

Every man shall give Hashem an atonement for his soul... This shall they give – everyone who passes through the census – a half-shekel... The wealthy shall not increase and the destitute shall not decrease from half a shekel. (30:12, 13, 15)

The Jewish census was taken by having the people contribute an item which would then be counted. In this instance, when the nation was counted in the wilderness, they were instructed to each give a half-*shekel* coin which was later used for the construction and maintenance of the *Mishkan*. Participation in this census via the half-*shekel* coin was mandatory on each and every Jew, who was to give an equal amount – a half-*shekel*. This was mandated regardless of financial ability or lack thereof – everyone gave the same. Why a half-*shekel*? Why did everyone contribute an equal amount? A number of reasons are given. **Horav S. R. Hirsch, zl**, explains it succinctly. Viewed objectively, not even the most complete and perfect contribution of any one individual can achieve the whole of the work that must be done. The effort of any one individual can be only a fragment of a whole. An equally selfless sacrifice from his brother is required in order to produce the whole.

The equality of rich and poor alike expresses the symbolic character of the contribution, which is fixed at a half-*shekel*. If each person contributes an equal amount then no one person “weighs more” on Hashem’s Divine scale than the other. We all stand equally before Hashem.

Alternatively, each Jew should view himself as incomplete without the other Jew. We are a unit. Also, a Jew should view whatever he gives as being only part of what is expected of him. One should never feel that “I have given enough.” This explains why we do not give a whole coin; but, why do we specifically give a half-coin? If the objective is to give less than a whole, then anything less than a whole should suffice. Why the exact amount of a half-shekel? Furthermore, why may the wealthy person not express himself with greater generosity? If he has it – let him give it!

I would like to take a homiletic approach and present two different expositions, both of which intimate a Jew’s collective responsibility to his fellow Jew. Our people have produced generation after generation of Jews who are resolutely committed and wholly devoted to Hashem, His Torah and *mitzvos*. We have overcome challenges, triumphed over adversity, and surmounted obstacles to our faith with a fierce single-mindedness, and an unfaltering sense of commitment. We brook no compromise in our service of the Almighty. Nothing stands in our way. Why is this? What motivates us so?

Perhaps the following Torah thought from **Horav Matisyahu Solomon, Shlita**, (which I have used before) will elucidate this phenomenon. The Torah (*Vayikra* 10:12) relates Moshe *Rabbeinu*’s conversation with Aharon *HaKohen* and his two sons, Elazar and Isamar, following the tragic

deaths of their older brothers, Nadav and Avihu. “And Moshe spoke to Aharon and to Elazar and Isamar, the children of Aharon, who remained.” The word *ha’nosarim*, who remained, seems superfluous. Aharon had four sons, two of whom perished. Obviously, the other two, are the remaining sons. Why does the Torah underscore this fact?

The *Mashgiach* explains that this term implies an added responsibility placed upon the shoulders of Elazar and Isamar. They were survivors, and those who survive when others perish are charged with the enormous responsibility of guaranteeing that the Torah will endure in ensuing generations. The survivor carries a dual responsibility on his shoulders: his own and that of those who did not make it, who did not have a second chance. The survivor must be able to look at himself in the mirror and reflect, “I am here – others are not. Life cannot go on as usual. I must make up the difference.” The survivor may not tolerate compromise, because he is not acting only for himself personally. He carries with him the added weight of those who did not survive.

When one is a survivor he had no room for negotiation, no room for error, no room for concession. When he serves Hashem, he may not slack off, because even if he could somehow, someway, find a way of excusing his personal responsibility – it does not mitigate his responsibility towards the “others.” A Jew gives a *machatzis ha’shekel*, half-*shekel*, to remind him that he is truly only a half. He may never forget “who” rides on his shoulders. We are a nation of survivors. We have survived the Romans, Greeks, Crusaders, Inquisition, pogroms and the Holocaust. Many have died under the most brutal and cruel circumstances. We are the survivors, the fortunate few, who thus have a responsibility to remember that what we do is only a half. We must carry out the other half on behalf of those who did not make it, so as to make it whole.

Horav Elchanan Wasserman, zl, was the recognized leader of Orthodoxy in pre-World War II Europe. He was revered and respected by all segments of Orthodoxy: *Ashkenazi*, *Sephardi*, *Chassidic* and *Yeshivish*. Everyone heeded his word, because it exemplified the very apex of integrity and Torah scholarship.

When the Second World War broke out, *Rav* Elchanan fled with his *yeshivah* (Baranowitz) to Vilna. Before the accursed Nazis entered Vilna, he traveled to the city of Slabodka, near Kovno, with the intention of returning soon to Vilna. The Germans, however, quickly seized control of Lithuania, and *Rav* Elchanan was forced to remain in Slabodka.

On the 11th of *Tammuz*, 1941, the Nazis decimated the city of Slabodka and executed its Jewish population. Prior to their brutal murder, *Rav* Elchanan calmly addressed his friends, rabbinic leaders and the Jewish community. He spoke softly, articulating every word with the inner calm for which he was noted. His last words have been recorded for posterity. I feel that the underlying motif of his farewell is connected to the idea of Jewish survivorship and kinship for others. We do not live only for ourselves. Every Jew is a “half.” These are the holy *Rosh Yeshivah*’s parting words:

“Apparently they consider us *tzaddikim* in Heaven, for we were chosen to atone for *Klal Yisrael* with

our lives. If so – we must repent completely, here and now. Time is short. The road to the Ninth Fort (where the Slabodka/Kovno martyrs were slaughtered) is rapidly approaching. We must realize that our sacrifice will be more acceptable when it is accompanied with repentance. We will thereby rescue our brothers and sisters in America. We are now about to perform the greatest possible *mitzvah*! ‘You destroyed it (the *Bais Hamikdash*) with fire, and with fire you shall rebuild it.’ The fire which will now consume our bodies, is the same fire which will give rise to the rebirth of the Jewish People.”

He was a person who was acutely aware that no Jew lives only for himself.

For the second explanation, I cite a short vignette that I used a number of years ago. It has not lost its timely message. *Chazal* teach that the distinguished *Tanna*, Rabbi Tanchuma, would always purchase two portions of food – one for himself and one for the poor. Deriving a critical lesson from Rabbi Tanchuma’s behavior, a young father was determined to impart this message to his children. Thus, every time they would go to the supermarket to shop, they would always pick up an extra item and place it into the shopping cart – an extra container of milk, a can of tuna fish, a bag of potato chips, etc. They would store the items, and every few weeks they would go to the local food *g’mach*, pantry, which distributed food to the poor, to drop off a bag of food items.

One day, while in the supermarket, the father took a box of Cheerios off the shelf and said, “This will be our gift today.”

His six-year old son picked up the box from the cart and placed it back on the shelf. He then proceeded to take a box of Cocoa Puffs from the shelf and place it into the cart. His father looked at him incredulously, and asked, “What is wrong with Cheerios?”

The young boy looked up to his father through his large, innocent eyes, and said, “Because there are hungry kids out there too – and kids like Cocoa Puffs better than Cheerios.”

Machatzis ha’shekel is a lesson in how a Jew should give charity. When he spends on himself, his family, his personal needs, he must take into consideration that there are Jews out there who are in great need. Whatever he is prepared to spend for his personal needs, he should likewise be prepared to spend for his fellow Jew. Furthermore, not only must he give his fellow, he must give him an equal portion of equal quality – a perfect half – which will complement his half. This is why it is an even *machatzis*, half, so that the contributor knows to give an equal portion.