

Haftarot Unrolled: Shekalim

Parshat HaKessef

This Shabbat is Shabbat Shekalim, the first of four special Shabbatot that precede the Passover season. For the Maftir at the end of the Torah reading, we read verses that describe the commandment to give a half-shekel for the census. The money would be used for the communal sacrifices for the entire year. Since these funds were collected at the beginning of the national year in Nissan, the remainder of the commandment would be read one month earlier, at the beginning of Adar.

Besides the Maftir, we also read a special Haftarah for Shabbat Shekalim. It tells us how King Yoash attempted different ways of raising money in order to repair the Temple. The word, "כסף", silver/money, is repeated sixteen times in about as many verses.

Shabbat Shekalim usually comes out on Parshat Mishpatim. It is the first set of commandments that Moshe was given at Har Sinai. "Mishpatim" means "civil laws" and the Parsha contains dozens of commandments about money.

Shabbat Shekalim also marks Rosh Chodesh Adar, the month of the Purim holiday. Money shows up there, too: at the crucial moment when Haman gets Achashverosh drunk and convinces him to kill all the Jews, we read:

ט) אם על המלך טוב יכתב לאבדם ועשרת אלפים כפר כסף אשקול על ידי עשי המלאכה להביא אל גנזי המלך:

9) If it pleases the king, let it be written to destroy them, and **ten thousand measures of silver**, I will weigh out into the hands of the contractors to bring to the king's treasury. (Esther 3:9)

That money must have been very important, because when Mordechai tells Esther about the meeting between Achashverosh and Haman, he says:

ויגד לו מרדכי את כל אשר קרהו ואת פרישת הכסף אשר אמר המן לשקול על גנזי המלך ביהודים לאבדם:

7) Mordechai told [Esther's proxy] about all that had happened to him, and about **the matter of the money**, that Haman had said to weigh out to the king's treasury to destroy the Jews (Esther 7:7)

Thus, Parshat Mishpatim, Parshat Shekalim, the Haftarah of Shekalim, and the Megilla can all be called Parshat HaKessef - a matter of money.

There are religions and philosophies that see money as a necessary evil at best; they believe a person of intellect and standing should not concern himself with something so trivial. Then there are societies where money is the ultimate way of keeping score, where entire industries exist for its growth, where it achieves an overriding importance in people's lives. There are those that worship its power, and those that attempt to negate it altogether.

How does the Torah view money?

שנא' (דברים ו) ואהבת את ה' אלהיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאדך ... ובכל מאדך בכל ממונך ... as it says, "You shall love Hashem your G-d with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might." ... With all your might: with all your money (Mishna Berachot 9:5)

The Mishna equates "might" with "money". Money gives you the power to build, or rebuild. As we see in the Haftarah, even the House of G-d cannot be repaired if there isn't money to pay the contractors.

The Haftarah goes out of its way to tell us of the failures of King Yoash's attempts at incentive-based fundraising. Ultimately, the money did not come from his complicated schemes, but rather through crowd-funding: a tzedaka box placed in the Beit HaMikdash itself, to which people donated as they saw fit. Small contributions from many people added up to more than enough to fund the project.

The commandment of Shekalim carries the same message: everyone gives a small amount, half a shekel, and it adds up to enough money to fund all the daily sacrifices for the entire year.

Money, thus, is not just a source of power for individuals; it is a way for a society to pool its resources to accomplish something that no individual could possibly do alone.

In truth, money only exists because society makes it so. Silver did not become a medium of exchange because of its inherent value, but only because people agreed that it should be one. In our society, money is not even based on silver or gold, but that doesn't matter. Money is whatever the society agrees to use. It is not true value, but rather a representation of value.

The word that the Torah uses for the concept of a representation of value is "כופר", usually translated as "atonement."

In Parshat Mishpatim, we find the following commandment:

וְאִם שׁוֹר נִגַּח הוּא מִתְמַל שְׁלֵשִׁים וְהוּעֵד בְּבַעְלָיו וְלֹא יִשְׁמְרֵנוּ וְהִמִּית אִישׁ אוֹ אִשָּׁה הַשׁוֹר יִסָּקֵל וְגַם בְּעָלָיו יוּמָת: אִם כֹּפֶר יוֹשֵׁת עָלָיו וְנָתַן פְּדִין נַפְשׁוֹ כָּל אֲשֶׁר יוֹשֵׁת עָלָיו:

But if the ox has gored in the past, and the owner has been warned and did not guard it, and it killed a man or a woman: the ox shall be stoned, and the owner also will die. If an **atonement** is placed upon him, he may give a ransom for his soul, according to what is placed upon him. (Shemot 21:29-30)

The commentaries explain that despite the statement that "the owner also will die," in actuality, the law is that the owner pays a monetary fine. The reason it is stated in this harsh manner is to point out that it was due to his criminal negligence that this life was lost. However, because he was only an indirect cause, in this particular case the Torah allows a "כופר," an atonement, to take his place. Money, which is itself a representation of value, can be used to represent the value of life.

The commandment of Shekalim is stated in similar terms:

הָעֶשִׂיר לֹא יִרְבֶּה וְהַדֵּל לֹא יִמְעִיט מִמִּחְצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל לְתֵת אֶת תְּרוּמַת ה' לְכַפֵּר עַל נַפְשֵׁיכֶם:
The rich will not give more and the poor will not give less than the half a shekel, to give the donation to Hashem, to **atone** for your lives. (Shemot 30:15-16)

The donation of half a shekel is meant to represent the value of each individual in the Jewish People. This money was used for sacrifices, which themselves are a representation of G-d's ownership of our very lives. Through this half a shekel, we "purchase" our lives from G-d.

But why did G-d decide on half a shekel as the symbolic price of a Jewish life? One of the many interpretations is that the half shekel highlights the fact that the amount is incomplete. In order to achieve anything with half a shekel, you need someone else to contribute the other half. This is not about the monetary power of the individual, but rather the combined power of the entire Jewish community. The sacrifices that this money paid for were not individual sacrifices, but rather communal ones that represented all of the Jewish People.

The Midrash points out that the sum total of all the half-shekel donations of the entire nation added up to ten thousand measures of silver. This brings us to Haman, who handed over ten thousand measures of silver to Achashverosh. Haman thought that he was purchasing the lives of all the Jewish People from Achashverosh. Perhaps he would have been successful, if not for the fact that Achashverosh was not the owner.

אמר רבי שמעון בן לקיש גלוי וידוע לפני הקב"ה שעתיד המן הרשע לשקול שקלים על ישראל לפיכך הקדים שקליהם לשקליו:
R' Shimon ben Lakish said: Hashem knew that Haman the Rasha would weigh Shekalim against Israel, therefore, He pre-empted his Shekels with their Shekels.
(Midrash Yalkut Shimoni Ki-Tisa 386)

The commandment of Shekalim made it impossible for Haman to purchase the Jewish People. We were already "paid for", and no longer for sale.

Moreover, Haman had described the Jewish People as "dispersed and scattered among the nations." They were vulnerable because in their exile, they saw themselves as no longer a nation, but rather as scattered individuals. The commandment of Shekalim is the antidote to this self-image. All the little half-shekels put together represent the value of an entire nation.

Shabbat Shekalim heralds the season of the Passover Holidays, the new year that begins in Nissan. Just as Elul is a time of preparation for the New Year of Tishrei, Adar is a time of preparation for the time of national renewal and redemption. Money allows society to abstract the concept of value, and makes it possible to achieve things that would be out of reach for scattered individuals. Parshat Mishpatim, the Megilla, Parshat Shekalim, and the Haftarah all teach us how money can be used to serve G-d, "with all your might."

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l

לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל