

This shall they give – everyone who passes through the ranks of census – a half-shekel of the sacred shekel, the shekel is twenty geras. (30: 13)

The Torah command those twenty-years old and up to give one half-*shekel* as part of the census. The Torah counts men to be participants in the census *over al ha'pekudim*, everyone who passes through the ranks of the counted. The *pasuk* implies that two groups exist: those who are among the counted; and those who are not. The mass of people about to be counted are, upon giving their half-*shekel*, now among the ranks of the counted. This is an amazing transformation which occurs when the individual drops a half-*shekel* into the *pushke* box. The giver is now among the counted, the dedicated who have given themselves over entirely to Hashem. Once everyone has fulfilled his obligation, the entire nation is one in preparation to bring the communal *korbanos*, offerings.

Horav S.R. Hirsch, zl, asks the obvious question, echoed by all the commentators: Why only half a *shekel*? It was not as if an economic crisis was occurring among the Jews. They had more money than they could imagine. The simple explanation is that no one can ever contribute more than a half. Hashem created the human experience in such a manner that no one can complete the entire job – alone. We must always rely on others for the endeavor to achieve fruition. This, explains *Rav Hirsch* is the meaning of *Chazal's* statement (*Pirkei Avos* 2:16): *Lo alecha ha'melachah ligmor*, "You are not responsible to complete the whole job." Hashem will never give you the ability to do it all alone.

One caveat concerns the half-*shekel* and what it represents. The Torah gives us the value of a shekel at twenty *gera*. When we break the whole *shekel*, valued at twenty *gera*, in half, we have half-*shekel* worth ten *gera*. Ten is the number that symbolizes *sheleimus*, completion/perfection. [The number ten serves as the base of the decimal system, reflecting a sense of national wholeness and symmetry. The decimal system is built on groups of ten, making it a logical and efficient way to organize numbers. The transition from "9" to "10" represents a complete cycle that resets the counting process, reinforcing the idea that ten is a full and whole unit. The number ten plays a critical role in Jewish thought.]

Hashem is intimating to us that, although we/you will never be able to do more than half, that half which you do must be a "ten"! We must give it our all – every bit of energy, acumen – absolutely nothing may go unused when it comes to serving Hashem. Nonetheless, we know that, regardless of how much effort we expend to achieve that perfect "ten," it is only a "half."

"You are not responsible for completing the job": This defines someone who has "passed" through the ranks of the counted. He has left no stone unturned; he has put his heart and soul into his effort, holding nothing back to achieve a "ten." Now he, together with another "counted", make up a whole. Thus, all of *Klal Yisrael* represents a fusion of "halves", which are composed of

individual Jews putting in maximum effort to complete the “whole.”

Varied forms of effort exists with regard to *mitzvah* performance, as well as Torah study. First, is one who acts meticulously, never failing to fulfill every detail of a *mitzvah* with precision, care and devotion. This meticulousness reflects a profound reverence for *mitzvos* and abiding love of Hashem. It also signals the individual’s recognition sanctity of the *mitzvah*.

Second, is one whose mindful devotion to the *mitzvah* is all-consuming. This person integrates the *mitzvah* into his consciousness, reflecting on its meaning and spiritual significance. Thus, even when a not performing the *mitzvah*, he remains connected to its essence and message. This is especially true with regard to Torah study which permeates one’s mind, influencing his thought processes and actions throughout the day. One could take a break for a meal, a *tefillah*, go to work – but the *sugya* (self-contained topic of discussion in the *Gemorah*), the *Rashi*, *Tosfos*, the question that keeps bothering him all day until it is resolved, never leaves him. Indeed, his life revolves around his learning.

At the end of the day, we value both approaches; they complement one another, so that one performs *mitzvos* with precision while maintaining a constant awareness of their spiritual purpose. Together, they allow the individual to achieve an elevated level of *avodas Hashem*.

An elderly Holocaust survivor came over to my nephew who was learning in a *Shtiebl*, and asked if he would learn with him. My nephew was happy to share his time. “Let me get another *Gemorah*,” my nephew said. He picked up *Meseches Kiddushin* which was what he was learning at the time. They began to learn. After a few minutes, the man broke out in copious weeping. My nephew was clueless to what had happened. He thought perhaps he had offended the man. “No, no. It is not because of you I am crying. Let me explain. Many years ago I, together with my friends, was in *shul* listening to our *rebbe* teach us that *sugya* in the *Gemorah*. Suddenly, the door burst open, and the accursed Nazis stormed in and screamed, “*Arous! Arous! Out – everyone leave immediately.*” Frightened and knowing what these fiends were capable of doing, we all quickly bid goodbye to our *seforim* and ran outside – except for me. I was in the middle of a *Rashi* and wanted one more look at it because its meaning eluded me. I was the victim of a few well-placed strikes of the Nazi’s truncheon and pushed to the door. They threw us on a truck together with others, and they sent us to a labor camp. Some of us were released and sent to Siberia, where I spent ten years. It was brutal, back-breaking work, in the frigid cold, but at least we were alive. How I survived physically, I do not know. I do know however, what kept me going spiritually and emotionally: that *Rashi*. I so missed the *Gemorah* and the *Rashi* and the explanation that had eluded me.

During the constant travail, that was all I thought about. Over time, I forgot where that *Rashi* was, even which *Meseches* I was learning at the time. Today, when we began to learn, it all came back to me. It was this *sugya* in *Meseches Kiddushin* that had been with me all those years. It helped me survive, and it gave me the strength, the hope, to look forward to a better day. This is why I

was crying. I finally came home.” This man’s learning as a child permeated his consciousness, so that it carried him through the war and adulthood. He could not separate himself from it. It was a part of him.