

PARSHA KI TISA

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586



CHARITY BRINGS BLESSINGS

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, “When you take a census of the Children of Israel according to their numbers, every man shall give Hashem an atonement for his soul when counting them, so that there will not be a plague among them when counting them” (Shemot 30:12).

At the beginning of Parsha Ki Tisa, G-d tells Moshe that everyone among the Children of Israel must give a half-shekel in order to be counted. This half-shekel was a type of “atonement” for people that protected them from all plagues. In this week’s parsha, Hashem also commands us to observe Shabbat, as it is written: “You shall observe Shabbat, for it is holy to you. Its desecrators shall be put to death” (Shemot 31:14). The text then recounts the sin of the Children of Israel with the golden calf: When Moshe did not descend from the mountain, and he was late in returning according to their reckoning, they quickly made a calf and appointed it as a god and leader.

We need to understand a few things. First, what is the connection between the mitzvah of giving the half-shekel and the sin of the golden calf? Likewise, what is the connection between the mitzvah of Shabbat and the other subjects mentioned in this week’s parsha? In reality, G-d juxtaposed the mitzvah of the half-shekel with the sin of the golden calf in order to teach the Children of Israel that every penny must be devoted to holiness and purity; they must be used for a mitzvah. However by wasting even modest sums of money on futile and material pursuits, small expenses accumulate and we risk doing harm to ourselves and diminishing our fear of Heaven. That is precisely what happened to the Children of Israel when they made the golden calf.

We sometimes think that a simple coin is worthless, and that it’s useless to give to charity. That’s not so. By giving whatever small amounts we have to charity, we are strengthening our virtues and increasing our fear of G-d. Our Sages have already affirmed, “Everything is according to the majority of deeds” (Pirkei Avoth 3:15), and the Rambam explains that it is better to give a small amount 100 times than to offer a large amount once. Why? Because the act of constantly and regularly giving, even if it consists of small amounts, accustoms us to giving and refines our character traits.

Unfortunately, we all know people who are prepared to invest millions of dollars in futile and useless endeavors, people who are only concerned with multiplying their material wealth. Yet when it comes to donating their money to charity and demonstrating generosity, they start weighing the value of each penny and can’t seem to find a way to help those in need. We need to realize that material wealth and financial investments in futile endeavors can bring us down to the abyss, being considered as idol-worship. Conversely, even using a small amount of our money for charity educates us and refines our character. Hence this is the connection between the mitzvah of giving the half-shekel and the sin of the golden calf: The juxtaposition of these two concepts teaches us the painful consequences that await those who waste their money in vain and useless pursuits, even with small amounts.

Steps in Building Faith

The passage that describes the mitzvah of Shabbat was inserted between the passages of the half-shekel and the sin of the golden calf in order to teach us that whoever uses his money prudently and invests it solely in holy endeavors demonstrates that he is filled with a fear of G-d, which in turn will help him strictly observe and respect the laws of Shabbat. On the other hand, whoever uses his money to obtain useless and futile possessions will slowly lose what remains of his fear of Heaven, and will soon desecrate Shabbat openly. Respecting Shabbat is therefore a symbol of faith, a faith that is built step by step beginning with the simplest and most basic of attitudes. By making the right choice in where to invest our money, we demonstrate the fear of Heaven that infuses and encourages us to observe this sacred day, or conversely (G-d forbid) to profane it.

In regards to the mitzvah of giving the half-shekel, we read: “The wealthy shall not increase and the destitute shall not decrease from a half-shekel” (Shemot 30:15). Thus it is not necessary to be very wealthy in order to make one’s offering to the community or give money to someone in need. A small amount is also sufficient, for a person is motivated by his will alone, not his money. Indeed, “Nothing can stand before [the power of one’s] will,” and as our Sages have explained: “ ‘You shall certainly tithe [asser te’asser]’ [Devarim 14:22] – tithe that you may become rich [tit’asher]” (Tanchuma, Re’eh 18).

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When the Hidden Face is Revealed

It is written, “You will see My back, but My face may not be seen” (Shemot 33:23).

G-d’s actions and behavior in His world are hidden from us, as we read in the verse: “You will see My back, but My face may not be seen.” It is therefore clear that we must happily accept the trials that He sends us. Hashem is a good Father, and the difficulties and sufferings that He sends us are also for our good. In fact we firmly believe that everything which happens to us is for our good, and just as a father punishes his son, likewise G-d punishes us. It is therefore obvious that everything is for our benefit, even if we fail to see the good that comes out of every situation.

A dreadful incident took place in the United States, a story that shook the Orthodox community in New York. It happened to the chassid Rav Moshe Daykman, the president of Slonim Yeshiva, a man who was very wealthy as well as a generous donor. He had converted the cellar in his home into a jewelry store, from where he purchased merchandise for numerous clients.

One day he received a visit from a group of city inspectors who had decided to verify the condition of his building from top to bottom. They had never come in the past, nor had they inspected any part of the building before. Yet now they suddenly decided to pay him a visit. The inspectors went from one floor to another, and from one room to the next. Everything was in order. Nothing abnormal in regards to adhering to city regulations was found. Nevertheless one thing was found to be “non-compliant” – the ladder that descended into the cellar from an upper floor was not placed against the wall at an angle, as it should have been. The cellar and upper floor were connected by steps, and this ladder was actually designed for emergency situations.

The inspectors therefore left the Rav with urgent instructions to angle the ladder against the wall, as it should be. The Rav, already stunned by the inspectors’ visit, was even more stunned by the fact that such a point was even raised. Never had such attention been focused on such a minor detail! The most surprising thing of all was that the inspectors said that they would return within 48 hours to verify that their instructions had been implemented, which demonstrated the importance they gave to it. Nevertheless, numerous other workplaces have ladders that were positioned in the same way, and nobody was concerned by that! However an order was an order, and on the same day the Rav hired a worker to reposition the ladder correctly, according to the specifications of the city inspectors. On the following morning, two people came knocking at his door, claiming that they wanted to purchase some jewelry. The Rav accompanied them into the cellar, where something completely unexpected took place: The two men quickly grabbed hold of the Rav, who was an elderly man, and tied his hands together.

Then they placed him on the ground and quickly fled with merchandise valued in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. They disconnected all the phone lines and blocked all the doors and stairs. Rav Daykman tried to untie his hands, but it was useless. With great difficulty, however, he was able to get up from the floor. Yet since the thieves had locked the main door leading to the cellar, he couldn’t escape that way. He therefore looked for some other way to escape. Suddenly, he remembered the ladder. He had never needed to use it before, which is why he had almost forgotten about it. He slowly walked towards it, and only then did he realize G-d’s great kindness in having sent city inspectors on the previous day, for they had left him with odd instructions regarding the ladder. If it had remained in the same position in which it had always been, he would never have been able to use it to escape, for he would have required both hands to climb it without falling backwards, which would have been impossible since his hands were now tied. The fact that it was now at an angle allowed him to climb it while resting his body weight against it. Otherwise, he would have remained in the cellar for several days without anyone ever finding him.

The Details Added Up

This story is one of many which prove that G-d does not reveal the meaning behind everything He does (“My face may not be seen”). Yet even in the deepest darkness, we can perceive something being revealed (“You will see My back”). G-d deals with us by “revealing one tefach [handbreadth] while concealing two.”

Almost everyone would have been upset with the city inspectors who had “bothered” him for nothing. Rav Daykman didn’t immediately notice the revelation of G-d, Who remained hidden in these events. However there was not one, but several things that took place: Why had the inspectors suddenly decided to inspect this building? Why did they focus on the ladder’s position? Why issue instructions for the following day? These small details, one after the other, added up, allowed for an extraordinary revelation of the divine.

And to think that we know what’s good for us and what’s not!

Guard Your Tongue

Listening and Earning Merit

It is sometimes a mitzvah to lend an ear to certain defamatory things that a person says, such as when we believe that by listening to someone to the very end, we can then explain to him or his listeners that what he is saying isn’t accurate, or that he can view the situation in a favorable light.

– Chafetz Chaim

In the Footsteps of our Fathers

The Honor of the Torah

It is written, “Whenever Moshe would go out to the Tent, the entire people would stand up and remain standing” (Shemot 33:8).

Based on this verse, the Sages explain in Midrash Tanchuma that we must rise before an elderly man as well as a Torah scholar, an Av Beit Din and a king, and that we must remain standing until they disappear from sight. Rabbi Abba HaKohen bar Papa said, “Whenever I saw a group of people, I used to take a different path so as not to disturb them; that is, so they would not see me and have to stand up. When I mentioned this to Rabbi Yossi ben Zevida, he said to me: ‘It is your duty to pass before them, so that they may see you and stand up for you, for in this way you will make them G-d-fearing’ ” (Tanchuma, Beha’alotcha 11). In his book Tokhahat Haim, Rabbi Haim Falagi wrote a moving description on this subject: “I take Heaven and Earth as witnesses to the behavior of the great gaon, my grandfather Zatzal: Although he was already revered in Torah and possessed immense spiritual greatness, when young Torah scholars came before him, he stood up and demonstrated tremendous respect for them. These young men were confused by the honor he was showing them, which made them feel very uncomfortable. They asked him for forgiveness, imploring him not to treat them this way. The gaon responded: ‘When a wealthy or famous person of your age presents himself before me, I show him respect and greet him warmly. That said, how can I commit the grave error of showing respect to simple ba’alei batim, yet not do as much for Torah scholars? That’s something I won’t do, for I would certainly be punished for it. On the contrary, how much more is this true if these wealthy or famous people realize that I respect the Torah and those who study it, for they will learn a lesson from it and do the same.’ ”

Even Greater Honor

The Chozeh of Lublin once decided to visit the tzaddik Rabbi Mordechai of Neshiz Zatzal. Word of his journey spread to all the Jewish communities that he would pass along the way, and people got ready to meet him on route and prepared a place for him to stay. In the end, the Chozeh decided to send Rabbi Moshe of Stanzitz, his faithful disciple, in his place. He carried a letter for Rabbi Mordechai, and in it the Chozeh wrote: “I am sending someone whom I love, and who is as great as myself.” The crowds, who did not know what the Chozeh looked like, welcomed Rabbi Moshe with royal honor, believing that he himself was the Chozeh of Lublin.

When Rabbi Moshe returned to Lublin, he described the great honor that he received wherever he went. The Chozeh asked him, “And how did you react to such honor?” He replied, “At first I was afraid and worried, for what connection was there between myself and all this honor? Who was I, such that I was being shown such respect? However I immediately realized that such honor was actually meant for you, whom they mistook

me for, at which point it seemed insufficient. I wanted them to demonstrate even greater honor, for it actually represented the honor of the Torah connected to you, and which you merit.” The gaon Rabbi Mordechai Auerbach (the son of Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach Zatzal and son-in-law of the Rebbe of Kapishnitz, Rabbi Avraham Yehoshua Heschel Zatzal) recounted that the Rebbe of Kapishnitz had traveled from the United States to Israel for the wedding of his grandson. During his stay in Israel, he went to visit Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach, his son-in-law’s father. After this visit, Rabbi Shlomo escorted the Rebbe outside, but the taxi they had called was late in arriving. Therefore Rabbi Shlomo, who was about 20 years younger than the Rebbe, decided to bring a chair out for him. However the Rebbe refused to sit, for “my father taught me that when we do something, we should first think of what it would look like if such an action were being photographed in Heaven. Throughout my life, I have worked to attain the realization that Heaven is constantly capturing all that we do. Therefore what would a photograph of me sitting down – while Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach is standing – look like from above?”

In the Light of the Parsha

Torah and Material Pursuits

It is written, “No man may ascend with you, nor may anyone be seen on the entire mountain. Even the sheep and cattle may not graze facing that mountain” (Shemot 34:3).

Before the giving of the Torah, Hashem ordered Moshe to warn the Children of Israel not to come near Mount Sinai, where He would give them the Torah. At the same time, He ordered Moshe to tell them to keep their sheep and cattle from grazing near the mountain. We need to look into G-d’s order regarding their livestock. We may assume that the order regarding the Children of Israel can be understood in light of the sanctity of that place. Yet why forbid the Children of Israel from grazing their livestock there, animals that lack a human mind and therefore cannot sense its holiness and purity? We should first point out, as a number of commentators have stated, that it was not proper or fitting for animals to graze to their satisfaction in a place where G-d was about to reveal His Shechinah. However there is a deeper significance behind the essence of G-d’s order: Sheep and cattle symbolize all that is superficial, and they are comparable to the material and futile pursuits of this world. Therefore just as animals could not graze near Mount Sinai, likewise desire and materiality cannot coexist alongside Torah. When the futile pursuits of this world occupy our hearts and minds, they drain all our enthusiasm for Torah.

This is why G-d ordered a clear distinction be made between the holy Torah and the fleeting desires of this world. In fact these are diametrically opposed to one another, and they cannot exist together. It is only when we completely disconnect ourselves from our brutish and material desires that we become receptive to the words of the holy Torah.

But a Half

It is written, “A half-shekel of the sacred shekel” (Shemot 30:13).

Why did G-d command the giving of half a shekel? The Chida cites a beautiful explanation from Rav Alkabetz, namely that it teaches us the meaning of unity among the Jewish people. Let no one think that he can separate himself from his fellowman and live his life alone. Each person by himself is but a half, and he can only attain perfection when connected to his fellowman. A Jew alienated from his brothers is but half a person, a “half-shekel.”

Different Shabbats

It is written, “However you must observe My Sabbaths” (Shemot 31:13).

In his book *Melo Ha'Omer*, Rabbi Aryeh Leib Tzintz wrote a wonderful commentary on the plural term “My Sabbaths.” He points out that because there are various geographic regions in the world, it is sometimes day in one region and night in another. Thus while some people are celebrating Shabbat, others are still working. In fact each of us is warned to observe Shabbat according to where we live. The text therefore uses the plural, for this commandment includes different Shabbats, depending on each person's location.

The Sabbaths that Follow

It is written, “The Children of Israel shall observe the Sabbath, to make the Sabbath an eternal covenant for their generations” (Shemot 31:16).

It is written in the saintly book *Kedushat Levi* that a Jew who observes Shabbat correctly will receive strength and energy to serve G-d throughout the week that follows. Then on the following Shabbat, it will be much easier for him to reach the level of this holy day and observe it, and so on for the weeks that follow. Thus when we fulfill the commandment, “The Children of Israel shall observe the Sabbath,” it will be easier “to make the Sabbath an eternal covenant for their generations” – meaning to observe the Shabbats that follow.

Two Lessons

It is written, “The people heard this bad news, they mourned, and no one put on his finery” (Shemot 33:4).

Rabbi Shemuel of Slonim derived two lessons from the incident of the golden calf:

1. We must never have complete confidence in ourselves, for even the Children of Israel in the Generation of Knowledge, who were at an extremely high spiritual level following the splitting of the sea and the giving of the Torah, descended to a very low level.

2. Even if we find ourselves in the depths of the abyss, it is

forbidden to lose hope. In fact after having worshipped the golden calf, the Children of Israel bitterly regretted their actions and repented. By the merit of their shame and modesty, they drew the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy to themselves and also received the commandment to build the Sanctuary, thus meriting the presence of the Shechinah. Nothing can stand before repentance!

The Offering of Incense

It is written, “G-d said to Moshe, ‘Take for yourself fragrant spices’” (Shemot 30:34).

Rabbi Shimon remarked, “If people only knew how precious the offering of the incense is to the Holy One, blessed be He, they would take every word of the passage where it is commanded and make it into a crown for their heads, a crown of gold. Whoever studies it should deeply reflect upon the way it was carried out, and by reciting it daily with devotion, a man merits a portion in this world and in the World to Come. He keeps death away from himself and from the world, and he is saved from all punishments in this world, from the “evil sides,” from the punishment of Gehinnom, and from strange powers. When the pillar of smoke ascended from the burning incense, the kohen would see the mystical letters of the Divine Name ascending on high in that pillar. Then numerous holy legions would surround the pillar on all sides, until it rose in the midst of light and gladness to the region where it diffused joy.”

– Zohar II:218b - 219a

Men of Faith

The License Was Finally Granted

A Moroccan Jew purchased a van to earn a living for him and his family. Yet to his great disappointment, the authorities refused to grant him a license to use it. As he was quietly walking along the street one day, he suddenly met Rabbi Haim Pinto, may his merit protect us. He kissed the Rav's hand, and with a broken voice he recounted his misfortunes to him.

“With all the money I had, I purchased a van so I could earn a living. Yet now the authorities aren't letting me use it. And if I can't use it, I'll lose everything I have! I've put all my money into it, so what can I do?”

Rabbi Haim Pinto looked at him and said, “It is written that tzeddakah saves from death, and a poor man is considered as dead. Give me some money for the poor, and you will receive your license.” The Jew obeyed the tzaddik, giving him some money for tzeddakah, and then went on his way. On the following day, he received a letter from the Transportation Ministry in which he was told to present himself to their offices. When he arrived, they warmly greeted him and said that his request for a license was in good standing order, and that he could now use his van for work. As they were saying this, they handed him a license! Thus it is written, “He will do the will of those who fear Him; He will hear their cry and save them” (Tehillim 145:19).