

Ki Sisa

Zeh Yit’nu: Kol HaOver Al HaP’kudim

An adaptation of the Maamar found in Torah Ohr

During their sojourn in the desert, several census counts were made of the Jews. In this week’s Torah portion, *Ki Sisa*, we read of G-d’s instruction to Moshe (Moses) that, in taking such a census, the Jews should not be counted directly. Instead, each person contributed a half-shekel coin as they filed, one by one, past the census takers. These coins would then be tallied to yield the census.

The relevant verse (Exodus 30:13) reads, “This is what they shall give: all who pass by of the counted [shall give] half a shekel of the holy shekel; the shekel is twenty *geira* [a unit of currency]; half a shekel is the offering to G-d.”

The Torah stipulates that (as we would expect for such a census to work) each person was to contribute exactly the same amount. A half-shekel was thus the uniform contribution of every Jew, rich or poor.

In addition to its plain meaning, the above can be understood allegorically as a reference to the “lowest common

denominator” expected of every Jewish person in his or her service of G-d.

It is written (Proverbs 13:23), “Her husband is known at the gates.” Because the Hebrew word for “gates” is similar to that for “allotment, assessment” this verse is often the object of a play on words by which it can be understood as meaning, “Her Husband – G-d – is known to any given person according to the amount of effort they expend and the capacity of their soul to know Him.” Jewish mysticism associates the concept of a “husband” with transmission of influence, and that of a “wife,” with receiving that influence. The point, for our present purposes, is that since G-d is compared to the “Husband” of the Jewish People – the source of everything we receive – we should recognize that anything we have comes from Him. This is not limited to material possessions, but includes whatever we possess in the spiritual sense as well: any true love for G-d or fear of G-d which one may possess is actually granted us from Above, as a gift from Heaven. It is a gift bestowed upon each person in proportion to the degree of effort he or she expends in seeking out and preparing for these gifts, through love and fear of G-d, as well as Torah study and mitzvah observance. (These four factors correspond to the four letters of the Tetragrammaton, G-d’s unpronounceable name.)

Yet this requires explanation, for it seems incompatible with the notion of free will: there must surely be some sense in which love and fear of G-d may be viewed as a person’s own “accomplishments,” which they have achieved after making the choice to devote themselves to G-d and to develop these feelings for Him. How can it be said that any love and fear of G-d one possesses are Heavenly gifts?

The answer lies in the opening verses of the *Shema* prayer (Deuteronomy 6:4-5), “Hear, O Israel, G-d is our G-d, G-d is One. And you shall love G-d your G-d....” The Hebrew word

meaning, “and you shall love” is susceptible (as in English) of two meanings: that you should love – that is, as a command – or that you will love – that is, as a prediction.

The command to love G-d implies that we do in fact have the ability to develop love for ourselves; this is what we are being commanded to do. The prediction that we will love G-d, on the other hand, refers to a type of love that comes of itself, a love bestowed upon us from Above. The Torah is saying that we may eventually have this kind of love, but it will not be a result of our direct effort; that is why the command form does not apply. (Although it is bestowed by G-d in recognition of our effort, this type of love cannot be reached solely by human effort. Rather, G-d sees how hard we are trying and helps us out from Above.)

The first kind of love, which we develop ourselves, is the product of contemplation and reflection. We must understand and realize that G-d is One with a perfect, all-encompassing unity: just as before the universe was created there was nothing else but G-d, so also now is there literally nothing else but G-d – there has been no change whatsoever from before creation.

This is a profound thought indeed, and is frequently expounded upon in Chassidic literature. While a full understanding of the concept is beyond mortal grasp, we can at least come to appreciate something approximating it, in accordance with the principle that (since G-d created humanity in His image) by reflecting upon our own makeup, we can understand something of G-d’s (so to speak).

A person’s thoughts are, quite literally, one with that person; they have no existence outside him or her. It is only when one actually speaks that a thought seems to take on more of a separate existence, as it is now expressed to the outside world in words. However, in truth, words are themselves

meaningless unless they do express some idea, some thought – otherwise they are not words at all, but sounds. Even as expressed in words, it is the underlying thought that counts; the thought is what makes a word, a word. Words may thus be viewed as nothing at all in relation to the thought they express.

Before creation, all the worlds – physical and spiritual – were entirely one with G-d, as a person's thoughts are one with that person. There was literally nothing else. (Even this is only true with respect to the “stage” of creation in which the worlds were already in G-d's “mind,” as it were, after He had decided to create them. But if one is considering the stage “prior” to that, that is, before G-d even “thought” of the worlds – all anthropomorphically speaking, of course -- they did not even have that limited degree of existence.) Creating the universe was similar to a person expressing his thought in words, as it is in fact written (Psalms 33:6), “By the word of G-d were the Heavens created, and by the breath of His mouth, etc.” Therefore, even now, as “words,” the universe and all its worlds have no true existence in relation to the “thought” of G-d that underlies and indeed, continually renews their existence. There is truly nothing whatsoever but G-d.

What is more, all the above is from our limited, human perspective. To us, it appears as though the universe exists (an appearance which is totally false), but that is because we cannot perceive things from G-d's perspective. The best we can do in appreciating the unity of G-d, therefore, is to comprehend the manner in which words are nothing in relation to the thought that animates them, for we can relate to the idea explained above, i.e., that words, which are outside of a person, are actually nothing in relation to that person. But in reality – that is, as things are from G-d's own perspective – even His “words” are not separate from Him: absolutely nothing is separate from Him. (For a fuller elaboration of this concept, see *Tanya*, chapter 21.) As things are before G-d, the reason the universe is as

naught before Him is not due to any subtle comparison between words and thoughts or to any other intellectual exercise. Rather, the universe is as naught before G-d because it just is – really and truly, in the simplest sense, and that’s that!

Furthermore, as explained elsewhere, the universe is not uniform in the degree of spirituality revealed therein. There is an entire hierarchy of spiritual progression by which this physical world ultimately came into being: at the top of the hierarchy is the most sublime spiritual realm, in which a great deal of G-dliness is manifest; below that, in progressively lower stages, exist spiritual realms wherein the underlying spirituality is more and more concealed; until, finally, here in our world, G-d is totally concealed from our perception. At each step of the way in this progression, the lower world is the expression of the one immediately higher than itself, in the same way that words express, and are nothing in relation to, thought. So, in fact, all the above is multiplied endlessly if we consider our world in relation to G-d: not only are we nothing in relation to Him, we are even nothing in relation to the spiritual world immediately higher than us on the hierarchy of creation (known in Hebrew as *seder ha-hishtalsb’lus*), which in turn is nothing in relation to its own immediately superior world, *ad infinitum*.

That is the meaning of the expression (Introduction to *Tikunei Zohar*), “No thought can grasp You at all.” Even the most inconceivably sublime of spiritual realms, at the very pinnacle of *seder ha-hishtalsb’lus*, the hierarchy of all creation – even such realms as are considered “thought” in comparison with relatively lower realms – cannot grasp G-d at all, for He is utterly beyond “thought.” He is called “hidden of all things hidden” and “concealed of all things concealed,” for, even from those sublime spiritual levels that are themselves hidden and concealed from everything else, G-d is “hidden” and “concealed.”

Now, as stated above, the command, “And you shall love G-d your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might,” refers to the kind of love that can be aroused and developed through intellectual contemplation. Specifically, one should contemplate all that we have been saying about the true unity of G-d, to the point that this brings one to a genuine love and yearning to be one with G-d as well. In Hebrew, the phrase “G-d your G-d” uses the Divine names “*Havaye*, your *Elokim*.” The name *Havaye* [an acronym for the Tetragrammaton, which is too holy to be pronounced as written] signifies G-d as He is in Himself, from His own perspective, as it were, before Whom all is revealed as absolutely naught. *Elokim* signifies G-d as He is perceptible to us created beings. The inner significance of this wording is that we should attain a level of love for G-d at which we perceive *Havaye* as our *Elokim* “with all [our] heart and with all [our] soul and with all [our] might.”

Torah sources associate the above verse with such a degree of love for G-d as involves self-sacrifice, offering up one’s very existence to Him. As a practical matter, this means that all the vehicles by which one’s soul expresses itself – that is, thought, speech and action, hinted at by the words, “with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” – should be nullified before G-d (who, as explained above, transcends even “thought”), since thought, speech and action only apply to worldly matters, and, as we have seen, worldly matters are illusory and false: only G-d truly exists.

However, it is impossible to render one’s thoughts totally blank. Accordingly, one should engage them, as well as one’s speech and actions, exclusively as vehicles for the expression of G-d’s Will, through the study of Torah and the observance of mitzvos – for Torah and mitzvos also transcend the level of “thought.” For “thought” is not as lofty a level as “intellect” itself, and the Torah is said to stem from G-d’s very “intellect” (again, anthropomorphically speaking), as the Kabbalah teaches

(*Zohar* II:121a), “The Torah comes from [G-d’s] Wisdom [*chochmah*].”

(Even though the Torah and mitzvos as we know them are en clothed in worldly form, such as laws of what is forbidden and what is permitted, and expressed through physical objects like coins for charity, and so on, this does not alter their essential character as G-d’s very “intellect.” Chassidic philosophy frequently uses an analogy to hair in making this point. The hair on one’s head grows outward through miniscule openings, and has so little of the body’s life-force in it that one can cut hair without feeling pain. This is in sharp contrast to what is on the other side of those tiny holes: the brain, which is the very center of the body’s vitality. Viewing the hair of one’s head as though it had pushed through the barrier of one’s skull and were a visible, tangible extension of the brain into the outside, hair serves as a metaphor for the way G-d lets unimaginably refined and lofty degrees of holiness find expression even in the “lowest” places. No one suggests that hair contains anything of the brain itself, or is comparable to the brain in any other way, but we can still say that if it derives from the brain, it is “of the brain,” so to speak. To apply this to the Torah and mitzvos, while it is true that they are thoroughly bound up with this physical world, they “derive from the brain”: the Torah and mitzvos as we know them are nevertheless visible, tangible manifestations to this lowly, “outside” world we live in of the rarified holiness within that deepest and most concealed “brain”: the spiritual level associated with G-d’s *chochmah*, or “wisdom.”)

It is incumbent upon each and every person to reflect well upon all that we have been saying. As explained, such contemplation arouses true love of G-d within a Jewish person, and this contemplation is indeed subject to one’s free will. We can choose to comply with G-d’s wishes and pursue this course of meditation, thereby developing our love for Him; that is the

sense in which we are commanded, “You shall love G-d your G-d.”

The second type of love for G-d, however, comes to us only after G-d has seen that we are trying our best to achieve a degree of love for Him that humans simply cannot attain. He then rewards us with the Heavenly assistance that lifts us above our mortal limitations and allows us to experience this “great love” (*ahava rabba*) anyway. That is why the verse says “Hear, O Israel...”: we only experience the second type of love, *ahava rabba*, if it has been presented to us by G-d, like someone who hears what has been said by another; our own contemplation will not do it.

This is known as “the holy shekel of silver.” The Hebrew word for “silver” is *kesef*, a term which is etymologically related to the word for “longing,” as in the verse (Genesis 31:30), *nichsof nichsafta*, “you have greatly longed...” It refers to that Great Love, *ahava rabba*, that comes to each person from Above, in proportion to the degree to which they have affirmatively engaged in worship and practice of mitzvos (*asei tov*). (However, the corresponding aspect of worship – refraining from committing any transgression of G-d’s will (*sur mei’ra*) – is a given: all of us have an equal obligation to do so fully.)

That is why the verse tells us “the shekel is twenty *geira*.” Each of the two types of love we have discussed is comprised of the ten components (three “intellectual” and seven “emotional”) that we find associated with the ten *sefiros* and the ten levels of the Jewish soul. Thus, a person who has achieved both kinds of Divine love has ten plus ten, or twenty, levels to his or her shekel, his or her contribution to G-d.

And that is why we are told (Exodus 30:12), “When you take the head [count] of the Children of Israel according to their number, each man shall give the ransom of his soul to G-d.”

The wording of this verse makes it possible to understand it also as follows: “When those Jews who are considered the ‘heads’ remember and ascend to their origin,” that is, when the most refined and saintly among the Jews, those who have reached not only the first level of love for G-d, but also the second – the “heads” of the Jewish People – arise, then “they shall contribute the full measure of their soul (all twenty levels of both types of love) to G-d.”

However, since, as we have said, not every person merits to experience the second level of love for G-d – as this requires perfection in abstaining from sin and great effort in performing mitzvos – not everyone can contribute a whole “shekel,” comprised of twenty parts. Nevertheless, it is within the ability of each and every Jewish person to achieve the first kind of love, since that can be developed by implementing a conscious decision, which it is within the free will of everyone to make, to reflect upon G-d’s unity, as explained at length above. Then, at least he or she will be able to contribute “half a shekel” – the ten components involved with that first level of love.

And this, too, may be understood from the Hebrew wording: “This is what they shall give: all who pass by of the counted ... half a shekel is the offering to G-d.” The word for “the counted,” *hap’kudim*, can also mean “the commandments”; the word for “pass by,” *oveir*, can also mean “transgress.” Thus, the phrase can be read, “all who have transgressed the commandments.” Even someone who has, G-d forbid, by their transgressions prevented themselves from reaching the higher degree of love for G-d is not excluded from participation in Divine worship. On the contrary, every Jewish person has the ability to dedicate their entire soul, in all its ten levels, to G-d “with all [their] heart and with all [their] soul and with all [their] might,” and thus, “half a shekel is the [uniform] offering to G-d.”

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