

Are You All In?

Category: Shemos, Vayakhel

The lesson the half-shekel can teach us about our commitment to Judaism.

The Miracle Injury

This week, I met Rabbi Menachem Kutner, who heads the Chabad Terror Victims Project. Since October 7th, as you can imagine, he has been busy day and night.

He shared an amazing story.

Recently, a rehabilitation department was opened at Hadassah Hospital -Mount Scopus.

Until now, all such patients were treated at Sheba Medical Center-Tel Hashomer, which is one of the ten largest hospitals in the world, and practically a city in itself. Unfortunately, there are so many injured people that they had to open an additional rehabilitation department at Hadassah to be able to accommodate all the patients.

Kutner heard about the opening of the department and immediately went to visit.

At Hadassah, he met a reservist named Oz, a father of several children. Oz was injured in Gaza by shrapnel to his head, but he could not have been in better spirits. He was happy, jolly, and very thankful to G-d. Why so?

When he was injured, he was sent to Hadassah, where he was immediately taken to the operating room. During the testing for surgery, the doctors discovered a cancerous growth in his head that no one knew about.

He is now recuperating from the double-surgery, and the doctors say that this early detection saved his life. If it weren't for his injury in Gaza, he might not have discovered the growth until it was too late.

An Answer in a Half Hour

His parents, who were sitting at his side, turned to Kutner and told him another amazing story. “Oz was born with the Rebbe’s blessing!”

After their wedding, seven years passed without them being blessed with children. At some point, the father decided he needed to seek a blessing from the Lubavitcher Rebbe. It was in the late eighties; he obtained the phone number of the Rebbe’s secretariat and tried all night to reach the office, but the line was constantly busy. Only after many hours did the secretary answer the phone.

He explained to the Rebbe’s secretary that he and his wife were in the middle of fertility treatments and asked for the Rebbe’s blessing. The secretary took their names and their mother’s names, and that was it. They didn’t hear back from him.

Some time later, their doctor said that he had exhausted all possible options; he had nothing more to offer. However, he suggested they turn to another doctor who had a new, innovative form of treatment; perhaps the new treatment would help.

The problem was that the innovative treatment was very expensive, and the young couple couldn’t afford it, so they turned to the woman’s parents and asked for their help. The woman’s father agreed to finance the cost of the treatment on one condition—if the Rebbe would bless the initiative.

This time, he reached out to a Chabad friend and told him the whole story, asking for his help to contact the Rebbe.

The friend took all the details and sent a fax to the Rebbe. Within half an hour, the friend called back excitedly and told him “such things never happen,” but the secretary had already returned with a response.

The Rebbe’s answer was to proceed with the treatment, and he gave a blessing “*Azkir al hatziyun*,” that he would pray for them at the previous Rebbe’s resting place. They did the treatment, and the woman became pregnant.

The Letter That Was On Time

After their daughter was born, they sent a letter to the Rebbe thanking him for his blessing. But to their disappointment, they didn't receive any response.

Nine months passed, and they discovered that the baby was born with a defect in her leg, and she needed surgery. As the parents waited outside the operating room, they noticed that the doctors were off schedule; they were waiting and waiting, and naturally, they were becoming more and more worried.

Meanwhile, the father went home to get something, made a discovery in the mailbox: a letter from the Rebbe with a blessing in honor of the birth of his daughter. The letter arrived nine months after her birth, at the very moment she was in the operating room. Of course, everything went well.

Later, the couple had twins, a boy and a girl, whom they named Oz and Hadar, (strength and beauty.) This was our Oz, whose injury in Gaza saved his life.

The Coin of Fire

This Shabbat is called "Shabbat Shekalim" because, in addition to the weekly Torah portion, we take out another Torah scroll and read G-d's command to Moses that every Jew give a half-shekel donation to the Tabernacle.

The goal of the half-shekel donation was to take a census. In Jewish tradition, counting people directly brings an evil omen on the population, and the solution is to have them each make a donation, and then to count the coins.

Why was a census necessary in the first place? It was to know how many army-age people they had; that's why only men between the ages of twenty and sixty were counted.

G-d also says that this contribution will be "to atone for your souls." An atonement for what? Our Rabbis say it was to atone for the sin of the golden calf.

The Talmud continues that Moses was astonished when he heard that. How can a person atone for the sin of idolatry with precisely half a shekel?

To resolve this question, they explain that "G-d took out a coin of fire from under

His throne of glory, showed it to Moses, and said to him, “This they shall give.”

In other words, the Rebbe explained, if a Jew gives this small, meager donation—but with a fire of enthusiasm, with a passion and commitment—then even a half shekel can make an impact.

The Commemoration

This mitzvah was not only in the desert. In the Temple era, there would be a yearly “fundraising campaign” where every Jew would give half a shekel as well.

These donations were made towards the daily sacrifices. In the Temple, there was a sacrifice called the Tamid offering, brought every morning and afternoon, on behalf of the entire Jewish people (as opposed to other sacrifices which could be brought by individuals). By each giving the half-shekel, every Jew was represented in these offerings.

These contributions were made in this month, the month of Adar. The court would send messengers to remind everyone to contribute, and on the fifteenth of Adar, the day after Purim, people in every city and town would come to donate their half-shekel, and the money would be transported to Jerusalem.

That’s why, after the Temple was destroyed, the sages established a commemoration for this custom for this Shabbat; on the Shabbat before Rosh Chodesh Adar, we read the portion of the Torah regarding this mitzvah.

The Rebbe’s Message

The Rebbe once pointed out something unique about this mitzvah.

In other charities, when a person pledges to give a sum of money, they aren’t obligated to give the entire amount at once; they could give it in installments. But Maimonides rules regarding the half-shekel that you must give it all at once (See Toras Menachem 5733 2:197).

The Rebbe explained that the half-shekel represented one’s association with the Jewish people, and with G-d. That cannot be done partially, “a little today and a little tomorrow.” If you are in, you need to be fully in—you need to give the entire

sum at once (Toras Menachem 5746 3:228).

What's the message here?

There are certain commitments that a person can divide into installments; there are some mitzvos that a person can do halfheartedly. But when it comes to a mitzvah that binds everyone equally—especially the half-shekel which was for the *military* census, to defend the Jewish people—there's no installments. You're either in or out.

In recent months, this mindset has become ever more clear among the Jewish people in Israel. On October 7th, it became evident that the younger generation is fully committed. They jumped into the war with every bit of energy they had. Thousands of soldiers who were abroad left everything behind—family, businesses, and more—to defend the people of Israel and the land of Israel.

Suddenly, the depth and the purity of the Jewish soul was revealed. The war has been going on for five months now, and yet, every time the army leaders visit the soldiers in Gaza, they don't hear questions like, "when are we getting discharged from the army," or "how much will the army pay us." They hear one and only one message: "We want to finish the job once and for all."

Soldiers injured during the war, as soon as they recovered, insisted on returning to fight in Gaza, often against the wishes of their families and commanders. They refuse to give it up, because they are completely committed.

My dear friends, every Jew is a soldier in Hashem's army and our mission is to live Jewish lives. This week, Shabbat Shekalim, G-d tells us that the half-shekel, "the coin of fire" of the Jewish soul, is given all at once. Whatever we do, needs to be with a fire, a commitment. We each need to ask ourselves whether we're all in or not.

And when you look in the mirror and ask yourself this question, I'm confident the answer will be: "I'm in."