

Parshas Shekalim 5763

There's an expression: Six of one, half a dozen of the other. I think the source of this expression must be a Yerushalmi in שקלים (2:3). There is a discussion there as to why the Torah prescribed a half-shekel for the מצוה of מחצית השקל. Both opinions ascribe it to the fact that the מחצית השקל was meant to atone for the חטא העגל. According to one opinion it was because they sinned halfway through the day, and therefore they had to give a half-shekel; according to the other it is because they sinned after six hours of the day, and half a שקל is equivalent to six *garmisin*.

It seems, in any event, that the giving of the מחצית השקל has some connection - and was in some way an antidote to the חטא העגל. Of course, the natural question is how the two are connected. I would like to suggest an approach to this question.

Note that both opinions in the ירושלמי assume that the חטא העגל began at noon. How do we know this? Because the פסוק says: וירא העם כי בשש משה לרדת מן ההר; and Rashi explains: בא שש; Moshe said that he would return בסוף ארבעים בשעה ששית, and they thought that the day he went up was counted.

So the חטא העגל began because the people panicked at the thought that Moshe was gone.

R' Meir Simcha elaborates on this. Idolatry was the dominant philosophy of the pagan world. What was the basic idea of idolatry? The Rambam explains that ע"ז is built on the premise that man can't approach the רבשי"ע directly, but only through an intermediary. It may be because man is too lowly, or because the idea of הקב"ה is too abstract to relate to emotionally. So there has to be an intermediary, that is either more tangible or more accessible or more immediate; the sun, the stars, the moon, spirits, a person, anything to stand between the רבשי"ע and ourselves.

The foundation of אידישקייט is that man does not need an intermediary to approach G-d. We don't need to serve some intermediate force, nor do we need to delegate our עבודה to someone else. Despite the infinitude that separates the infinite from the finite, each of us has a direct and unmediated relationship with the רבשי"ע Himself.

The root cause of the חטא העגל, explains R' Meir Simcha, was that the Jews had absorbed the idolatrous conception, and they therefore conceived that they needed משה רבינו to be the buffer between them and the רבשי"ע. Without Moshe, they felt bereft of closeness to השם. They could not imagine that they could approach the רבשי"ע except through Moshe. They could not imagine that they could speak to the רבשי"ע, or that He could speak to them, except through Moshe. They could not imagine that they could have any relationship with הקב"ה, except

through Moshe.

And therefore when they thought that Moshe was gone - כי בשש משה - they desperately needed to create some substitute, some other figure that would mediate between them and G-d. They had just experienced the most profound religious experience of all time. They wanted to retain their connection with the רבשייע. And they could not envision that connection without some intermediary, something tangible, on which to lavish their attention, their love, their service.

And to fill that need, that vacume, they created the עגל.

And that is why, explains R' Meir Simcha, when משה came down and saw what they had done, his first reaction was to break the לוחות. Because משה understood that with such an idolatrous conception the people would take the לוחות and make them into an עיז, too. With such a conception they would see the לוחות - not as a communication from G-d to them, but as an intermediary between G-d and them. They would reduce the לוחות into a fetish. And rather than have that happen, Moshe destroyed them.

The great lesson that the people needed to learn was that a Jew does not need an intermediary between Himself and the רבשייע. Of course we need Moshe Rabbeinu as a teacher; and every Jew needs a rebbe from whom to learn Torah. But our prayers, our עבודה, our allegiance, is not to any person, or place, or party, or symbol, נאר צו דיר אליין.

And here lies the significance of the מחצית השקל, and the secret of how the מחצית השקל served as a counter-weight to the עגל. So long as the משכן and the בית המקדש stood, the focus of עבודה of the Jewish people was the קרבנות that were brought there. The actual work of processing the קרבנות was given over to a professional caste, the כהנים. The actual work of קרבנות and so on was done by the כהנים. But they were not the קרבנות's כהנים. Essentially, the קרבנות were offered by the people as a whole. The כהנים did the physical work, but the בעלים, the essential owners of the קרבנות, were the people themselves.

And therefore the קרבנות had to be brought - not from any private source of funds, not from the treasury of the כהנים, but - from the people themselves. Every single Jew equally - rich or poor, old or young, העשיר לא ירבה והדל לא ימעט - participated in the giving of the שקלים from which the קרבנות were purchased. In that way every Jew, great or small, no matter his שבט or his station, was a direct participant in the עבודה of the בית המקדש. Every Jew therefore had a share - an equal share - in the relationship with the רבשייע that the קרבנות embodied.

And in that way they demonstrated that the great lesson of the חטא העגל had been learned.