

KI SISA (EXODUS 30:11-34:35)

Hot Cash

2008 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

The Children of Israel sinned. They sinned egregiously. They melted their gold and formed it into a statue of a calf. They danced around that statue, referring to it as their god who had taken them out of Egypt. This was a terrible sin. G-d almost wiped out the entire nation as a punishment.

They needed to atone for their sin. They needed to engage in an overwhelming Mitzvah that would serve as an atonement for their sin:

G-d spoke to Moses saying: "When you take a census... each one shall be counted by giving an atonement offering for his life...This is what they must give ...a half-shekel...a shekel is 20 gerahs (.8 ounces, according to Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan) It is half of such a shekel that must be given as an offering to G-d...It is an offering to G-d to atone for your lives. (Exodus, 30:11-13, 15)

There was to be an annual collection of .4 ounce silver coins. The first year the silver was melted down into rings to hold the wooden beams of the tabernacle together. In subsequent years this silver was used for the purchase of communal offerings to be brought in the Temple.

Simply put, the Israelites sinned against G-d by melting their gold into an idol. They atoned for this sin by melting their silver into a Temple for G-d.

[I should point out that this is not so clear based upon a simple reading of the Torah Portion. The Mitzvah of donating the Half Shekel appears in the opening verses of the Portion, in Chapter 30. The Golden Calf is later on, in Chapter 32. It is clear that not everything in the Torah is written in chronological order. In the opinion of Rashi and some other commentaries, the Mitzvah in Chapter 30 was given after the sin in Chapter 32.]

...This is what they must give ...a half-shekel... There were certain commandments that Moses didn't fully understand. The Half Shekel was one of them. The Torah says *...This is what they must give ...a half shekel...* The Talmud says that G-d showed Moses a fiery half-shekel coin, and said, "It should be like this."

Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin asked why Moses was so confused. Why did he need to see what a half-shekel looked like? Had he never seen such a coin before? And why did G-d show him a half-shekel of fire? Wouldn't a regular silver coin have sufficed to clarify the requirement?

Rabbi Sorotzkin explains that Moses knew quite well what a silver coin looked like; that wasn't his question. Moses was wondering what the significance was of silver in achieving atonement for sin. That's why G-d showed him a coin made of fire. Silver is like fire; it has two components.

Fire can be extremely destructive. When it gets out of control, it can destroy everything in its path. When controlled, it can warm and illuminate. The fiery heat of the sun causes fruits to grow and ripen. It is up to us to decide whether we will use fire to build or to destroy.

It is the same with silver/money -- the so-called "root of all evil." Money corrupts. The desire to amass wealth leads to theft and deceit. It causes jealousy and murder. It leads people to live lives of ostentatious opulence. It can also be used for charity and kindness. Money can be used to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. Our money can be used to build temples of materialism or Temples of Torah.

The fiery coin was there to answer Moses' question. Yes, Moses, silver coins are that powerful. They can achieve atonement. Yes, our People lost their perspective. But then they regained their perspective. They bowed down to a Golden Calf. The men of Israel melted their rings and cuff links and Rolex watches and made them into an idol. But the mothers of Israel (who, by the way, NEVER lost that perspective) melted their gold jewelry and made it into holy golden vessels for use in the Tabernacle.

When you take the source of sin, and learn to turn it around in the service of G-d, you have learned how to "undo" the effects of that sin. You have found "Atonement."

Have a great Shabbos.

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