

Counting Each Person: The Mitzvah of Donating Half a Shekel

Source Sheet

What is the biblical commandment of donating half a shekel, connecting with the month of Adar? How can we use the values behind this mitzvah to illustrate the importance that each and every person contribute to bringing the hostages home?

There is a commandment in the Torah which calls on every person over the age of 20 to contribute a half-shekel to the community, *Machatzit HaShekel*. This commandment is read in synagogues today during the regular Torah reading cycle, with an additional reading that highlights this commandment on the Shabbat leading into the month of Adar (or Adar Bet during a leap year). How can we use the values behind this mitzvah to illustrate the importance that each and every person contribute to bringing the hostages home?

1. Exodus 30:11-13 ■ שמות ל'י"א-י"ג

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: כִּי תִשָּׂא אֶת־רֹאשׁ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְקֻדֵיהֶם וְנָתַנּוּ אִישׁ כַּפָּר נַפְשׁוֹ לַה' בַּפֶּקֶד אֹתָם וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה בָהֶם נֹגֵף בַּפֶּקֶד אֹתָם: זֶה יִתְּנוּ כָל־הָעָבֵר עַל־הַפְּקֻדִים מִחֻצֵי הַשֶּׁקֶל בַּשֶּׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ עֶשְׂרִים גֶּרָה הַשֶּׁקֶל מִחֻצֵי הַשֶּׁקֶל תְּרוּמָה לַה':

“Adonai spoke to Moses, saying: When you take a census of the Israelite men according to their army enrollment, each shall pay Adonai a ransom for himself on being enrolled, that no plague may come upon them through their being enrolled. This is what everyone who is entered in the records shall pay: a half-shekel by the sanctuary weight—twenty gerahs to the shekel—a half-shekel as an offering to Adonai.”

Discussion Question:

- The Torah goes on to say that everyone over the age of 20 was responsible to give this amount, whether they were rich or poor. Why do you think it was important for everyone to contribute?

2. Mishnah Shekalim 1:1 ■ שקלים א:א

The Mishna explains how this money was collected and used in the Land of Israel during Temple times:

בְּאֶחָד בְּאָדָר מְשַׁמֵּיעִין עַל הַשְּׁקָלִים וְעַל הַפְּלֵאִים. בַּחֲמִשָּׁה עָשָׂר בּוֹ קוֹרִין אֶת הַמַּגְלָה בְּכַרְפֵּינָה,
וּמְתַקְּנִין אֶת הַדְּרָכִים וְאֶת הָרְחוּבוֹת וְאֶת מְקוֹנְאוֹת הַמַּיִם, וְעוֹשִׂין כָּל צְרִיכֵי הָרַבִּים,
וּמְצִינִין אֶת הַקְּבָרוֹת, וְיוֹצְאִין אֹף עַל הַפְּלֵאִים:

“On the first of Adar, the court oversees the collection of shekalim (i.e. the yearly half-shekel contribution) and looks for kilayim (forbidden mixtures of produce in the fields). And on the fifteenth day of the month of Adar, the Scroll of Esther is read in the walled cities. And they also repair the roads that were damaged in the winter, and the streets, and the cisterns. And at that time they perform all that is necessary for public welfare. And they also mark the Jewish gravesites anew, so that people would know their location, as the previous markers may have eroded during the rainy season. And they go out to look for and uproot kilayim.”

3. Shulchan Arukh, Orach Chayim 694:1 ■ שולחן ערוך, אורח חיים תרצ"ד, א

Today, there is no Temple in Jerusalem, and Jews do not give a half-shekel tax to cover communal costs; however, there is a custom to give a half-shekel, or its equivalent, to the poor each year on Ta'anit Esther in order to remember the mitzvah of machatzit hashekel.

דין מעות פורים לעניים ובו ד סעיפים

חייב כל אדם ליתן לפחות שתי מתנות לשני עניים: הגה יש אומרים שיש ליתן קודם פורים מחצית מן המטבע הקבוע באותו מקום ובאותו זמן זכר למחצית השקל שהיו נותנין באדר ומאחר ששלשה פעמים כתיב תרומה בפרשה יש ליתן שלשה (מרדכי ריש פ"ק דיומא) ויש ליתנו בליל פורים קודם שמתפללים מנחה (מהרי"ל) וכן נוהגין בכל מדינות אלו ויש ליתן ג' חצאי גדולים במדינות אלו כי אין מטבע ששם מחצית עליה מלבד זו ובמדינות אוסטרייך יתנו ג' חצי ווינ"ר שנקראו ג"כ מחצית וכן לכל מדינה ומדינה ואין חייב ליתנו רק מי שהוא מבין עשרים ולמעלה...

The law as regards Purim money for the poor, 4 Seifim: All people must give at least two gifts to two poor people. RAMA: Some say that there is [support] to give prior to Purim a half-coin that is established in that place and in that time as a memorial to the Shekel half-coin that they would give in Adar. And since "terumah [tithe]" is written three times in that portion, there is [support] to give three [half-coins] (Mordechai, beginning of the first chapter of Yoma). And there is [support] to give on the night of Purim prior to praying the Mincha prayer (Maharil), and such is the custom in all these provinces. And there is [support] to give 3 half-coins of the bigger [coins] in these provinces, for there is no coin that is only half beside for [the bigger coin], and in Austria, they would give 3 half-coins of Vienners, which were also called "halfs". And so it is for each province...

The timing for this custom is particularly meaningful on a fast day, when many have the custom to give the amount of money they would have spent on food that day to the poor, and around the holiday of Purim when we are also obligated to give to the poor.

Discussion Questions

- What are modern-day communal responsibilities?
- What are the values behind the mitzvah of *machatzit hashekel*?
- How can we apply these values to the hostage crisis?

4. Mishneh Torah, Gifts to the Poor 8:10 ■ 'משנה תורה, הלכות מתנות עניים ח"י'

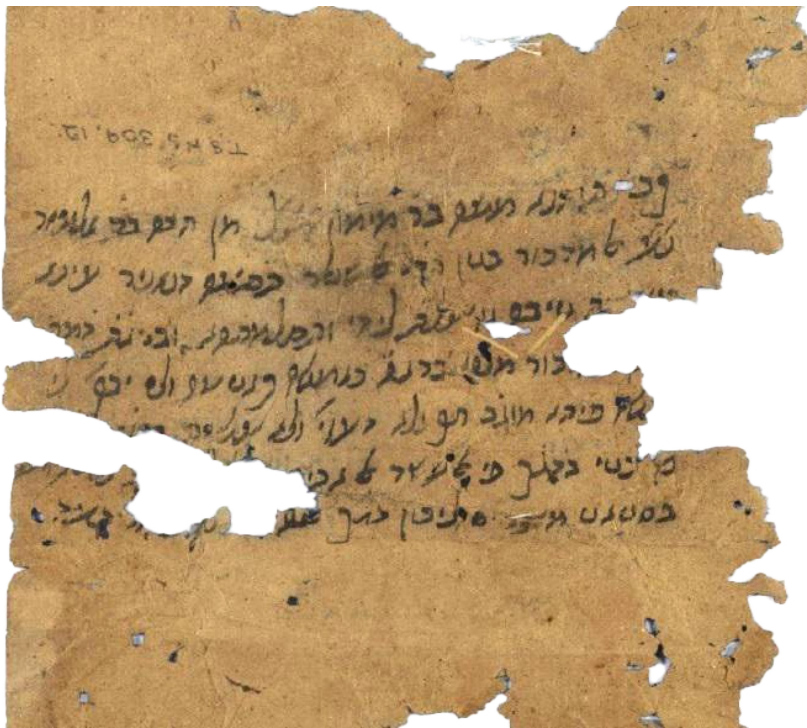
What does giving to the poor have to do with redeeming captives?

Maimonides helps answer this question:

פְּדִיּוֹן שְׁבוּיִים קוֹדֵם לְפָרֶגֶט עֲנִיִּים וְלְכִסּוּתָן. וְאִין לָךְ מִצְוָה גְּדוּלָה פְּדִיּוֹן שְׁבוּיִים שֶׁהַשְּׁבוּי הָרִי הוּא בְּכָלֵל הָרְעֵבִים וְהַצְּמֵאִים וְעֲרוּמִים וְעוֹמֵד בְּסַפְּנַת נַפְשׁוֹת... וְאִין לָךְ מִצְוָה רַבָּה פְּדִיּוֹן שְׁבוּיִים:

The redemption of captives receives priority over sustaining the poor and providing them with clothing. There is no greater mitzvah than the redemption of captives. For as the Rambam continues to explain, all of the different aspects of charitable gifts are included in the redemption of captives (Bava Batra 8b). For a captive is among those who are hungry, thirsty, and unclothed and he is in mortal peril. For at any time, his captors may take his life... There is no mitzvah as great as the redemption of captives.

Maimonides (1138-1204) took this mitzvah very seriously and worked to redeem captives in his own time:



◀ A receipt signed by Maimonides' hand, relating to a sum donated for the redemption of captives. The text of the receipt explains that the donation came from the donor's sale of his property.

Cambridge University, TSNS309.12