

# ***Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality***

## **From Rav Binny Freedman**

(Portion of Mishpatim)

*Along with all the challenging events of this past summer including the terrible kidnapping and murder of our three boys Gilad Eyal and Naftali, I heard an incredible story:*

*A teacher who worked in a resource room in a class for children with learning disabilities had a young student who joined the class and started taking lessons. He clearly had no difficulty with his lessons and consistently did well on tests, and yet continued to attend the classes as a remedial student. Try as she might, the teacher could not determine what learning disabilities this boy might have.*

*Assuming the boy was simply trying to find an easier path of study, she took him aside and explained to him that he could not continue to attend the remedial class as it was a waste of his time and unfair to the other students who were in much greater need of her attention.*

*Lowering his voice, the boy said he would tell her why he was in her class begging her not to tell anyone.*

*“I have a friend with a learning disability, and our teacher told him he had to attend this remedial class, but he was really embarrassed to be singled out as having to attend this class. So I told him it was not a big deal as I also take remedial classes. And that’s why I come to you, so my friend will not be embarrassed.”*

*The boy who came to that class so as not to let his friend be embarrassed was Gilad Shaar, one of those three kidnapped boys. He was ten years old at the time.*

*How do we find the strength to rise to that level; to care so much about our fellow human being that we can put their pain ahead of our own pleasure?*

This Shabbat, alongside the portion of *Mishpatim*, we also read a special additional portion: *parshat Shekalim*. This is the first of four special additional paragraphs, read on four special *Shabbatot* leading up to the festivals of Purim and Pesach, necessitating a second Torah scroll in Synagogue.

In the portion of *Shekalim*, (*Shemot* (Exodus) 30:11-16) Hashem commands us as part of what would ultimately become the yearly census, to give, each of us, a half a shekel to be used for the upkeep of the *Beit HaMikdash*; the holy Temple in Jerusalem. This mitzvah is described in the Torah (*Shemot* 30:12) as the opportunity to redeem one’s self; an atonement of one’s soul (“*kofer nafsho*”).

Today, when our Temple no longer stands, this mitzvah is commemorated with a gift of charity on Purim, whose festival falls in the month of Adar, when this contribution to the Temple was once made. And this is the reason we read this portion this week, in the weeks preceding the time when communities would once have been exhorting their members to donate the half shekel on time.

Interestingly, when a firstborn son is born, there is a *mitzvah* to redeem the newborn baby, on the thirtieth day after its birth with five *shekalim* given to a *Kohein* (Jewish priest), and somehow, many of the commentaries connect these two *mitzvot*.

What is this idea of redeeming ourselves with coin? And why the half shekel?

There is a fascinating idea that comes from the Jerusalem Talmud (tractate *Shekalim* 2:3)

Four thousand years ago, when the brothers conspired to sell Joseph into Egyptian servitude the Torah tells us (*Bereishit* (Genesis) 37:28 ) that they sold Joseph for “twenty Shekel” (Twenty pieces of silver) . And the Talmud explains that these were actually twenty *dinarim*, equal to five *Shekalim* in Talmudic times; exactly the amount with which we redeem our first born; and Joseph was the firstborn of Rachel.

Further, as there were ten brothers, the portion of each brother in the sale of Joseph was two *dinarim* which is the equivalent of half a shekel.

And so, for all eternity, Jews will contribute a half a shekel to the Temple in part to remember that terrible moment when we sold our brother into slavery for half a shekel. Perhaps it being a *half* a shekel recalls the true character flaw that resulted in the sale of Joseph. When Joseph finally finds his brothers in the field, and they first see him approaching, the Torah tells us they see him ‘from a distance’. (*Bereishit* 37:18). And the Ramban explains that it was precisely the fact that they saw him from a distance that allowed them to conspire to kill him. It’s so much easier to dismiss people, even to hate them, when we keep them at a distance.

In fact, this is what having a Temple all is about. The *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple) was a place where all Jews would come, three times a year, to be together, in the presence of G-d. It was, among many things, a celebration of Jewish unity, and ultimately a place where we could not only dream of peace, but practice it as well. It is so easy to preach about Jewish unity sitting at home; it takes a lot more work when we are all standing together.

Indeed, this is also the message of Purim, which is now just around the corner. When Esther realizes the great danger in which the Jewish people find themselves from the Persian (read Iranian?) Haman, her first response is to “gather all the Jews...” (Esther 4:16). Perhaps because our greatest challenge is not how we fend off our enemies, but rather how we put aside our differences and remember we are one people. In fact, when Haman first presents his plot to destroy the Jews he describes them as “*One people who are scattered...*” (Esther 3:8); because when we allow ourselves to become separate, we lose an essential piece of who we are.

The portion of *Shekalim* reminds us how easy it is to become distant; to forget that we are all brothers and sisters, created in G-d’s image. And it exhorts us to become better, to work harder, to learn to live together in harmony. *Be’ezrat Hashem*, perhaps this week each of us can find a way, in one moment, in one action, to make it a little closer to being so.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny