

MARCH 13, 2017

Parashat Ki Tisa

Every One of Us Makes a Difference

כל העובר על הפקודים (שמות ל:יג) (Exodus 30:13) Every one that passes among them that are counted

Over the past two weeks, many of us have been captivated by the [unexpected success](#) of the Israeli baseball team in the World Baseball Classic. Despite being the last team to qualify, Israel has defeated powerhouses such as South Korea and Cuba. Because of a quirk in the rules, that allows non-citizens to play if they are *eligible* for citizenship in the country they are playing for, only one of the players is a native born Israeli. Most of players are actually Americans. Thus, the Israeli baseball team is another example of the power of the U.S.-Israel relationship! However, this is no team of all-star ringers. Rather most of the players are [minor leaguers and journeymen](#). Their success is not the result of exceptional individual talent, but because they have come together as a team. Each player doing his part to make a difference.

This is also precisely the message conveyed in the first section of Parashat Ki Tisa, which describes a mitzvah called *Machatzit Hashekel* (“The Half Shekel”). Moses is instructed that when he wishes to count the men above the age of twenty (eligible for military service), he must do so not by counting each person, but rather by requiring the contribution of a half-shekel coin from each person and then counting the coins. This money was designated for the expenses incurred in public sacrifices offered both in the Tabernacle and later the Temple in Jerusalem. This commandment represents perhaps the most universal mitzvah in the Torah, as it points to the critical importance of each and every individual, irrespective of personal wealth, to donate the same half-shekel. In his commentary on Talmud Yerushalmi Shekalim (46), Rabbi Menachem Mendel Kasher writes that one reason each person was required to give a half-shekel (and not a whole amount) was to teach us, “that only through the connection of each and every individual in Israel can the nation become whole.” The powerful and meaningful lessons of *Machatzit Hashekel* are clear: Every person must do his or her part. No one may shirk his or her responsibility. And finally, only when we garner our collective energy, with a communal unity of purpose, do we marshal the full force of our power for good.

While the practice of giving the half-shekel fell dormant with the destruction of the Temple, it resurfaced several hundred years ago as Jewish communities instituted a custom of giving a symbolic half-shekel to commemorate the ancient practice. Many communities specifically designated the funds raised from the half-shekel towards the needs of the impoverished residents of the Holy Land. For example, in 1601 the Jewish communities in both Venice, Italy and Worms, Germany issued proclamations instituting the collection of the half-shekel from every member of their community. Those funds were then committed to the needy and destitute who lived in Hebron and Jerusalem. Today, in many communities around the world on the eve of Purim, Jews donate a symbolic “half-shekel” (or half-dollar) to remember this mitzvah. Yet, the spirit of the practice must live on not only in our donations, but in our actions as well. We must utilize the power garnered in our collective energy for the betterment of the Jewish people and specifically, the people living in the state of Israel.

In just over a week, people from across the political spectrum and from every state in the country will gather in Washington, D.C. for AIPAC’s annual Policy Conference. Members of our community will represent us in this important event, and we salute them for dedicating their time and energy on our behalf to learn, discuss, and lobby for a strong U.S.-Israel relationship. The theme of this year’s conference—Many Voices, One Mission—is a direct reflection of the values of *Machatzit Hashekel*: Each of us must come together to achieve the critical goal of

strengthening Israel. Moreover, our success relies on everyone's participation regardless of religious denomination or party affiliation. Only through our willingness to work together, including with those with whom we disagree on other issues, can we truly represent the entirety of *Klal Yisrael*—a collective of many voices united in one mission. ■

The Danger and Power of Money

This they shall give (Exodus 30:13)

זה יתנו (שמות ל:יג)

Last week, the Justice Department announced that Chinese cellphone equipment maker ZTE Corp. would plead guilty and pay the United States nearly \$900 million for shipping sensitive U.S.-made technology to Iran in violation of U.S. sanctions. According to the [Times of Israel](#), “The settlement marks the largest civil fine ever imposed in a Commerce Department export control case.” This critical case, which was initiated during the Obama Administration and has now been resolved by the Trump Administration, demonstrates clearly that the U.S. will not tolerate corporations that defy American sanctions against Iran. “Those who flout our economic sanctions and export controls will not go unpunished,” said Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross.

Midrash teaches that the way we use our money can and must be a powerful force for good. Commenting on the verse, “This they shall give,” Rashi (on verse 13), based on Midrash Tanchuma (2:9) explains that Moses instructed the people to give a specific type of coin. “He (God) showed him (Moses) a kind of fiery coin the weight of which was half a shekel and said to him, ‘Like this shall they give.’” Commentators wonder: Why according to the Midrash was Moses shown a vision of a fiery coin rather than a normal coin? Rabbi Elimelech of Lushensk (see *Shivim Panim L'torah vol. II* p. 212) explained the vision of the fiery coin was meant to serve as a warning about the power and danger of money. He writes that fire and money share unique characteristics: Fire is, without a doubt, one of the most essential elements in the world. While fire can bring positive, great benefits to the world, it can also be used as a force for terrible destruction. Similarly, just as a coin (i.e. money) can be used for great, exalted purposes, it can also be used to support nefarious plots and those who desire to spread fear, hatred and terror.

Today, the ways that nations utilize their financial resources can be seen as two opposite sides of a coin: Iran, rather than using its significant financial might to build freedom and peace, utilizes those resources to promote the values of radicalism and terror around the world. According to the [Jerusalem Post](#), at a recent international security conference in Munich, Israel's Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman and Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir each “highlighted Iran as the main threat to regional stability,” calling Iran “the biggest state sponsor of terrorism in the world.” Recognized by the State Department as the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism, Iran seeks to export its radical Islamic ideology abroad by supporting terrorist proxy groups which carry out attacks on American troops and Israeli civilians—including Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

On the other hand, we in the United States encourage our elected officials to utilize the financial might of our country to serve as a force of good in the world. In a positive sense, through its foreign aid allocations, America generously utilizes its financial resources to promote the values of democracy, pluralism, human rights, along with the rule of law, around the world. At the same time, the United States has rightly marshaled the power of its economy to punish countries, like Iran, with the force of biting financial sanctions. This is why recent efforts to not only increase sanctions on Iranian entities, but also to strongly enforce those sanctions and punish violators is so important. If we ever hope to persuade Iran to stop using its money to destroy, we must continue to utilize America's financial resources and economic power as a model for nations around the world—a model that increases the promise for peace and admonishes the promotion of terrorism. ■

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