

L'Chain! Weekly



Living with the Rebbe



פרשת ויקהל, כ"ט אדר א' תשפ"ד

PARSHAS VAYAKHEL

8-9 March 2024 - 29 Adar I 5784

TIMES FOR SYDNEY

Candle Lighting: 7.04 pm

Shabbat Ends: 7.58 pm



This Shabbat we read a special portion known as Shekalim.

In connection with the commandment of giving a half-shekel during the time of the Holy Temple for the public sacrifices, we find that the Torah explicitly commands that “the rich shall not give more...than a half-shekel.”

On the surface, this is difficult to understand: All the offerings in the Holy Temple were required to be perfect and complete. Why then, in this instance, was it forbidden to give no more than a half-shekel? Also, since the donation required was only a half shekel, why does the Torah tell us that an entire shekel is equivalent to twenty geira? Why doesn't it just tell us that a half-shekel is equal to ten geira?

In resolution: This command teaches us that a Jew cannot become a complete entity, a “holy shekel,” unless he joins together with another Jew. Every Jew by himself is ten geira, a half-shekel. When, however, he joins together with another Jew, they comprise twenty geira, a complete entity.

That the portion of Vayakhel and Shekalim are read on the same Shabbat emphasizes the need for establishing unity within oneself, making it possible to then establish bonds of unity with other Jews.

A Jew's service begins with gathering together and synthesizing the various aspects of his own being, after which he joins together with the entire Jewish people. Only then can he gather together every element of the world and show how its entire existence is intended solely to carry out G-d's will.

This will lead to the ultimate process of ingathering, the ingathering of the dispersed Jewish people, when G-d will “sound the great shofar...and bring us together from the four corners of the earth to our land.”

SLICE OF LIFE

Purim in Moscow, 1946

BY MIRIAM PALTIEL NEVEL

The first Purim I remember began in sadness and ended in joy. It was 1946, and World War II had finally come to an end. My family was back from Siberia, where we had spent most of the war years (our mother had passed away). Now, in our onerom Moscow home, my two brothers and I were sitting on the floor playing chess. That is, my oldest brother was trying to coax me, or perhaps I should say coerce me, into playing chess with him, when the door opened and in walked a tall, uniformed soldier. It was our uncle Itche Mordche, returning from war.

His wife, who was my mother's sister Rivka, and their baby had been murdered by the Nazis in their hometown. And now Itche Mordche had returned from war and wanted to find out what he could about his family, whom he had left behind when he went away to fight three years ago.

Our uncle asked us when our father would be home. My older brother told the visitor that Papa would come home after work. Then the soldier began to examine some spoons and a plate that were on the table in the middle of the room. The plate was caked with the days-old remnants of something that used to be food.

He proceeded to search anywhere else where there might have been food. There was none. The soldier left.

We didn't expect the visitor to return, but sometime that afternoon the door opened, and there was Itche Mordche again. And this time, nestled in his hands was the biggest loaf of black pumpernickel that my brothers and I could remember seeing.

"Happy Purim!" the soldier boomed, dropping the black loaf on the table. He took off his green military jacket, and ceremoniously pushed up his sleeves. Then he picked up the bread knife that was on the table, and proclaiming, "Shalach monos, a freilichen Purim!" our guest began to work on the pumpernickel, splitting it into chunks, while three hungry pairs of eyes stared at the knife in their uncle's hand as it moved up and down and side to side on the black loaf.

(The next day, after Itche Mordche had left, my brothers and I speculated about how our uncle had procured the bread. My oldest sibling, who in my eyes was an expert on practically everything, came up with this scenario: When Itche Mordche left us earlier that day, he went to the bread store, which was mobbed with people eager to buy bread. Using his strong fighting elbows, the soldier delivered a left jab, then a straight right, then a front punch, and all the while he kept muttering loudly over and over again, "Daetee, daetee, golodniyae daetee." ["Children, children, hungry children."] And so the line at the bread store had split in front of our uncle, and he crossed all the way to the head of the bread line.)

After handing each one of us our meal, our uncle went to the kitchen to wash his hands. He whispered a blessing over the bread. Undoubtedly, he was thankful to G-d for allowing him to acquire this bread, which was drawn out of G-d's good earth in time of hunger. Then he sat down at the table. And all four of us ate our first Purim meal, leaving a sizeable portion of bread for later, when we would have a second meal with our father.

After we finished eating, while waiting for Papa to come home, our uncle and my older brother played chess together happily. And I was glad not to be forced to move the chess pieces at my brother's commands.

When the chess game was finished, Aunt Rivka's husband sat silently, waiting to talk to Father, who could give him information about his wife and his baby.

Father came home. After they greeted each other, and ate a Purim meal consisting of more black pumpernickel, Father and Uncle sat on chairs facing each other, talking. Deep sighs punctuated their almost whispered words about mass graves and the date of Aunt Rivka and her baby's yahrtzeit. Tears, bright like tiny crystals, glistened in the tall soldier's eyes.

The next day Uncle Itche Mordche left Moscow. That year he succeeded in joining many chassidic Russian Jews

who escaped the Soviet Union. Once out of the Soviet Union, our uncle made his way to England, where he remarried and began a new family and a new life. I never saw him again.

My father, brothers and I left Russia as well. After several years of wandering through Europe, we came to America.

Decades later, in my American home one Purim. The reading of the Megillah; the sound of graggers; the clamor of children, toddlers and adults; the delicious homemade sesame candy, hamantaschen and hot chocolate all mixed together to create the happy atmosphere that celebrates the Jewish people's victory over evil.

I was sitting quietly amid the roar, and let my thoughts wander. In my mind's eye, here was Uncle Itche Mordche rolling up his sleeves one at a time and booming, "Happy Purim! May all the Hamans have a downfall, and we should have warmth, happiness and great celebrations all together!" In my mind's eye, a circle of children would mill around Itche Mordche, and he would dance with the children and make l'chaims in fine Purim spirit.

Miriam Paltiel Nevel (1935-2022) was a blend. She navigated between now and then.

Her books, Zaide, and Why I Didn't Die When Comrade Stalin Died, are available on Amazon.



The author as a child in Russia.

It Happened Once



Rabbi Chanina bar Chama was one of the first generation of great Talmudic Sages who followed the redaction of the Mishna by Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi [Rabbi Judah the Prince]. By the time he came from his native Babylonia, to study under Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi, Rabbi Chanina was already a very accomplished scholar and was received with great warmth and friendship. He developed strong ties with his teacher and many of his fellow disciples, particularly with Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi.

During those turbulent and dangerous times, it was often necessary to send Jewish dignitaries to plead with the Roman government on behalf of the Jewish people. Rabbi Yehoshua and Rabbi Chanina were often chosen to appear before the Roman emperor. When one of the emperor's advisors asked him why he would rise in honor of these Jews, he replied, "They have the appearance of angels."

Rabbi Yehuda passed away and was succeeded by his son, Rabban Gamliel, who, according to his father's instructions, seated Rabbi Chanina in the place of greatest honor at the academy. However, Rabbi Chanina's tremendous modesty prevented him from taking that place. Only when the elderly sage, Rabbi Efes passed away did Rabbi Chanina occupy it.

According to the teaching of our Sages that we should not make the Torah "an ax with which to dig," Rabbi Chanina went into business dealing in honey. When he succeeded, he opened and supported a Torah academy in his town of Tzipori. He never ceased trying to bring the people closer to G-d and would often reprimand them; this, of course, caused some resentment.

Once, there was a severe drought in the northern part of Israel where Tzipori was situated. At the same time, in the southern part, where Rabbi Yehoshua lived, ample rain fell as soon as Rabbi Yehoshua prayed. The people of Tzipori complained, saying that the drought continued only because Rabbi Chanina didn't pray for them enough.

In response, Rabbi Chanina sent for Rabbi Yehoshua. When he arrived, a public fast was declared and prayers were said for rain. When no rain fell, the people finally understood that the fault was not Rabbi Chanina's, but their own, and they resolved to correct their behavior.

Rabbi Chanina was known as a gifted healer who was well-versed in the use of various kinds of herbs and also the antidotes to snake poisons. He frequently advised people to be careful not to catch colds and to take care of themselves and not neglect treating any disorder.

His Torah teachings and the example of his mitzva observance had a profound influence on his generation. He observed the Sabbath in a manner which showed his love and devotion to the mitzva and when the Shabbat departed he marked it with a Melave Malka -- a feast for the departing out the Sabbath Queen.

Although he lived through very difficult and trying times, he accepted all his suffering -- losing a son and a daughter -- with love of G-d and an abiding faith. He lived a long life and even when he was very old he was unusually fit. It is said that at the age of eighty, he was able to put on his shoes while standing on one foot. When asked to what he ascribed his good health, he replied that he was always careful to show respect to Torah scholars as well as for the elderly, even if they were not learned.

Before Rabbi Chanina passed away, Rabbi Yochanan, his disciple, (who compiled the Jerusalem Talmud) went to visit him. On the way, word reached him that his master had died and he tore his clothes in mourning. Rabbi Chanina was so loved and respected among the Jews of his time that he was given the honorary title, "Rabbi Chanina the Great."

Adapted from Talks and Tales

Smile, it's Shabbos!



Two kids are in a hospital each lying on a stretcher next to each other outside the operating room. The first kid leans over and asks, "What are you in here for?"

The second kid says, "I'm getting my tonsils out. I'm a little nervous."

The first kid says, "You've got nothing to worry about. I had that done when I was four. They put you to sleep and when you wake up, they give you lots of jello and ice cream. It's a breeze."

The second kid then asked, "What are you in here for?"

The first kid says, "A circumcision."

The second kid replies, "Whoa, good luck buddy. I had that done when I was born and I couldn't walk for a year."



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Do Jews Believe in Hell?

By Rabbi Aron Moss

Question of the Week

Do Jews believe in Hell? I am not planning any trips there or anything, but I have heard conflicting reports about its existence.

Answer

We do believe in a type of Hell, but not the one found in cartoons and joke books. Hell is not a punishment in the conventional sense; it is, in fact, the expression of a great kindness.

The Jewish mystics described a spiritual place called "Gehinnom." This is usually translated as "Hell," but a better translation would be "the Supernal Washing Machine." Because that's exactly how it works. The way our soul is cleansed in Gehinnom is similar to the way our clothes are cleansed in a washing machine.

Put yourself in your socks' shoes, so to speak. If you were to be thrown into boiling hot water and flung around for half an hour, you might start to feel that someone doesn't like you. However, the fact is that it is only after going through a wash cycle that the socks can be worn again.

We don't put our socks in the washing machine to punish them. We put them through what seems like a rough and painful procedure only to make them clean and wearable again. The intense heat of the water loosens the dirt, and the force of being swirled around shakes it off completely. Far from hurting your socks, you are doing them a favor by putting them through this process.

So too with the soul. Every act we do in our lifetime leaves an imprint on our soul. The good we do brightens and elevates our soul, and every wrongdoing leaves a stain that needs to be cleansed. If, at the end of our life, we leave this world without fixing the wrongs we have done, our soul is unable to reach its place of rest on high. We must go through a cycle of deep cleansing. Our soul is flung around at an intense spiritual heat to rid it of any residue it may have gathered, and to prepare it for entry into Heaven.

Of course, this whole process can be avoided. If we truly regret the wrong we have done and make amends with the people we have hurt, we can leave this world with "clean socks."

That's why our Sages said, "Repent one day before you die." And what should you do if you don't know which day that will be? Repent today.

Good Shabbos,
Rabbi Moss