

ALSHICH

INSIGHTS FOR THE SHABBOS TABLE

ספר שמות

פרשת כי תשא

SERIES 1: ISSUE 21

HOW WAS THE HALF-SHEKEL AN ATONEMENT FOR EVERY JEW'S SOUL?

Chapter 30

12) When you count the Jewish people for the sake of their numbers, each man shall give an atonement for his soul to Hashem when they are being counted so that they will not be struck by a plague when they are counted.

13) This shall each person give who is included in the census: half a shekel – the shekel used in the Sanctuary – 20 gerah to the shekel, half a shekel as a terumah (offering) to Hashem.

14) All who pass among those who are numbered, from twenty years old and above, shall give the offering to Hashem.

(ב) כִּי תִשָּׂא אֶת רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְקֻדֵיהֶם וְנִתְּנָנוּ אִישׁ כֶּפֶר נַפְשׁוֹ לַה' בְּפִקֹּד אֹתָם וְלֹא יְהִיָּה בָהֶם נֶגֶף בְּפִקֹּד אֹתָם.

(ג) זֶה יִתְּנוּ כָּל הָעֶבֶר עַל הַפְּקֻדִים מִחֻצֵית הַשֶּׁקֶל בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֲשָׂרִים גֶּרָה הַשֶּׁקֶל מִחֻצֵית הַשֶּׁקֶל תְּרוּמָה לַה' לְכַפֵּר עַל נַפְשֹׁתֵיכֶם.

(ד) כָּל הָעֶבֶר עַל הַפְּקֻדִים מִבְּנֵי עֲשָׂרִים שָׁנָה וּמַעְלָה יִתְּנוּ תְּרוּמַת ה'.

Consider the following questions:

1. Why does Hashem say to Moshe (verse 12), "**When** you count the Jewish people"? Hashem wanted the Jewish people to be counted after the plague following the sin of the Golden Calf. He should therefore have commanded Moshe directly, "Count the Jewish people."
2. The word **לִפְקֻדֵיהֶם**, *for the sake of their numbers*, seems redundant and also difficult to understand. What is it coming to tell us?
3. Why were Bnei Yisrael required to give half a shekel and not a full one?

After those who had sinned with the Golden Calf were punished, Hashem's anger abated and He wanted to give the Jewish people the opportunity to gain merit. The sin had caused the Divine Presence to distance itself from the world; now the atonement of the half-shekel offering would be used to make the silver bases of the Mishkan's beams. They would thus be the foundation and basis of the Mishkan through which the Divine Presence would once again manifest itself in the world.

In the meantime, however, the Jewish people were undoubtedly very distraught that the Divine Presence had left them and worried that it would not return. They were particularly concerned that after the Tribe of Levi killed the 3000 people who had sinned, their number had dropped below the 600,000 they had when they left Egypt. They knew that if they did not total at least 600,000 the Divine Presence would not rest upon them. Only that number includes all the different root souls of the Jewish people that have within them all the sources of holiness, and through them the Divine Presence manifests itself in the world.

Now, Rashi states that Hashem wanted to count the Jewish people to see how many had survived the plague. How could it be that Hashem needed to have them counted to know how many had survived? Everything is known to Hashem! But now we can explain that Hashem ordered the census out of His love for the Jewish people. It was only for their sake, to enable them to rejoice that their number had **not** dipped under 600,000 – for while they lost many people in the plague, they’d gained back that number through the young people who had reached the age of twenty (and thus became eligible for the census) since the Jews left Egypt six months earlier. Therefore, the Torah says, “*When you count the Jewish people, do not think for a moment that Hashem does not know how many they are. Rather, it is merely for the sake of their numbers, i.e., so that they themselves should know that there are still more than 600,000 of them.*”

[This answers Questions 1 and 2.]

Let us now focus on why they were commanded to bring only half a shekel. Our Sages (*Talmud Yerushalmi, Shekalim 2:3*) explained that the sin of the Golden Calf had involved idol worship, and one who worships idols is considered as if he transgressed all of the Ten Commandments. They were therefore commanded to bring half a shekel, which is the equivalent of ten *gerah*, with one *gerah* as an atonement for each Commandment. **[This is one answer to Question 3.]**

I have heard another explanation in the name of the sage R’ Shlomo Alkabetz, that it is to show the unity of the Jewish people. A Jewish person should not think that he is separate from his fellow Jew; rather, it is as if each Jew is only half a person and he becomes whole by uniting with the rest of the Jewish people. But we still need to understand why Hashem chose to teach us this lesson now, after the sin of the Golden Calf.

We can explain as follows: The people may have been wondering why each one had been commanded to bring *an atonement for his soul*, since the people who actually sinned with the Golden Calf had already died and the only thing the rest of them did wrong was that they did not prevent their fellow Jews from sinning. But who says that they were responsible for what their fellow Jews were doing? Hashem therefore hinted to them with the half-shekel command that the souls of all Jewish people are interlinked. They all have the same source and are all considered as one collective soul. By bringing only half a shekel, they would realize that each Jewish person is only complete in combination with other Jewish people and that they are therefore all responsible for one another. If so, they all shared responsibility and required atonement for what had happened with the Golden Calf. **[This is a second answer to Question 3.]**

THE ALSHICH AND HIS COMMENTARY

The Alshich (1508–1600), was one of only five famous rabbis in Jewish history universally known by the title “HaKadosh” (the holy one). He served on the same Beis Din as Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of the Shulchan Aruch. The Alshich is most noted for his monumental Tanach commentary.

The Alshich uses his creative insight and encyclopaedic knowledge of Tanach, Talmud, and Midrash to weave together his profound interpretations. He simultaneously focuses on the text as well as the context of a series of verses by listing a range of questions and then answering them all with one or two concepts.

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