

SHEKALIM

CREDIT LINES AND
HOLY INVESTMENTS

A

The Duality of the Jewish Calendar

Parshas Shekalim describes a *mitzva* that every Jew had in the time of Beis Hamikdash—namely, to deposit a half-*shekel* into the Beis Hamikdash account to be used for public sacrifices (*korbanos tzibur*). These include the *tamid* twice a day, *korbanos musaf* of Shabbos and Yom Tov, and other public needs.

The *mitzva* to give a half-*shekel* begins in the month of Adar (Shekalim 1:1). Before the month begins, we spread the word about the *mitzva* with the public reading of this *parsha*. By the end of the month of Adar, all the half-*shekalim* should already be collected. On the first of Nissan, the temple treasury would begin to use the newly collected money for the sacrifices.

The Jewish year has two beginnings. The year itself begins on the first of Tishrei—Rosh Hashana. In the order of the months, though, Nissan is considered the first. Thus, the Jewish calendar synthesizes two different systems of time. The solar year goes from Tishrei to Tishrei, while the lunar months begin in Nissan. Why is it that the fiscal year of the Beis Hamikdash begins in Nissan—why not begin in Tishrei?

Furthermore, why is the entire month of Adar dedicated to the collection of the coins? This *mitzva* could have had a two-week time span or even one week, perhaps just the week before Rosh Chodesh Nissan. And yet, we are told that the collection began on Rosh Chodesh Adar, and we read Parshas Shekalim accordingly. Why?

B

Two Stages of Creation

The Shem Mishmuel starts his explanation with a famous idea of Tosfos. The Gemara (Rosh Hashana 27a) presents a *machlokes* regarding when Hashem created the world—on the first of Nissan or of Tishrei. Tosfos proposes a strange resolution. He distinguishes between two stages of creation. In the first stage, in Tishrei, God devised a plan to create the world; He *thought* to create the world. Six months after this creation ideation, in Nissan, God actually created the world.

We always try to understand God relative to human terms. People generally plan before they act. A builder draws up a blueprint before commencing construction. Similarly, Hashem first thought to create in Tishrei, and only in Nissan did He implement His plan. What Tosfos does not explain, though, is what Hashem's purpose was in bifurcating the creation process.

C

Justice and Mercy

The Shem Mishmuel makes an interesting connection to another statement of Chazal. Rashi (Bereishis 1:1) cites a Midrash that Hashem originally thought to create the world using *middas*

hadin. However, He saw that the world would not survive with only *middas hadin*, so he added *middas harachamim*.

In other words, Hashem originally planned for the world to function with pure justice. There would be clear cause and effect, right and wrong, good and bad. There would be no gray areas. But God understood that such a world would be short-lived. The core and center of the creation—humans—would not be able to survive in this kind of system. Straight *din* would not allow for *teshuva*, which comes from *chesed*. In the original plan, good would earn clear reward, and evil would evoke immediate punishment. There would be no exceptions, just as the laws of nature as we know them do not have exceptions. Every time you drop an apple, it falls; gravity does not countenance exceptions or extenuating circumstances. The moral code and accompanying providence of God could also have been straight and unfailing—clear reward for *mitzvos* and clear punishment for *aveiros*.

However, Hashem understood human frailty. People are not robots; each person is an unpredictable being. This uncertainty factor looms large in the human experience. Our greatness lies in our ability to choose and to change. Yet this is our weakness as well, and we can stray from our commitments. People have soft hearts. Sometimes, our hearts flicker with energy, and sometimes they turn cold, devoid of energy. We are composed of both good and evil.

If God would impose strict order on man, nobody would survive, because man is fickle and unpredictable. Since Hashem evicted Adam and Chava from Gan Eden, the road to the Tree of Life has a revolving fiery sword blocking it. Man is comprised of good and bad, successively turning on and off, with successes and disappointments, triumphs and failures. Hashem never wanted humans to be robots. He has enough robots: angels, stars, mountains, animals, etc. The greatness and weakness of the human being is his inconsistency. He or she can do great things and then

turn right around and do horrible things. The revolving sword is a representation of the human condition.

God Himself is absolute truth. Truth demands reward for good and punishment for bad. Like an apple that falls 100 percent of the time, *mitzvos* should always receive reward and sins should always receive punishment. But Hashem saw that humans are too fickle, inconsistent, moody, and flighty to have such a strict regime of *din*.

D

Mercy, the *Midda* That Keeps Us Alive

Despite the original plan of using *din* to guide the world, Hashem decided to integrate *middas harachamim*. Mercy is very flexible and can be expressed in varying degrees. Sometimes, it comes because the person deserves the mercy. And sometimes, it comes despite the fact that the person doesn't. It's not rooted in *emes*. It is not a black-and-white system, but rather somewhat unpredictable.

It is a wonderful system, though, because there is so much in this world that is beyond what meets the eye. There are so many surprises based on the mercy of God. Man, in the image of God, also possesses the *midda* of *rachamim*, the unpredictable trait of sweetness, goodness, and generosity.

At this second stage in the plans for creation, Hashem said, "Man must be given *chesed*. And from the *chesed* that I shower upon humankind, they will embody that *chesed*. They will shower this kindness and goodness upon each other. This will redeem the world from the sins and failings of man and woman."

This *middas harachamim* is also at the root of *teshuva*, the power of change, to create something new and wondrous. The *ba'al teshuva* can reach heights so great that not even a *tzaddik*

can compare. Through this amazing process, people can create a new personality in place of the one sullied by sin.

E

The *Din* of Tishrei, Balanced by the *Chesed* of Nissan

Tishrei is the month of *din*. Rosh Hashana is the *yom hadin*, the day of truth and justice. Who can stand in front of the Almighty Judge on Rosh Hashana at the beginning of the new year and hear the *shofar* and not tremble in fear at the consequences of his failures? It is a time of strict justice. This is a specific time of the year when Hashem says, “Let’s see if you can stand up to the rigor of strict justice.” Too many of us, though, cannot pass the test of *din*.

Hashem also created a different regime and gave it a different time frame. Nissan is the time of *chesed*. When the Jewish People walked out of Egypt, it was only because of Hashem’s kindness for us. In Egypt, we were on a very low level. Despite our flaws, Hashem had mercy on us and took us out of Egypt.

The Zohar notes that the respective *middos* of each month are even hinted at by their names. The first letters of Nissan—*nun* and *samech*—appear in the *alef-beis* order. The letters of the word Tishrei—*tav*, *reish*, and *shin*—appear in backwards order. When a word is spelled in backwards order of the *alef-beis*, it signals the power of *din* – justice – while going forward represents the power of *chesed*. How so? Moving from right to left is a movement of *chesed*, since it emanates from the right side, which in Chassidus represents *chesed*. Moving from left to right is *din*, since it emanates from the left side, which represents *din*. The right hand is usually stronger than the left. So, too, *chesed*, which in Nissan starts from the right, is stronger than *din*, which in Tishrei starts from the left. Thus, by creating the world in Nissan, Hashem made

chesed in this world stronger than *din*. That's the way we should be as well.

The purpose of donating the *shekalim* during Adar is to get ready for Nissan. These coins, given in generosity, are going to help us enter the time of *chesed*, in the month of Nissan.

F

Moving Up and Moving Down

The differences between *chesed* in Nissan and *din* in Tishrei revolve around an important point, a central theme of Chassidus and Kabbala. Our existence in this world is nothing more than an encounter between people and their Creator. This world is the platform on which we meet Him. This is what life is all about. All of our economic, social, and intellectual activities are all about meeting our Creator, discovering Him, and talking to Him—and His response.

This rendezvous between man and God can always be thought of as movement. When two people interact with each other, we can ask: Who is moving towards whom? Chassidus refers to these movements as *isarusa d'le'ila*—a movement from above, when God moves down toward us—and *isarusa d'letata*—a movement from below, when humankind moves up towards God. According to Chassidus, whoever starts a movement causes a response. If we initiate an *isarusa d'letata* by moving up towards God, then He will respond in kind. If Hashem initiates by showing us His loving touch, then we will respond with an uplifting response to Him.

This is the difference between Tishrei and Nissan, between *din* and *chesed*. In *din*, the human being must take the first step. It is our obligation to find God, to do what is right. If we do so, He will respond. If we do wrong, on the other hand, we will be punished. The burden is on the human being to initiate; he is charged with living a justified and sanctified life. Man and woman must

make that decision. This is movement from below, from within our own world. We have to make the decision to live a redeemed and justified good life. This is our mission in the time of Tishrei.

Chesed elyon, though, begins with God Himself. Hashem's *chesed* comes from above, *le'ila*. It starts at a higher level and descends into the world, like rain coming down into the world. We have no claim on it, no way of demanding it, and no way of producing it. We can only pray for it and hope that God, in His infinite kindness, decides to shower it upon us at the right time.

G

Undeserved Kindness

The Shem Mishmuel gives us at least one idea to explain the fact that Hashem has mercy on us even when we don't deserve it. All of us know we live with this mercy, and we certainly need it. We need it when people are sick or when they need children, *parnasasa*, help in getting a job, or whatever else they need. This is *chesed elyon*. And it is tricky. How can you claim *chesed elyon*, God's great generosity? It comes from above, from out of our reach. We can't control His *chesed*. So, what can we do to receive it?

There is a factor that can trigger the *chesed*. Moshe asked Hashem, "On what basis are you taking the Jews out of Egypt?" Rashi explains that the Bnei Yisrael were on the forty-ninth level of *tuma*; they were worshiping idols and being disloyal to their fellow Jews. Moshe challenged, "They are scoundrels! They don't even believe in God. Why do you want to redeem this nation?"

Hashem responded with a sign: "When you take the Jews out of Egypt, they will serve Hashem at Har Sinai" (Shemos 3:12). In other words, Hashem was saying, "I see that they possess a certain potential that is different than any other people. They have potential for greatness and holiness, the potential to proclaim, '*na'ase v'nishma.*' They will accept the Torah and keep it under

all circumstances. I know they will observe the Torah through all their persecutions and even into and out of the gas chambers. The Jewish People will remain loyal to Torah. No other nation could or would make that commitment. Now, in Egypt, we don't see it. But I see the future. When you take the nation out of Egypt, they will make that ultimate commitment. The whole world will exist because of the Jewish commitment and power to keep the Torah. This is the reason for My *chesed* today. My *chesed* today is not *ba'asher hu sham*. The way Klal Yisrael is now, I would never redeem them. This redemption is instead based on what they will become. They will be the holy nation, *mamleches kohanim v'goy kadosh*." Because of that future glorious greatness, God did *chesed* for Bnei Yisrael before they were worthy of it.

H

Nissan—Forward to the Future

We have our own challenges of *chesed*. When and how is there rationale for us to act with *chesed*? If I feel the person is worth the investment, I invest today because, though today he is nothing, he will be worth it in the future. A farmer who sees a barren, empty tract of land will plow, plant, and water the ground, and fertilize it, trusting that in the future, it will produce quality crops. Hashem knows that in the future, the Jewish People will become a good investment, a good stock, even if they are a penny stock today. One day, they will be worth millions. Hashem said, "Take them out because I know they will become an amazing people at Sinai."

This is the concept of the *chesed* of Nissan. The *chesed* represented by the month of Nissan is God's investment. It is the month of the beginnings of the blossoms of the spring, the month of the faith that Hashem has in people: that people are worth His generosity.

Divine Credit Lines

The *piyut* for Parshas Hachodesh says, “*Asher yeshu’os bo makifos*, the month in which Hashem’s salvations surround us.” The Shem Mishmuel quotes the Chiddushei Harim, who notes that the word *makifos* can be understood as credit: the *yeshu’os* that serve as a credit line. God taking us out of Egypt served as a credit line. He gave us value, worth, and blessings not because of what we were then, but because of what we would become in the future. Even now, Hashem gives us the credit in Nissan because He knows we will pay off, we will be a good investment.

How much kindness and generosity does Hashem give us every day? Life, health, children, *parnassa*. and more than anything else, the privilege and beauty of being part of the holy nation of Israel, of being able to receive and study His Holy Torah, the key to understanding life itself and our mission therein. It is the path and method of getting close to our Creator. What great *chesed* He gives us! He has the trust to shower us with blessings because He knows it is a good investment that we will repay. It is a moving testimony of God’s love for us. He knows that this is a worthy credit line. The month of Nissan is about the awakening of coming to life, it is the month of *aviv*, the Spring of God’s generosity.

The Shem Mishmuel asks a profound and serious question. Given this boundless kindness, love, and confidence of God’s belief in His people and all His generous gifts, *yetzias Mitzrayim*, and the Torah, how was it possible that so many Jews refused to leave Egypt and died there instead? According to Chazal (Rashi Shemos 13:18), 80 percent of our people refused to leave and died during *choshech*.

His answer is frightening. Hashem knows that we are a good investment, so He gives us this *chesed*. But not all of us are such a good investment. Just because a person is born a Jew doesn’t mean that he will be a successful investment for Hashem. He has

free will. At the end of the day, we are people because we have the power of choice. We can make the choice to be the good investment, but, God forbid, we also can decide to be the opposite. People can choose not to be recipients of God's kindness because they want no part of Sinai. Heaven help those souls. It is an unfortunate and sad reality.

Many people, too many people, from the time of *yetzias Mitzrayim* until today, are making the poor and horrible decision not to be part of the Jewish People and destiny. They choose to drop out, and Hashem does not interfere with that decision.

J

The Will to be Part of Hashem's People

The Shem Mishmuel teaches that the most important thing is to have a *ratzon elyon*, a desire to be a part of Hashem's investment plan. Granted, we are weak and have our failings. But there is a deep point within us, a *nekuda penimis*, of being a Jew and wanting to be Jewish. Even if this point is undefined and amorphous, the desire to have some connection to Jewish destiny and to the Jewish God and spirit will keep a Jew connected. This *ratzon*, the *pintele yid*, as we discussed in Parshas Mishaptim, is the seventh point beyond the six dimensions. The seventh point can never be extinguished; it is a fire of connection to God and his people through Torah. There is a will to be part of this. If we have some kind of will to be part of Hashem's team, then Hashem will keep investing in us. "If they want to be connected to Me," Hashem says, "I will give them My blessings."

It is as if Hashem says, "Even if they don't keep Shabbos, I will give them the State of Israel. Even if they don't learn, their children or grandchildren will become *bnei Torah*." If people don't want to be connected at all to Hashem, if they want to sever all connections to Israel, their people, and to God, they are given the

free will to do so. People who are born Jewish but choose to leave have no *ratzon elyon*. They can be wiped out, God forbid, during the three days of *chosech*.

The Shem Mishmuel says that this question of the *ratzon elyon*, of maintaining a vital inner point burning with Jewish feelings of wanting to be Jewish, is a function of a sanctified life. This can be accomplished when a person behaves with proper *tzniyus* (modesty). This *tzniyus* is the core point that gives us our Jewish holiness. That holiness sensitizes a person to one's deepest and most holy inner desire, the *ratzon elyon* to connect to Hashem.

K

***Bris Mila*—the Foundation of Jewish Identity**

The *bris mila* is the first thing we do with a baby boy. He will be a Jewish male, he will conduct himself according to some level of Jewish morality between himself and women. The *bris* is the core sanctity of Jews. If he keeps the commitment to have that modesty in his life, then he will have that connection with Hashem, he will have the inner point of Jewish being.

If we lose this sensitivity symbolized by *bris mila*, we become Jewishly dead and lose the life of the Jewish soul. This is a terrifying concept that has been confirmed and reconfirmed thousands of times since the beginning of our history.

The first commitment of Avraham to Hashem was *bris mila*. Hashem told him that as long as his children keep the *bris mila*, He will be their God. He will give us the *chesed* and generosity of His blessing. But if we break the *bris mila* and live an immoral life, He will sever any and all connections with us.

In Parshas Balak, Bilam gave advice to topple the Jews. Rashi (Bamidbar 24:14) says that Bilam's method was, "*Elokeihem shel eilah sonei zima*." Bilam knew the God of the Jews hates licentiousness. Modesty is the key to being Jewish; there is no other

way. This is the first commitment of Avraham to Hashem, the *bris mila*. When the Jews lose that, they can lose everything, even their core Jewishness. Then Hashem says that this is an investment He will not invest in. This is a scary thought. We should strengthen ourselves in the area of *bris mila*, sexual morality and *tznius*.

L

Half *Shekel*—Commitment to Holiness

The half-*shekel* in the month of Adar is because the half-*shekel* is to make amends for the sin of the sale of Yosef. Yosef was sold for 20 silver *dinar*, which is 5 *shekel* (see Torah Temima Bereishis 37:28). Each of the ten brothers involved in the sale thus received half a *shekel*.

Yosef was the epitome of modesty. He was called a *tzaddik* for this reason. He rejected the advances of the wife of Potifar. All the girls of Egypt tried to seduce him—*Banos tza'ada alei shur* (see Rashi Bereishis 49:22). But he did not give into the licentious culture that surrounded him. He raised a Jewish family even in this decadent culture. When the brothers sold Yosef, they betrayed the values that he stood for as well. They abandoned the value of *bris mila* and *tzniyus*. This is the *aveira* that brought us to Egypt.

Therefore, when we give the half-*shekel*, we make a commitment to fix the sin of the sale of Yosef. We make a commitment to follow the lifestyle of our holy *tzaddikim*, who are paragons of care for the *bris mila*. If we fix and commit to the value of *bris mila*, we will deserve the *chesed* of Hashem. He recognizes us as a good people even if we don't do some *mitzvos*. We will deserve Hashem's generous investment which comes in the month of Nissan.

The whole month before Adar is dedicated to collecting the coins. This is to fix the sin of immorality and to connect ourselves to the Beis Hamikdash. During the time of collection, we prepare

to bring the sacrifices that are necessary for a chaste and noble life. This is the point of the half-*shekel*, to become a *tzaddik* like Yosef, to become an investment that God will choose.

As we go into the time of *chesed*, the time of Nissan, we must take heed of the message of the *shekalim*. All the Jews should join together in *teshuva*, rededicating themselves to Hashem and the Jewish lifestyle of chastity, purity, and *bris mila*.

We will be *zocheh* to Divine kindness, *chesed elyon*, and *isurusa d'le'ila*. No matter how low we are, we will be redeemed. We will march to Sinai, say "*na'aseh v'nishma*," and build a *mamleches kohanim*, a kingdom of priests and a nation that is holy, a model of holy life for the world. Then we will be ready for redemption together with the whole world.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What do the two months of creation, Tishrei and Nissan, represent?
2. Why are the letter orders of Tishrei and Nissan reversed?
3. What are the two movements to meet Hashem?
4. Why does Hashem do special *chesed* for the Jewish people?
5. Why do we give a half *shekel*?
6. What's the most important way to access one's inner divinity?

EXERCISES

1. For a week, notice your state of chastity and morality.
2. Add one extra piece of chastity for a week.
3. Did you feel a bit more spiritual?

