jew. No single person could claim a greater share in the offering. Rather, each individual had to feel that the daily offerings expressed his or her personal sacrifice to, and communication with, God.

The maintenance and repair of the temple, Bedek Ha'Bayit, was itself a reminder of the communal function of the sanctuary - the sanctuary as the locus of community - as the prime location in which the assembly, as community, worships God. Long before the institution of public prayer existed as a communal act, the temple was the locus of national worship of God.

The third, Tzedakah, satisfying the needs of the poor, was of course the constant reminder of the sense of responsibility for others. This central Jewish teaching was embodied in every element of Jewish life, in its commercial law as well as in its ritual. It is not accidental that gifts to the poor is an essential Mitzvah of Purim. It is not incidental that we open the Seder of Pesach with the declaration, "all who are needy, come and join us in the feast!" The essence of the mission of the Jewish people is linked to our responsibility to improve the lot of the unfortunate. Ethical responsibility is at the very heart of true Frumkeit!

Therefore, the giving of these three half shekel really embody the sense of what the sanctuary meant. The giving of shekalim to the sanctuary was an attempt to symbolically represent the central ideas of the Sanctuary: the spiritual perfection of the individual, the reshaping of community, and the assumption of responsibility for the well-being of others.

Our continuing echo of this Biblical instruction each year in fulfillment and reminder of the three-fold use of the phrase machatzit ha'shekel, sets an agenda before Nissan - sets an agenda for us before the beginning of the new Biblical year in the month of Nissan - as to what that year needs to hold for us: individual spiritual perfection, communal rejuvenation and moral responsibility

TO BE JEWISH IS TO LIVE A JEWISH STORY

By Rabbi Josh Feigelson

An Orthodox teenager rebels against his parents. He begins eating at McDonald's, going out on Friday nights, watching movies with graphic sexual content. His parents are concerned, so they bring him to their rabbi for a talk. The rabbi makes a referral to a psychotherapist - an African-American gentile. After one session, the boy is suddenly back on the path, proud of his identity and behaving accordingly.

I heard this not-quite-hypothetical story in my first year as a rabbinic student at Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. The person who told it was an eminent Orthodox psychotherapist and Rabbi. The main point of the vignette, he emphasized, was that the boy had never encountered someone to whom he had to tell his story. He had never had to explain what it meant that he was an Orthodox Jew, and so he had never articulated his values for himself. Telling his story allowed the boy to embrace his identity in a new and powerful way.

This story has stuck in my memory ever since. Its clear message is that telling our stories to people different from us is important, if for no other reason than because the exercise helps us to clarify our own values, our own story. And from that message emerges a lesson about the importance of dialogue—with Jews from outside our home communities, and with human beings from other religious and ethnic traditions.

Today all Jews are Jews by choice—even Orthodox Jews, as our teenager demonstrates. The way to strengthen our young people's Jewish identity and commitment is not to attempt to limit their choices. It is, instead, to help them make their Jewish story more compelling and meaningful than the other stories from which they can choose.

But this move involves a paradox, namely: If our children are to willingly choose to make their story Jewish, we must give them a genuine experience of choice - which means we must willingly expose them seriously to other choices, including other cultures and other religions. Like all paradoxes, this is a difficult one to embrace. And yet, in the world of unprecedented choice and access to information in which we live, Jewish survival depends on it.

Our tradition teaches as much. The first generation of Israelites accepted the Torah under duress, as God "held a mountain over their heads," according to the Talmud. Ultimately, their commitment and their descendants' commitment to living Jewishly waned. Jewish faith was renewed (kimu v'kiblu), reaffirmed, and re-accepted, in the

words of Esther—in the diaspora, this time without duress. This second commitment was sustained where the first would have collapsed, through centuries of cultural mixing, in the land of Israel and throughout the world.

Of course, many Jews chose other stories. Many assimilated into other cultures and religions. But the risk of assimilation is the paradoxical price of keeping Judaism alive, of maintaining a living Torah. The greatest figures of our Biblical tradition bear witness to this: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and David all form their identities in the midst of others, not in hermetically sealed enclaves. We cannot develop our own story in isolation, and without our story, we cease to be.

There are those who would stay away from intra- and inter-religious dialogue for fear of what they might hear, or perhaps what they might say. Dialogue is, as the above mentioned eminent Orthodox Rabbi and psychotherapist has recently written, "fraught with dangers and difficulties." These concerns are real; genuine dialogue and genuine choice have unpredictable results, and historically many Jews have found other stories more compelling than their own.

But to this I say "fakert," the opposite is true. No wall can keep out the world of possible stories and choices that exist in our time. Our children will eventually be exposed to those stories and choices, and our best defense is not quarantine but inoculation.

The process of inoculation in this case is dialogue. Not a dialogue in which the parties try to convince each another, but rather one in which we try to listen to one another's genuineness - never giving up on our own story, nor expecting our interlocutor to give up on theirs. That kind of dialogue produces both understanding of the Other and understanding of ourselves; Jewish self-understanding is essential for Jewish choosing.

Yet, individual dialogue can only happen between parties who respect one another's right to their narrative. I think most of the time we do respect the right of individuals to their stories, but when it gets institutionalized we start to lose that. Denominational labels are a place where we lose the concern with the individual based on the institutional.

Jews in our age have unprecedented freedom to construct their identity. If we are to continue the Jewish story, we must make it our most compelling story. We must tell it to others who will listen, in order that we may hear it for ourselves.

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