

See, I set before you today a blessing and a curse. (11:26)

Noticeably, the *pasuk* begins with the singular *re'eh*, “see,” and continues with *lifneichem*, “before you,” in the plural. The *Chasam Sofer* cites *Chazal* (*Kiddushin* 40b) who teach: “Every person should view himself and the entire world as being half guilty and half meritorious. One *mitzvah* that he performs can tip the scale to the side of merit. If he commits a sin, however, he tips the scale (both personally and globally) to the side of guilt.” Thus, with every act, one must ask himself, “Do I really want to do this? With this act, I might be destroying myself and the world!” For this reason, the *re'eh*, “see,” speaks to the individual: “In your mind, you shall always be cognizant of your awesome responsibility. What you do can affect the future of the world. It is not only about you. Every action has a compelling effect on the world.”

Horav Yaakov Galinsky, zl, quotes the famous words of Yonah *HaNavi* during the mighty tempest at sea which was endangering the ship upon which he traveled. The captain woke him to cast lots that would determine the identity of the catalyst responsible for the threatening storm. The lot came up with Yonah's name. Yonah then revealed his story. (He was running away because he refused to carry out his mission to Ninveh.) When the sailors heard this, they became even more frightened. Yonah told them not to worry, “Pick me up and cast me into the sea, so that the sea will subside from upon you, for I know that it is because of me that this mighty tempest is upon you.” Yonah *HaNavi* was teaching us that one can never be certain that his *mitzvos* and positive acts of *chesed*, kindness, will be sufficiently protective. Thus, he must live by the credo, *Ki b'sheli ha'saar ha'gadol aleichem*, “It is because of me that this mighty tempest is upon you.”

The *Maggid* continues with the imperative to *daven* for others. Not only will we be judged for our own shortcomings, but also for those of others, whom, had we cared about, would not have sinned. Caring need not be actual endeavoring, like teaching, inspiring, spending time, being involved. It can mean something as simple as praying on behalf of others. If someone we know is gravely ill, we would certainly daven. Why wait until one is ill?

Yeshayah *HaNavi* (*Yeshayah* 54:9) refers to the flood which destroyed the world as *mei Noach*, the waters of Noach, as if to imply that Noach the *tzaddik*, righteous person, is held responsible (in some way) for the devastation caused by the flood. Why? He tried for 120 years to warn the people. No one listened; no one cared. The *Zohar* explains that Noach failed to plead with Hashem to spare his generation, and, as a result, they were wiped off the earth. Why did Noach not pray for them? After all, he did everything else – but pray. *Horav Levi Yitzchak Berditchever, zl*, explains that this is what *Rashi* (commentary to *Bereishis* 7:9) means when he writes that *Noach mi'ketanei emunah*; “Noach was among those of little faith.” It means that Noach had little faith in himself. He did not consider himself worthy of praying for his generation. He did not view his prayers as having the appropriate and necessary efficacy. As a result, he did not pray for them and they died.

While our *tefillos* are not on the level of those of *tzaddikim*, this should not deter us from praying, from caring, from feeling the pain which others experience. We must always feel like Yonah

HaNavi, “It is because of me that this mighty tempest is upon you.” My Torah study and *mitzvah* performance do not only benefit me and those close to me. They benefit all *Klal Yisrael*. As such, when we do not “step up to the plate” and take communal responsibility for others, Hashem holds us liable. A Jew does not live only for himself – he lives for others as well.

In one of the earlier editions of *Peninim*, I explained the concept of *machatzis hashekel*, the half-*shekel*. Each Jew was enjoined to contribute to facilitate the construction and maintenance of the *Mishkan*. This half-*shekel* was then counted and used as the means for calculating the census of the Jewish people. This was not an arbitrary demand, but mandatory for each and every Jew, who each had to donate an equal amount – a half-*shekel*. The commentators explain the underlying lesson of the half-*shekel* as teaching us that the effort of any one individual is but a fragment of the whole. An equally selfless sacrifice from his fellow is required to produce the whole.

I think that *machatzis hashekel* is a lesson in how a Jew should give charity. I will preface this with the following vignette.

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 *gemach*, 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 hashekel 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.

In *Parashas Vayakhel* (*Shemos* 35:21), the Torah refers to the contributors to the *Mishkan* with two

distinct appellations: *nesa' o libo*, his heart inspired him; *nadvo rucho*, his spirit motivated him. The *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* distinguishes between the *nadov rucho*, whose spirit inspired him to give what he could afford, voluntarily and wholeheartedly. The *nesa' o libo* was motivated by his heartfelt emotion to give even more than he could afford – so great was his desire to be a part of the *Mishkan*.

Perhaps we might explain the variance between the two types of donors as being distinguished from one another in accordance to the type of gift he shares with the needy. Unquestionably, the Jewish people are a charitable and generous people, but are we prepared to spend on others commensurate to what we spend on ourselves? This, I feel, might be the line of demarcation between one whose spirit motivates him and one whose heart impels his benevolence.