



MISHPATIM

The Many Lessons of 'Half'

I was never very good at math. It all goes back to the fourth grade. I came down with a case of some ordinary childhood disease, probably chicken pox, at just the time that Mrs. Levine was teaching the class about the concept of percentages. I must've missed about a week of school, and when I returned to class, it seemed as if everyone was speaking Greek. Phrases like "50%" and "75%" and "a half" and "three-quarters" cut the air, and I simply did not know what these strange words meant. Mrs. Levine probably tried to catch me up with the rest of the class, but all I remember are feelings of frustration.

It was my rebbe, the man who taught us religious studies in the mornings, who came to the rescue. He realized that I was beginning to think of myself as dumb, and he was concerned about my damaged self-esteem.

"You are far from the first person

to be puzzled by percentages", he said comfortingly. "Moshe Rabeinu, also had his difficulties with math, and it was the Master of the Universe Himself, the Ribono shel Olam, who helped him out."

As a mere fourth-grader, I was in no position to question the good Rabbi, and I was ashamed to ask him where he found a biblical allusion to Moshe's incompetency in mathematics. But he soon filled in the gap.

"This week", he told me, "we do not only read the Torah portion of Mishpatim (Sh'mot 21:1-24:18). This Shabbat is special because it is the last one before the month of Adar. It is Shabbat Sh'kalim. We will read a short additional passage, Sh'mot 30:11-16, in which we will learn how Moshe was instructed to ask each Jew to donate a half-shekel toward the maintenance of the Mishkan. This donation was required throughout the history of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. The funds were collected during the month of Adar. Now that the Temple has been destroyed, we commemorate the collection of the half-shekel by reading about it in the Torah on the last Sabbath before Adar."

I told him that I remembered learning all about this mitzva last year but failed to see any evidence of Moshe's mathematical handicap in that passage.

It was then that he shared with me the fascinating anecdote originating in the Midrash Tanchuma, and quoted in abbreviated form by Rashi in his remarks on verse 13. As an outstanding pedagogue, my Rebbe did not read the quotation to me verbatim, but elaborated upon it in a way he knew I would find interesting and relevant to my personal quandary.

"Moshe had great difficulty with this commandment. There was something about the half-shekel that he simply couldn't understand. We do not know precisely what he found so puzzling. But we are told that the Almighty sympathized with Moshe and vividly demonstrated what the half-shekel was to look like by miraculously making a coin of fire appear in the heavens. So, you are not the only one who finds the concept of 'half' challenging. Moshe too needed a help with it."

The rebbe's attempt at restoring my self-esteem was quite helpful. I did not get a visual demonstration from the Almighty, but I did get the courage to approach Mrs. Levine and asked her for an afterschool tutorial.

Ever since this little episode, which happened more years ago than I care to mention, I have sought out explanations of the significance of the half. Why were we not required to give a whole shekel, a complete coin, as our contribution? Was it simply because that would have

been too great of an expense to require of each individual? I somehow don't think so.

And so, over the years, I have amassed a collection of dozens of explanations on the symbolic meaning of half a coin. I can't possibly share them all with you, dear reader, in this brief column. I'll give you some samples instead.

One explanation, which makes for excellent sermonic material, is that none of us is a complete entity. No one is spiritually self-sufficient. We are all only half of the picture, and we all need each other. Hence, we contribute only half a shekel, to impress upon ourselves that we can't go it alone but need another person in order to be complete.

Another approach is based upon that famous saying of Rabbi Tarfon, in Pirkei Avot. "It is not incumbent upon you to complete the task, but nevertheless you are not permitted to exempt yourself from it entirely." Being required to only give half a shekel drives home the point that total completion of the task is not expected of us. All we can each do is try our best and do our share.

Yet another approach is advanced by one of the classics of Jewish mysticism. The Zohar emphasizes that this world is a diminished one, in which there are broken vessels which need to be restored. We live in an imperfect world, and its

imperfection is symbolized by being a broken shekel.

I encourage each of you to use the opportunity of this week's supplemental Torah reading to meditate upon either the mundane half-shekel or the celestial fiery coin. I am quite certain that you will creatively find symbolic meanings of your own. And, if you wish, feel free to send them to me at execthw@ou.org. If any of your suggestions are really on the mark I will share them with the rest of my readership in a future Person in the Parsha column. 📌