

There is Always Hope

By Rabbi Pinchos Lipschutz

This past *Shabbos*, when we were *mekadeish* the incoming month of *Adar*, everyone felt a tinge of happiness. We knew that the snow will soon melt and even those of us who haven't been to Florida will be able to enjoy warm weather. Soon, *Purim* will be here and we will celebrate the victory over Haman and Amaleik back in the days of Shushan. *Adar* is in the air and we all took a breath of relief.

We consider all that has transpired since last *Purim* and offer a prayer of thanks that we are here. There has been so much sadness and tragedy during the past year. Everyone is looking forward to the *simcha* of *Purim* and its story of redemption, hoping that we will soon merit our own stories of restoration and recovery.

This *Shabbos*, *Rosh Chodesh Adar*, we read the first of the four special *parshiyos*, *Parshas Shekolim*. "*B'echod b'Adar*," on the first day of *Adar*, *Chazal* instituted that "*mashmi'in al hashekolim*," we announce the obligation to donate a half-shekel to the *Mishkon*.

Essentially, the call for *machatzis hashekel* is one for *achdus*. Everyone participates and contributes the same amount. It is for this reason that *Chazal* say that the *mitzvah* of *shekolim* was as a preemptive strike to offset the *shekolim* that the evil Haman offered Achashveirosh for the right to destroy the Jewish people.

The *mitzvah* has several angles. Rav Dovid Cohen, *rosh yeshiva* of Yeshivas Chevron, discusses in the second volume of his monumental *Mizmor L'Dovid* different aspects of the counting of the *Bnei Yisroel*, which we read this *Shabbos* from *Parshas Ki Sisa* (30:12). Hashem commanded Moshe to take a half-shekel from each person and to count the coins, instead of the people, so that the counting would not cause a plague.

Rabbeinu Bechayeh (*ibid.*) explains that when people are counted one by one, they are in jeopardy, because then each person has to stand on his/her own merits. However, when a person is counted as part of a group, each person is judged collectively as a member of *Am Yisroel* and the *zechuyos* of

the entire community allow each person to be judged favorably, as the communal merits accrue to all the members of *Klal Yisroel*.

Rav Yitzchok Eizik Chover explains further that the reason there is no plague when Jews are counted in this manner is because there is *achdus* among them, and the *Shechinah* is thus able to rest among the Jewish people. When the *Shechinah* is among them, there can be no *negef*, no plague.

The Jewish people are compared to a body comprised of many parts, each one vital. There are bones and sinews, tendons and organs, and the body functions only when they are all working in perfect tandem. As long as they are, the *neshomah* is present in the body. When different parts of the body break down and cease to perform their functions, the *neshomah* leaves the body and it dies.

Similarly, when there is *achdus* among the *Bnei Yisroel* and we are unified, the *Shechinah* hovers over us and does not allow a *negef*. When there is *peirud* and the Jews separate from each other, the *Shechinah* departs, and there can be a *negef*. Counting the Jewish people through their equal donations of half-shekel coins serves to unite them and averts all sorts of unpleasantness.

The Alter of Kelm would famously position himself at the center of the *bais medrash* on *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. He would say that the strongest source of merit on those days of judgement is the communal strength of a *klal*. Thus, he ensured that he was part of the *klal* and would not stand out in any way that would cause him to be viewed independently.

The Alter would quote the Isha Hashunamis who helped Elisha the prophet in his time of need. In appreciation, Elisha asked her if there was any area in which she required a special favor that he could perform for her. She responded, “*Besoch ami anochi yosheves – Amongst my people I dwell*,” (*Melochim* II, 4:13). She responded that she was merely one amongst many, for there is no station loftier or more glorious than being a Jew amongst Jews.

Once, when Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk was ill, he was asked for his mother’s name so that Jewish communities could pray for his recovery. The great *gaon* replied with the words of the Isha Hashunamis. He said that rather than specific prayers, he would appreciate *tefillos* on behalf of all the *cholei Yisroel*, which would include him and help him as well. He explained that if

the *tefillos* were offered just for him, the Heavenly Court would examine his life as it considered whether he should live. “And who knows if I will be found worthy?” wondered Rav Meir Simcha. “As a Jew amongst Jews, however, everyone is worthy.”

The *Alshich*, quoting Rav Shlomo Alkabetz in *Menos Halevi*, says that each person gave a half-shekel for the census so that no one would feel separated from the others. Rather, everyone realized that without the others, he is not whole. Every Jew understands that his soul is intertwined with everyone else’s. Thus, everyone gives a half and, together, the entire group forms a whole being, which nourishes each one of its members.

This is why, say the *Chofetz Chaim* and Rav Yitzchok Eizik Chover, the silver half-shekel coins each person contributed for the counting were melted down to form the *adonim* upon which the *Mishkon* stood. The foundation blocks were not fashioned of the silver which certain people contributed to the Mishkon Building Campaign in response to Moshe Rabbeinu’s appeal. Rather, they were made of the coins that everyone gave equally to symbolize the importance of *achdus* in establishing the dwelling place of the *Shechinah* among us.

This use of the *machatzis hashekel* underscores its special properties. The purpose of the *Mishkon* was to show the *Bnei Yisroel* that even after the *Eigel*, Hashem still loved them because they are collectively His people. After all is said and done, after all the actions and words each Jew performs, we are all equal members of the *Bnei Yisroel*. The foundation of the *Mishkon* came from donations that reflected this truth. The contributions caused a realization of our *achdus*, which is at the foundation of the *Mishkon*, and thus the *Shechinah* was enabled to rest among us, hovering over the *Mishkon*.

For most people, *Purim* marks one year since we were attacked by the coronavirus. Let us use this period of *shekolim* and the miracles of *Purim*, which were fostered by *achdus*, to do what we can to strengthen unity in our world so that we may merit the return of the *Shechinah* and its protection from ongoing *negef*.

This week, we usher in *Adar*, the month that embodies *simcha* and *achdus*. While we are all familiar with the generally accepted *Purim*-related reasons for the increase of joy during this month, the *Sefas Emes* offers an interesting illumination. He says that since the Jewish people annually

donated their half-*shekolim* to the *Mishkon* during *Adar*, it became a month of joy because their acts of donating caused them to be *besimcha*.

We recreate that *simcha* by reading the *parsha* of *shekolim* as *Adar* commences. We strengthen our commitments to each other and experience the satisfaction felt by a *baal tzedakah*.

The *parshiyos* of *nedivus lev* lead into a season of joy.

During this month of *marbin besimcha*, let us concentrate on finding things to be happy about. Let us remember that we are *ma'aminim bnei ma'aminim*. We are people of deep faith. We know that just as sure as melting follows snow and sun follows rain, there is always a reason to hope and our faith will definitely be rewarded.

The Kamenitzer *rosh yeshiva*, Rav Yitzchok Scheiner, whose memory is fresh in our minds, spoke about his memories of the *Chazon Ish*. He related that besides his amazing brilliance, *tzidkus* and everything else that the *Chazon Ish* is famous for, "upon meeting him, you were overwhelmed by the impression of a *freilicher Yid*, with a face that radiated happiness."

The *Chazon Ish* was encumbered by many personal hardships, which were compounded by him listening to challenges and *tzaros* of the people who flocked to him seeking advice, consolation and support. How was the sickly, weak, poor man able to always radiate happiness? The *Chazon Ish* offers a hint in his published letters, where he writes, "*Ein kol eitzev ba'olam lemi shemakir ohr ha'oros shel ha'emes*. Those who perceive the light of truth have no sadness."

Those who know that everything that takes place is Divinely ordained for a higher purpose, those who know that there is no happenstance, those who know that a proper life is one lived with *emunah* and *bitachon*, and those who know that there is never a reason for *yei'ush* and that there is always room and reason for *tikvah* are never sad.

The *Chazon Ish* was one of those people. We can all be among those people and always find reason for joy, especially during *Adar*. Even when things aren't going well, there are always things to be thankful for. We need to consider them instead of floundering in self-pity and sadness, which don't do us any good.

Sadness is one of those things which feeds on itself. It is very difficult to climb out of a rut. Being positive gives us the power and the courage to benefit from every moment. As dark as everything seems, there is always some light to reflect on, positive things to remember and be thankful for.

Following the reading of *Megillas Esther* on *Purim*, we recite the *piyut* of *Asher Heini*, which describes the wickedness of Haman and delineates the reasons we celebrate his downfall. The first line of the *piyut* begins with an *alef*, and each subsequent line starts with the next letter of the *Alef-Bais*, concluding with the letter *tof*.

The verse that begins with the letter *vov* states, “*Velo zochar rachamei Shaul...*” Haman lacked the *middah* of *hakoras hatov* and conveniently forgot that the Jewish king Shaul had mercy on his grandfather over 400 hundred years prior.

Rav Dovid Soloveitchik, who was *niftar* last week, explained that we learn from this the importance of possessing proper *middos* and appreciating benefits we have accrued from others. Although Haman was wicked and desired to kill all the Jews in one day, his lack of appreciation of a favor that was done to his ancestor is recorded to his everlasting demerit.

Let us remember to appreciate those who have improved our world and made it a better place. Let us do what we can to emulate them and follow their example. Besides bringing joy to others, it will contribute to our own sense of *simcha*.

Let us seek to foster unity and camaraderie. Let us try to be uniters, not dividers; problem-solvers, not creators; joyful, not sad; and positive, not negative; and seek to enlarge our tent, instead of shrinking it. Let's not be judgmental. Maybe just for this month let's try to give other people the benefit of the doubt.

Let us do it with dignity and grace; and find favor in the eyes of Hashem and our fellow man. Let us do it so that we merit the *geulah sheleimah bekarov*.