

TO OWN IS TO OWE

The law of Shekalim was not merely a clever way to solve two problems, that of the Census and the maintenance of the Temple budget. It was a mitzvah, a commandment of G-d, and the giving of the half shekel was therefore the performance of a sacred religious duty. And even more than an ordinary mitzvah, the law of the shekel has become a badge of pride for the Jew, the symbol of Jewish philanthropy. For indeed, even in those quarters where Jewish commercial ability is regarded with envy, Jewish charitableness is admired. The Jew may be a "go-getter," but he is also a "go-giver."

What is the source of this Jewish trait? In the context of Torah Judaism, what is the rationale of such charitableness?

Let us first direct our attention to what we might call the "Jewish Theory of Property." In the mid-eighteenth century, the great English legal thinker, Sir William Blackstone, taught there is no absolute private property. What a man owns is not absolutely, unconditionally, and unquestionably his own to exploit as he sees fit. The ultimate title of all property is in the hands of - mankind. Hence, private property confers upon the owner not only rights and privileges, but also duties and obligations. The major responsibility of the owner of private property, is, in the words of Blackstone, to promote "the grand end of civil society."

Now long before Blackstone, Judaism already saw the folly and the error of the theory of absolute private property. Judaism went even further than Blackstone. The ultimate title of property is not in the hands of mankind, but belongs to the Creator of all Man. Hence, Judaism agrees that the purpose of ownership is to promote the grand ends of civil society, but

adds the provision that civil society itself must eventually be transformed into sacred society: kehillah kedoshah.

So that in Judaism, all that man has is, in a sense, a trust with the ultimate title belonging to G-d. Man's wealth belongs to the Creator: "For Mine is the silver and Mine is the gold, are the words of the Lord."

Man's wisdom and intelligence are a gift from a good G-d, and must be used appropriately, as we imply in the Amidah prayer: "Thou graciously giveth to man knowledge, understanding, and intelligence."

Parents are not the absolute masters of their children; children are a trust from the Almighty, as we know from the famous story of Rabbi Meir and his wife Beruriah, who when their children died accepted the tragedy as though they were returning borrowed gems to their rightful owner, quoting the words of Job: "The Lord gave and the Lord hath taken, blessed be the name of the Lord."

Those who have power and influence must recognize that the source of that power is the Lord: "For to Thee, O Lord, is the greatness and the might."

When we realize this, we will act selflessly, nobly, and wisely. When we find ourselves as possessors of either wealth or family, intellectual resources or political strength, we will remember that all of this is an obligation owed to G-d, and hence we will use them in a manner conforming to His will. For to own is to owe. When giving the shekel or what it symbolizes, we know that we are not really giving; we are only returning.

After Joseph's sudden ascension from the misery of slavery to the second in command of all the Egyptian empire, we read that he was given an Egyptian name, Egyptian clothing, and an Egyptian wife. And then, when his first son was born, he called him Menasheh, explaining: ki nashani Elokim et kol amali v'et kol bet avi. That verse is usually translated as, "for G-d hath made

me forget all my toil and all my father's house." Every year when we read that passage, we feel a welling resentment at Joseph. True, we understand that he had been terribly wronged by his family. But is ~~this~~ what one expects of a saint like Joseph? Is this in keeping with his blemishless character, with the nobility of his personality?

A beautiful insight and solution is offered by two great Rabbis: Rabbis Samson Raphael Hirsh of Western Europe, and Rabbi Aaron Levine, the Reszher Rav. They tell us that the word nashani does not mean "made me forget," but rather comes from the word nosheh, a creditor. Thus, the word nashani means "he placed me in his debt." In that case, the meaning of the verse is exactly reversed! "For G-d has placed me in His debt by virtue of all my toil and my father's house." I now recognize that what appeared at the time as the cruelty of my brothers and the misery of my fate was in reality merely a stepping stone to my astounding success, merely preparation for my meteoric rise to greatness. How much I owe to G-d, how much I owe to my brothers, how much I owe to my very misery!

So that Joseph, far from being an embittered ingrate, is a revealed man of rare character especially to his Creator. He recognizes that what he owns, he owes. Joseph understands that he must now raise his children, spend his money, exercise his power, and wield his influence so as to satisfy the divine nosheh. His son Menasheh served as a constant reminder to Joseph not to let his good fortune go to his head. His son reminded him that beneath his Egyptian royal clothing, and despite his royal Egyptian throne, he is only - as the Chief Cup-Bearer called him - a naar eved ivri, a Hebrew slave boy. With an attitude of this sort, arrogance, haughtiness, or miserliness are impossible. With this kind of attitude, one may officially be an Egyptian prince, but inwardly he is a Jewish aristocrat.

Yet, despite the nobility of this idea, so characteristic of Jewish faith and Jewish character, the Mitzvah or Shekalim and the charitableness that it symbolizes must be seen in the prospective of the whole Torah.

It has been asked: Why does the Torah command that the amount to be given by each Jew be only machatzit ha-shekel, a half shekel, why not a whole shekel?

There are many answers. Let us suggest one. The law of the half shekel was given by the Torah to all Jews, both rich and poor. He'ashir lo yarbeh ve'ha-dal lo yamit - "the rich man shall not give more, and the poor man shall not give less." The Torah meant, in the commandment of the half shekel, to give two messages, one to the rich and one to the poor.

To the rich, the Torah said: Despite the great importance of the shekel and the philanthropy that it symbolizes, remember that giving is not the totality of Judaism. It is, at most, only one-half.

We Americans, despite our well known generosity, often fall into the error of materialism. We believe that all that is worth having, can be gotten if enough money is spent for it. Thus, for instance, if we have a national problem in education, we instinctively offer the prescription for a solution: increase the budget. We conveniently forget that, in addition to money, it is necessary to create a cultural milieu in which parents will become models and examples for their children. If we have a problem in medical research, we react by demanding more funds, forgetting that scientific creativity must have not only money but also the proper academic atmosphere which encourages unfettered investigation. In international diplomacy we find it necessary to obtain the friendship of the new nations, and so we imagine that we can buy this friendship merely by giving large gifts; we forget that, in addition, we must

acknowledge the desire of the new nations and their citizens for national dignity and civic pride.

And so it is with American Jews. We all too often think that we can buy religion by giving shekels. We sometimes delude ourselves into believing that one can pay his way out of all religious obligations. And so the Torah reminds us: giving is only machatzit, only a part and not all of Judaism. Perhaps he'ashir lo yarbeh means not only "the rich man shall not give more," but that he who can and does give liberally must not exaggerate the value of his giving. He must not emphasize the act of charity out of all proportion, to the point where he ~~is~~ no longer feels it necessary to be a Jew personally. The checkbook can never completely replace prayer, Kashruth, Jewish ethics, the study of Torah.

And to the poor man the Torah speaks as well. It tells him: do not think, as those who are less wealthy often do, that giving is a luxury reserved for the rich. Absolutely not. Ve'ha-dal lo yamit should be translated not only "the poor man shall not give less," but also "the poor man shall not minimize" the value of giving.

No matter what else you do that is good and noble and Jewish, still if you have not given as much as a man of your limited means can and should, you are missing machatzit, a goodly portion of all of Judaism. For just as Tzedakah cannot replace Tefillah, so Tefillah can never become a substitute for Tzedakah. The Halakhah reminds us that even an ani ha-chozer al ha-petachim, a poor man who is professionally a beggar, must himself give charity to other poor!

When we will understand this Torah view, when we will feel within our bones that what we own we owe, when we will see giving in the perspective of all Judaism - that it is not more but also not less than only one-half of the

totality of Torah - then giving will become for us not merely a matter of the transfer of funds, but an uplifting religious experience as well.

For **indeed**, our tradition teaches us that when G-d gave Moses the commandment concerning the shekel, he showed him a matbei'a shel esh, a coin made out of fire which He had taken from under His kisei ha-kavod, His divine Throne of Glory, and said to Moses ka-zeh yitnu - "thus shall they give."

This indeed is what Jewish giving is and should be. It must be fiery filled with enthusiasm, and suffused with warmth. Above all, the reward will be kavod - dignity, from the ^{Throne} of G-d itself.

Ka-zeh yitnu - thus shall the Jew give.