



Around the Shabbat Table

Shabbat Shekalim (Mishpatim) 5762 February 2002

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Shalom!

Introduction

This Shabbat, the Torah portion of Mishpatim is read. It is a fascinating *parasha*, establishing the foundation for a just society through laws that regulate property and damages, and more. In addition, on this, the Shabbat before the beginning of the Hebrew month of Adar, it is customary to read from a second Torah. Today we will focus not on the regular *parasha*, but on this special portion.

This second reading, from Exodus 30:11-16, describes the method through which a census of the Jewish people was to be taken. All men (the census was largely taken as a measure of military preparedness, so women and children were not included) were to donate a half-*shekel* (referring to either a coin or a measure of silver) to a fund that would support the upkeep of the Tabernacle (*mishkan*) -- which served as the temporary Temple -- and later in history, for upkeep of the Temple in Jerusalem. By counting the amount raised, they would know the size of the population.

It is from the name of the coin collected (*shekel*) that this Shabbat gets its name, Shabbat Shekalim. Our tradition is that the announcement of the collection of the *shekel* took place annually at the beginning of the month of Adar.

Questions for Your Family's Discussion

When your family sits down together this Shabbat, here are some questions for you to wrestle with:

1. The Torah was generally opposed to taking a census or otherwise directly counting people. To this day, when trying to count people to determine whether a *minyan* is present for services, many people have a custom to count in only an indirect way. Why is the Torah so opposed to counting people? What are the

dangers of assigning numbers to people? [Consider how people were numbered during the *Shoah*].

2. The Torah goes out of its way to indicate that, for this purpose, the contributions must be the same, regardless of whether a person is rich or poor: one-half *shekel*. Why the emphasis on equality when it comes to this donation?
3. The half-*shekel* was almost like a tax that all people had to give in order to support community institutions. How do we support our Jewish institutions? How do we support institutions that serve general society?

A Text to Wrestle With

The following excerpts are taken from the biblical book of 2 Samuel 24, and speak of the census that King David took, and its dire consequences.

The king said to Jo'ab and the commanders of the army, who were with him, "Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beer-sheba, and number the people, that I may know the number of the people." ...So Jo'ab and the commanders of the army went out from the presence of the king to number the people of Israel...when they had gone through all the land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days.

And Jo'ab gave the sum of the numbering of the people to the king: in Israel there were eight hundred thousand valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand. But David's heart smote him after he had numbered the people. And David said to the Lord, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O Lord, I pray thee, take away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly."...So the Lord sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning until the appointed time; and there died of the people from Dan to Beer-sheba seventy thousand men.

Why did King David and the Israelites receive such a severe punishment for conducting a census? In what ways was this census different from the one commanded by the Torah in the reading for Shabbat Shekalim?

Towards an Action Agenda

Reading about the collection of the half-shekel is a reminder that, when it comes to community needs, all are counted upon to help.

In our community, UJA-Federation of New York is the organization which gives funds to those in need, and to those agencies that serve a wide range of needs: social services, health, education, recreation and more!

This Sunday, hundreds of volunteers will gather at sites in Syosset and the Five Towns, as well as in Manhattan and Westchester County, to telephone our community's members to give their "shekalim" to help our community meet its needs. You, as a family, can participate. To learn more about volunteering for the day, and about family programs being offered at the phone sites, see

<http://www.ujafedny.org/specials/supersunday/02/default.htm>
or call 516-677-1856.

Shabbat Shalom!

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site. Simply respond with your thoughts and ideas to RavADS@bjeny.org

If there is any way we can be of service, please contact us at the BJE Nassau Queens Center, 516-876-6535, or see our web site: www.bjeny.org

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