

Small Change

By Rabbi Joshua (numismatically known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

The Talmud tells us that there is no order in the Torah. Rabbi Yitschak Abarbanel points out this refers only to the chronology that we find recorded in the Torah. In order to teach us a certain insight, the Torah will sometimes present events out of sequence, so that we better understand a certain logical connection. There is, however, a logical order to the Torah. Thus, the midrash tells us that the half shekel which the Israelites were commanded to bring served as an atonement for their worship of the calf, even though the half shekel offering is mentioned before the sin of the golden calf. The idea expressed by mentioning the two sections out of sequence is that God, out of His love for His people, has already prepared the antidote for a malady before it occurs. In what way, however, does the half shekel atone for the great sin of worshiping the golden calf? A closer look at the midrash that makes this connection will, I believe, provide us with an answer.

Rabbi Jonah, in a midrash cited by the Yalkut Shimoni, says the then nation was lowered through the word 'zeh' (this) and was also raised through the word 'zeh.' They were lowered when they said 'This man Moshe who brought us up from the land of Egypt - we do not know what became of him' (Shemos 32 : 1), and they were raised when they were told, "This is what they shall give - everyone who passes among the counted - half of the shekel, by the holy shekel" (Shemos 31 : 13). Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, in his Emes LeYaakov, brings this midrash and explains it as reflecting a lack of proper respect for Moshe and his role as the prophet who brought them the eternal Torah. The half shekel atoned for this because an accepted system of coinage indicates legal validity, and therefore the shekel of the Torah represents the Torah's eternal validity. This explanation, however, does not account for the Torah's insistence that only a half shekel, no, more and no less, be given. I would like to offer an explanation that is, in essence, the opposite of Rabbi Kamenetsky's.

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, in his commentary Meshech Chochmah, writes that when the people referred to Moshe as the one who brought them out of Egypt, they were ascribing a holiness to him that is reserved only for God. This overestimation of Moshe, he writes, is actually what led them to their act of idolatry, in an attempt to replace Moshe with a molten god. When Moshe saw what they had done, he broke the tablets, because he feared that they would turn them into an idol, as well. The nation needed to learn that God's holiness is unique, and that no human being can replicate it. Moshe was merely an agent of God, not a deity. As Rabbi Meir Simcha puts it in his elaborate essay, Moshe did not have intrinsic holiness. The midrash on parshas Kedoshim, on the verse, "You shall be holy, I am the Lord your God," explains, "'You shall be holy' - perhaps (you would think) the same as I? Therefore it says 'I am the Lord your God' - My holiness is above yours." It was the people's failure to recognize this distinction that led to their semi-deification of Moshe, and the idolatry of the golden calf.

As an antidote to the sin of the golden calf, God commanded that each person give half a shekel. The poor man is not to give less, and the rich man is not to give more. We can readily understand why the Torah tells us to make sure that the poor man not give less than the prescribed amount. Some mitzvos are of such great importance that a person must go to great lengths to fulfill them. However, why insist that the rich man not give more? I believe that the message being delivered here is

that human attempts to attain holiness are by necessity never complete. No matter how rich a person is, he cannot give a complete shekel to the mishkan. He is always in need of someone else for his act to be complete. Rashi, in parshas Bereishis, comments on the verse, "It is not good that man be alone; I will make him a helper" (2 : 18), "so that they should not say that there are two authorities ('shtei reshuyos'); that God is unique in the higher realms and has no mate and this one (man) is unique in the lower realms and has no mate." Interestingly, the very religion that ascribes divinity to a human being also prohibits its clergy from marrying. The Torah, then, by insisting that each person bring only half a shekel, was seeking to prevent the mistake that led to the sin of the golden calf from recurring.

Please address all correspondence to the author (Rabbi Hoffman) at the following address - JoshHoff @ AOL.com.