

MISHPATIM (EXODUS 21:1-24:18)

Four-tenths of an Ounce of Prevention...

2026 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

This Shabbos will be a very busy one in the synagogues of the world.

As is done every regular Saturday, we will read the weekly Torah Portion. Then, from a second Torah, we will read about the Mitzvah of the Half-Shekel.

Every year a census was taken by the Israelites donating a half-shekel to the Temple treasury. The population of army-worthy Israelites was determined by counting the half-shekels that had been donated.

*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. (About \$30 at today's prices.) The first year the silver was melted down into sockets to support the wooden beams of the Tabernacle. In subsequent years this silver was used for the purchase of communal offerings to be brought in the Temple.

The half-shekel tax was due on the first day of Nissan, two weeks before Passover. The Talmud (Shekalim, Mishnah 1) tells us that on the first of Adar, the announcement was made that the half-shekels would be due in one month. Hence, our custom of reading about this Mitzvah on the before the beginning of the month of Adar.

Haman hated Jews. He wanted, more than anything, to destroy them. Being a superstitious man, he decided to draw lots ("Purim" in Hebrew) to see when would be a good time to wipe out his enemies. He drew the month of Adar. Haman was thrilled. Well-versed in Jewish history as he was, he knew that Adar was the month during which Moses died. Obviously, Adar must be a bad month for Jews. His mistake was that Moses was also BORN during Adar, a particularly auspicious event for the People of Israel.

He approached the king with a proposal:

“...There is a certain nation...Their laws are different... they don’t obey the king’s laws; it is not befitting of the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let it be recorded that they be destroyed, and I will weigh out ten thousand silver talents into the hands of those who do the action, to deposit in the kings treasuries...” (Esther, 8-9)

Haman hated us so much that he was even willing to pay the bill for our slaughter. (A talent is 3,000 shekels. Ten thousand talents, or 300 million shekels, would be about 18 billion dollars’ worth of silver at today’s prices. That’s a lot of hate!!)

And the king, no lover of Jews himself, told Haman he could keep the money. The extermination would be “on the house.”

Miscalculating the significance of the month of Adar was not Haman’s only mistake:

Reish Lakish said, “It was well known to He who said ‘Let the world exist’ that Haman would one day weigh out shekels against Israel. Therefore, He preceded their (Israel’s) shekels to his shekels, and that’s what we learned in the Mishnah: ‘On the first of Adar, we announce the shekel tax... (Megillah, 13b)

You fight fire with fire, and you fight silver with silver. We are not capable of understanding the full significance of the fulfillment of G-d’s commandments. Our Nation’s fulfillment of the Mitzvah to donate silver coins to the Tabernacle all those years before somehow pre-empted the ability of Haman’s silver coins to destroy us.

Some things never change. The Persians hated us then. And they hate us now. The Persians/Iranians have invested billions in our destruction ל”ר. That’s a lot of hate!!

But our Shekels came long before there’s.

Two and a half weeks from now, we will celebrate the holiday of Purim.

Yes, the Hamans of the world are alive and well. Let us hope and pray that the month of Adar, which begins next week, will be, for all of Israel, *“As the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies, and the month which was transformed for them from one of sorrow to gladness, and from mourning to festivity.”* (Esther, 9:22)

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz