

Mishpatim Shekalim

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Purim is on the way, b”H. This week is the first of the four special readings, *Parashas Shekalim*, in advance of and after Purim. This is the time of year the Jewish People gave their half-*shekels* to the Temple for public sacrifices, a tradition we have continued since even during non-Temple times.

Famously, the half-*shekels* the Jewish People first gave in the desert mentioned at the beginning of *Parashas Ki Sisa* was the healing before the illness. The Megillah reports that Haman offered Achashveros 10,000 *kikar kesef* for the right to exterminate the Jewish People. As Tosfos explains, it happened to be the total amount of half-*shekels* the Jewish People gave almost a thousand years earlier in Moshe’s time (*Megillah* 13a).

A coincidence?

Of course not.

Hashgochah Pratis. God, knowing the future and what Haman would plan to do, pre-empted his act of paying Achashveros for lost revenue by having them give the same amount for *Machatzis HaShekel*. It was as if the Jewish People built up a credit that was cashed in when Haman purchased the

right to destroy the Jewish People.

Ironically, as the Gemora explains, Achashveros was so in agreement with Haman's plan that he waived the "fee" and gave Haman free reign to deal with the "Jewish Problem" as he saw fit. Achashveros may have thought he was being magnanimous and Haman may have thought he was getting a great deal. But, in the end, by not actually paying the money they left the door open for their plan to fall short since they failed to counteract the *Machatzis HaShekel* from desert times.

There are a couple of lessons to be learned here. First of all, never take a mitzvah lightly, even if you can't see its importance at the time. Today's *mitzvah* can be tomorrow's redemption, as well as the basis of your reward in the World to Come.

Secondly, never under-estimate the power of a "small" *mitzvah*. A half-*shekel* even from real silver isn't that much money. But things accumulate in life over time and become big things. I had a *chavrusa* with someone for only fifteen minutes a day before *Minchah*. We were amazed when one day we realized how many *seforim* we had learned together over time. Small good things add up to become big good things.

And finally, it is important to remember that even though we can't see the spiritual world, it is the backdrop of everyday life. *Megillas Esther* opens up reporting on Jewish participation in Achashveros's feast. It may have seemed like no big deal at the time, but it created spiritual vulnerabilities that evil could and did take advantage of.

It is not random that a whole bunch of technical *halachos* are sandwiched between two accounts of *Kabbalas HaTorah*. Many commentators have weighed in on this and given explanations for this. One more is that the everyday physical reality is "sandwiched" by the spiritual one, and they always interact

with each other.

This *Shabbos* I had a rare opportunity to doven “*Neitz*” (Sunrise) at the *Kosel*. I could not find the *minyán* I had joined in the past, so I chose one that I thought would be right for me, meaning relaxed and “*Shabbosdik*.” I couldn’t have been more wrong.

They had finished a two-hour *dovening* in fifty-five minutes. The Chazzan dovened in a way that seemed to say, “We don’t really want to be here, so let’s get this over as quickly as possible.” The moment we finished *Shacharis*, I change *minyanim* for the rest of dovening.

As frustrating and disturbing as it was for me, God might have looked at differently. Maybe He said, “Hey, they came to the *Kosel* for *Neitz*, didn’t they? They’re *dovening*, aren’t they? How much more can I expect from these people?” Maybe God was content with their level of *tefillah*.

On the other hand, the Gemora says that *tefillah* is one of those things that stand at the heights of the world and yet people walk all over. It’s because people can’t see the spiritual world and the impact their actions have on it. If they could, they would take prayer far more seriously, as they seem to do when dealing with a crisis.

The Gemora says that the final redemption depends upon *teshuvah*, and that if the Jewish People don’t do *teshuvah* on their own, a “Haman” will rise up whose decrees will force us to do it. That has stopped being theory in our lifetime, just as it did in Mordechai’s and Esther’s time. It’s time to wake up to the spiritual world so we can stop our Haman’s from being any more potent than they already are.

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Have a great Shabbos,

Pinchas Winston